

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

For NPS use only

**National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form**

received JUL 3 1986
date entered

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

1. Name

historic FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF PLAINFIELD

and/or common First Congregational Church of Plainfield

2. Location

street & number Route 12 N/A not for publication

city, town Plainfield N/A vicinity of

state Connecticut code 09 county Windham code 015

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 checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational
<input type="checkbox"/> site	Public Acquisition	Accessible	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial
	N/A	<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military
			<input type="checkbox"/> museum
			<input type="checkbox"/> park
			<input type="checkbox"/> private residence
			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> religious
			<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
			<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
			<input type="checkbox"/> other:

4. Owner of Property

name First Congregational Church of Plainfield

street & number RFD 2 Box 85

city, town Plainfield vicinity of state Connecticut

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Plainfield Town Clerk

street & number Town Hall
8 Community Avenue

city, town Plainfield state Connecticut

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title State Register of Historic Places has this property been determined eligible? yes no

date 1975 federal state county local

depository for survey records Connecticut Historical Commission

city, town 59 South Prospect Street
Hartford state Connecticut

7. Description

Condition

excellent
 good
 fair

deteriorated
 ruins
 unexposed

Check one

unaltered
 altered

Check one

original site
 moved date

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

Plainfield's First Congregational Church (Photographs 1 through 3) is a 2 1/2-story Federal-style stone church built in 1816 from plans by Ithiel Town. At the east end the gable roof is brought forward to form a full portico on four columns, above which is a steeple of several stages. The church is situated well back from Route 12, Plainfield's principal north-south road, among a concentration of houses mostly dating from the late 18th and early 19th century.

The walls are of locally quarried stone, a warm, light brown gneiss. The stones for the east elevation, or facade, were laid in a coursed ashlar, whereas the sides and rear walls are an ashlar of randomly sized stone. The stones were secured with a thin layer of lime mortar.

The wooden details of the portico follow the Roman mutulary Doric order. Four smooth columns support an entablature having triglyphs on the frieze and mutules with drilled plancers along the molded cornice. The shallow-pitched gable is treated as a pediment and is covered with horizontal flush boarding. The mutules and moldings are continued around the building and up the rakes of the roof as the main cornice. At the corners of the building there are wooden pilasters, with those at the rear corners having short sections of the triglyphed frieze between them and the cornice.

The facade within the portico (Photograph 4) features three entries, the center one slightly larger, which are surrounded by wooden molded frames with exaggerated quoin blocks. Recessed within each entry are double doors with four sunk panels; the upper panels on the center doors have been glazed. Above each entrance is a round-arched window with prominent impost and key blocks. All are fitted with small-pane sash, and the side windows have interlaced glazing in the heads. Windows on the other elevations have wooden sills and frames and large stone lintels. They are fitted with small-pane sash (not original), with a pivoted swing-in section in the upper part. Closed shutters cover the upper part of the second-story windows. Also covered with blinds is the former pulpit window half-way up the rear elevation (Photograph 3).

The steeple consists of a square stone tower, of coursed ashlar masonry, with three small clockfaces and a molded cornice ornamented with small coved brackets. Above is a square wooden belfry with paneled pilasters at the corners and a similar cornice. The belfry openings are round-arched in shape and fitted with louvers. The heads of the openings are outlined by a band of raised blocks suggestive of stonework. The third stage of the steeple is an octagonal drum, again with the same cornice treatment, and above is an octagonal shingled spire. At the top is an arrow-shaped weathervane (of modern origin). Work on the steeple began in 1821. The clock was installed in 1905.

(continued)

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Representation in Existing Surveys (continued):

Historic American Building Survey (CT-172)

1935 - Federal

Records deposited with Library of Congress, Washington, D.C

Architectural and Historical Survey of Plainfield, Connecticut

1981 - State

Records deposited with Connecticut Historical Commission
59 South Prospect Street
Hartford, Connecticut 06106

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Description (continued):

In 1850 and 1851, extensive changes were made to the interior of the church, and the present appearance dates almost exclusively from that period. The formerly open audience room with gallery was divided into two levels, with the pews and pulpit on the second floor and a plainly finished meeting room on the first.¹ Window trim, pulpit, oak seats, communion table, organ, and enclosed stairways within the vestibule all are Victorian (Photograph 5). However, on the first level are remains of the original ornate interior woodwork, including paneled window jambs and a few reeded pilasters (Photograph 6).²

Other than these interior changes, the church retains a high degree of its original historic appearance. Window sash, though replaced, retains the small-pane configuration proper to the period. A missing tower fan louver is presently in storage in the church basement. The center entry's doorway glass and the lack of interlacing in the window above probably represent modifications. Except for these alterations, the church retains its integrity of design, setting, materials, and historical associations. The church is presently used for religious services by its original congregation and the hall is rented out for meetings of community organizations.

NOTE:

1. The new floor was installed at the level of the gallery which extended around three sides of the audience room. It is supported by the former supports at the wall and by a system of nine cast-iron columns bearing on the main floor.

2. Neither the interior design nor that of the steeple represent the work of Ithiel Town.

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Significance (continued):

The church is an early design by Ithiel Town (1784-1844), one of the country's leading architects of the early 19th century. Town was born in nearby Thompson, Connecticut. He later moved to Boston, where he is believed to have associated with builder-architect Asher Benjamin. Town later practiced in New Haven, where he built two churches on the Green, the brick Center Church, which employed the Doric order, and the early (1814) Gothic-Revival Trinity Church. Although he soon centered his practice in New York, Town continued to design buildings in his native state, including houses, banks, and churches in Plainfield, Thompson, and Hartford. Profits from his popular bridge truss design enabled him to travel widely in Europe, and he amassed a major art and architecture library which he opened to interested persons. He was a key founder in 1826 of the National Academy of Design. He was an early proponent of the Greek Revival and leaned toward academically correct interpretations, a tendency evident even in this early work, in which the proportions are close to Classical precedent and quite unlike the tall, slender proportions practiced by Asher Benjamin, David Hoadley, and others. Town designed a number of important buildings, including the New Haven Connecticut State Capitol (1829),³ the Indiana State Capitol (1835), and the New York Customs House (1833-42). Town's influence was great, not only through the example of his buildings and his activities to promote learning, but also through the work of his associates. Alexander Jackson Davis, one of the leading practitioners of the Gothic Revival, was Town's partner from 1829 to 1844. Another associate was Henry Austin, a major figure in Connecticut Victorian architecture and the mentor of many leading Connecticut architects of the late 19th century.

Historical Associations

The sturdy stone walls of the Plainfield Church vividly recall its origins as a replacement for an earlier meetinghouse utterly destroyed by the great gale which devastated parts of New England in September of 1815. The new meetinghouse was paid for by a combination of a publicly sanctioned lottery, private subscriptions, and a town-wide tax. Citizens donated not only money but labor, timber, teams of horses or oxen, and stones. The Congregational Church held religious services, conducted a Sunday school, and had a number of social organizations connected with it, and even in Plainfield, a town which had substantial numbers of Baptists and Methodists, the church was a focal point for most of the inhabitants. When it was built, it was a secular public building as well as a church, and even after the Constitution of 1818 disestablished Congregationalism, public meetings continued to be held in the church, since there were few other suitable places. Plainfield did not construct a town hall until the 1870s.

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Significance (continued):

NOTES

1. The town chose to locate its state-provided historical marker in front of the church (Photograph 1).
2. In fact, such doorways are called "Gibbs surrounds" by English architectural historians.
3. The State Capitol in New Haven was demolished early in this century.

8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
prehistoric	archeology-prehistoric	community planning	landscape architecture	X religion
1400-1499	archeology-historic	conservation	law	science
1500-1599	agriculture	economics	literature	sculpture
1600-1699	X architecture	education	military	social/
1700-1799	art	engineering	music	humanitarian
X 1800-1899	commerce	exploration settlement	philosophy	theater
1900-	communications	industry	politics government	transportation
		invention		other (specify)

Criteria A, C

Specific dates 1816 - completed **Builder/Architect** Ithiel Town, architect

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

Summary

The First Congregational Church of Plainfield is significant as a well-preserved and representative example of Federal-style architecture, one designed by Ithiel Town, a major American architect of the early 19th century (Criterion C). The building's columns, portico, and Classical cornice are characteristic features of New England meetinghouses of this period, and the church's close adherence to Classical proportions was typical of the work of Ithiel Town. Although buildings used for religious purposes are normally excluded from listing on the National Register, the Plainfield Congregational Church has exceptional architectural distinction. Moreover, the building has historical significance as an important community institution (Criterion A). Congregationalism was the religion of the greater part of the town's citizens in the pre-industrial period, and this building was central to their religious life. The building also served a secular function, as it was used for town meetings even after Congregationalism was no longer the state's established religion. Today the building's prominent central location, its visually striking stonework, its age, and its high-style architecture make it a local landmark not only for members of its congregation but for the whole town.

Architectural Significance

The early national period (1790-1830) saw the emergence of a new type of meetinghouse in Connecticut, and the 1816 Plainfield church is typical of the new form. In place of the simple vernacular structures of the 18th-century, designed like large houses with their broad sides facing the road, Federal-period meetinghouses were stylish structures more like English churches, with porticos, steeples, and their entrances in the narrow end facing the public way. Drawing heavily on the widely publicized designs of English architects Wren and Gibbs, these churches included decorative elements derived from Renaissance interpretations of Classical architecture. The appearance of stylish meetinghouses in the Federal period has been linked to declining cultural isolation in Connecticut, making more stylish architecture available, and to a softening of strict Calvinist dogma in religion, which made plain-style houses of worship seem less of an issue.

This church, built at a time when Plainfield was enjoying a prosperity based upon livestock and sheep raising and turnpike-related trade, is typical of the Federal period. It has the portico and steeple form found in most churches of the period, and its ornament is Classical in inspiration. The treatment of the gable as a pediment illustrates the emerging temple-like appearance. The interlaced glazing and small-scale cornice ornament reflect the period's aesthetic, which called for light, elegant detailing. The quoins around the entries are a stock feature from Gibbs' Book of Architecture.

(continued)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Arnold, Henry T. The Bicentennial Sermon. Plainfield, 1905.

_____. "The Churches of Plainfield." Plainfield Bicentennial.
Norwich: Plainfield Bicentennial Commission, 1899. Pp. 98-109.

(continued)

10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of nominated property .82

Quadrangle name Plainfield

Quadrangle scale 1:24000

UTM References

A

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Zone Easting Northing

B

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Zone Easting Northing

C

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Verbal boundary description and justification

The nominated property includes the church and surrounding lot, as recorded in the Plainfield Land Records, Vol.44, page 403.

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 Bruce Clouette & Matthew Roth, National Register Coordinator edited by John Herzan,

organization Historic Resource Consultants date January 8, 1986
The Colt Armory

street & number 55 Van Dyke Avenue telephone (203) 547-0268

city or town Hartford state Connecticut

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.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature 

title Director, Connecticut Historical Commission date June 24, 1986

For NPS use only

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

Entered in the
National Register

date 7-31-86


Keeper of the National Register

Attest: _____ date _____

Chief of Registration

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Moosup: C.F. Burgess, 1895.

Kelley, J. Frederick. Early Connecticut Meetinghouses. 2 vols. New York:
Columbia University Press, 1948.

Newton, Roger Hale. Town and Davis, Architects. New York: Columbia Univer-
sity Press, 1942.

Sinnott, Edmund W. Meetinghouse and Church in Early New England. New York:
McGraw-Hill, 1963.

Wilcox, Edna E. 250th Anniversary of the First Congregational Church of
Plainfield, Connecticut. Plainfield, 1955.

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
OF PLAINFIELD

Plainfield, Connecticut

UTM Reference:

19/257360/4618700

Plainfield Quadrangle

1:24000

