

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

**FOR NPS USE ONLY**

RECEIVED

DATE ENTERED

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN *HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS*  
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

**1 NAME**

HISTORIC Old Ship Church

AND/OR COMMON  
Old Ship Church

**2 LOCATION**

STREET & NUMBER Main Street

CITY, TOWN Hingham VICINITY OF 12th  
STATE Massachusetts CODE 25 COUNTY Plymouth CODE 023

**3 CLASSIFICATION**

CATEGORY	OWNERSHIP	STATUS	PRESENT USE
<input type="checkbox"/> DISTRICT	<input type="checkbox"/> PUBLIC	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> OCCUPIED	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE <input type="checkbox"/> MUSEUM
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BUILDING(S)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE	<input type="checkbox"/> UNOCCUPIED	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCIAL <input type="checkbox"/> PARK
<input type="checkbox"/> STRUCTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> BOTH	<input type="checkbox"/> WORK IN PROGRESS	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATIONAL <input type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE RESIDENCE
<input type="checkbox"/> SITE	<b>PUBLIC ACQUISITION</b>	<b>ACCESSIBLE</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> ENTERTAINMENT <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> RELIGIOUS
<input type="checkbox"/> OBJECT	<input type="checkbox"/> IN PROCESS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> YES: RESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> GOVERNMENT <input type="checkbox"/> SCIENTIFIC
	<input type="checkbox"/> BEING CONSIDERED	<input type="checkbox"/> YES: UNRESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRIAL <input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
		<input type="checkbox"/> NO	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY <input type="checkbox"/> OTHER:

**4 OWNER OF PROPERTY**

NAME First Parish Unitarian Church

STREET & NUMBER Main Street  
CITY, TOWN Hingham VICINITY OF STATE Massachusetts

**5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION**

COURTHOUSE, REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC. Plymouth County Registry of Deeds

STREET & NUMBER  
CITY, TOWN Plymouth STATE Massachusetts

**6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS**

TITLE Historic American Buildings Survey (11 sheets; 37 photos)

DATE 1960; 1941, 1959, 1961  FEDERAL  STATE  COUNTY  LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR SURVEY RECORDS Library of Congress/Annex Division of Prints and Photographs  
CITY, TOWN Washington STATE D.C.

## 7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> EXCELLENT	<input type="checkbox"/> DETERIORATED	<input type="checkbox"/> UNALTERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ORIGINAL SITE
<input type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> RUINS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ALTERED	<input type="checkbox"/> MOVED      DATE _____
<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> UNEXPOSED		

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### DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

Old Ship is a large square two story structure with a steeply pitched roof, balustraded at the ridge and topped by a belfry and spire. The entrances on the south and east sides are emphasized by enclosed porches, the one on the southwest with Doric pilasters and dentiled pediment.

The building proper is 45 by 55 feet in plan. The roof is carried by a true system of truss framing, the elaboration of which betrays the empirical rule of thumb approach of its builders. The trusses, with their curved members look like the inverted framework of a ship's hull, a resemblance which gave the church its name. This system of construction was derived from late medieval truss framing, which frequently had curved members, but the exact precedent would be difficult to determine. Three main trusses span the narrow dimension. Resting on the upright 20 foot side posts, each has a 45-foot tie beam, holding the lower ends of the principal rafters together, a vertical king post, and long side struts curved to a pointed arch, meeting near the top of the king post. By means of short connecting pieces, these struts brace the main rafters.

In 1729, the church was widened 14 feet on the northeast side, and a balancing addition at the southwest was made in 1755. A hipped-roof was then superimposed from the new additions to the old belfry, hiding the very steep Gothic pitch of the original. At the same time square box pews with banister toppings were placed against the walls, but the hard oak benches without backs were kept in the center until 1817 when square pews finally covered the entire area.

In 1755 a gallery was added on three sides, a new pulpit was installed, the old leaded-glass medieval windows were replaced by wooden sliding sash, and two porches with Georgian decorative detail were added. In 1731 a flat ceiling was also hung under the tie beams, thus, concealing the magnificent roof-framing, in order to make the unheated building warmer. This 18th century ceiling was removed in the restoration of 1930.

In 1869 the 18th century box pew and earlier benches were removed and curving pews installed. At the same time the pulpit of 1755 was removed, although the sounding board was retained.

In the 1930 restoration most of the 19th century alterations were removed. Fortunately the original pulpit, with its beautiful paneling had not been destroyed. Parts of some of the old pews were used in the restoration and thirty-two of the original eighty doors were found in the possession of descendants of the original owners of the pews. These were hung in the original locations in accordance with an old plan and description. It is still an active church and well maintained.

# 8 SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD	AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW			
<input type="checkbox"/> PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PLANNING	<input type="checkbox"/> LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGION
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> CONSERVATION	<input type="checkbox"/> LAW	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENCE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> ECONOMICS	<input type="checkbox"/> LITERATURE	<input type="checkbox"/> SCULPTURE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input type="checkbox"/> THEATER
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
<input type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY)
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION		

SPECIFIC DATES 1681, 1729, 1755

BUILDER/ARCHITECT

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Old Ship Church, begun in 1681 and enlarged in 1729 and 1755 is the only surviving example of a traditional seventeenth century New England Puritan meetinghouse, and probably the oldest English church in continuous use in America. The plain wooden structure reflects the Puritan rejection of the Gothic architecture of the Anglican tradition and represents a style of building common to New England meetinghouses of the 17th century.

## HISTORY

The earliest settlement within the bounds of the present town dates from 1633 followed by the major period of settlement beginning in 1635, under the leadership of Reverend Peter Hobart. Old Ship typifies the Puritan meetinghouse of 17th century New England. The first meetinghouses were crude frame buildings, usually 20 by 30 feet in plan, generally with thatched roof, and without tower, spire, cross, or other embellishment. The congregation sat on extremely uncomfortable benches with narrow seats and only a single timber as a support for the shoulder blades; men were seated on one side of the building and women on the other. In Puritan meetinghouses the altar was abandoned and the side pulpit became the focus of the service. Benches were therefore arranged facing the pulpit, which was located in the center of a long side, and the main entrance door, which was situated in back of the benches, opened to the middle of the opposite long side. With such an interior arrangement there was little point in an oblong floor plan and perhaps by the middle of the 17th century a square floor plan was adopted. This "four-square" New England meetinghouse became the familiar type and remained typical of New England churches until well into the 18th century. These structures might have a gallery and instead of a gable roof, these square churches had hipped or pyramidal roofs, with a small square platform at top carrying a belfry and the bell rope hung down to the middle of the central aisle below. Constructed by ship's carpenters, Old Ship was built on this typical plan.

The Old Ship is the second meetinghouse built by the First Parish in Hingham. The building was erected by direct taxation of the 143 members of the congregation and cost 430 English pounds. The original structure was built in 1681. Around 1730 this was extended 14 feet on the northeast side, with a similar addition being made on the southwest side in 1755. It was at this

(Continued)

## 9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

- Condit, Carl W., American Building Art, 19th Century, New York, 1960  
 Marlowe, George F., Churches of Old New England, New York, 1947.  
 Morrison, Hugh, Early American Architecture, New York, 1952.  
 Stark, Gladys, "The Old Ship Meeting House," publication of Old Ship Church.

## 10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY 1.25

UTM REFERENCES

A	19	344250	4678050	B			
	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING		ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING
C				D			

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

The landmark boundary is coterminous with the city lot of the property along Washington Street on the south and the western property line. The northern boundary of the property continues in a straight line to the eastern property line, excluding an ell of land which contains an unrelated bell tower soon to be deeded to the city, as indicated on the plat map.

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

## 11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE Patricia Heintzeman, Architectural Historian, Landmark Review Project;  
original form prepared by Charles Snell, 1967

ORGANIZATION

Historic Sites Survey

STREET & NUMBER

1100 L Street NW.

CITY OR TOWN

Washington

DATE

August 1975

TELEPHONE

202-523-5464

STATE

D.C. 20240

## 12 STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

NATIONAL

STATE

LOCAL

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

FEDERAL REPRESENTATIVE SIGNATURE

TITLE

Recd. OCT 9, 1978 (NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARKS)  
 Dist. ...  
 George J. ...  
 ...

FOR NPS USE ONLY

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DATE

12/5/78

DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF ARCHEOLOGY AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION  
 ATTEST:

DATE

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARKS

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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CONTINUATION SHEET

ITEM NUMBER 8

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time that the remarkable high pulpit and the first box pews were built, in place of the wooden benches used for the first seventy-five years. Other 18th century alterations included the addition of two porches, a gallery on three sides, installation of sash windows, and the hanging of a flat plaster ceiling which concealed the roof framing. The old box pews were removed and new curving pews installed. The old high pulpit was taken down, although the old sounding board was left in place and a carpet was laid on the floor and the platform steps.

The church was restored in 1930, under the supervision of Boston architect Edgar T. P. Walker, at which time most of the 19th century alterations were removed.