NPS Form 10-900
(3-82)

OMB No. 1024-0018
Exp. 10-31-84

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form

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

For NPS use only
received
date entered
FEB 12 1987

1. Name

historic Centerbrook Congregational Church

and/or common N.A.

2. Location

street & number Main Street N.A. not for publication

city, town Essex N.A. vicinity of

state Connecticut code 09 county Middlesex code 007

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use	
___ district	___ public	_X_ occupied	___ agriculture	___ museum
_X_ building(s)	_X_ private	___ unoccupied	___ commercial	___ park
___ structure	___ both	___ work in progress	___ educational	___ private residence
___ site	**Public Acquisition**	**Accessible**	___ entertainment	_X_ religious
___ object	___ in process	_X_ yes: restricted	___ government	___ scientific
	___ being considered	___ yes: unrestricted	___ industrial	___ transportation
	N.A.	___ no	___ military	___ other:

4. Owner of Property

name Centerbrook Congregational Church

street & number Main Street

city, town Centerbrook ~~N.A~~ vicinity of state Connecticut

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Town Clerk's Office

street & number West Avenue and Grove Street

city, town Essex state Connecticut

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

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

date 1986 ___ federal _X_ state ___ county ___ local

depository for survey records Connecticut Historical Commission, 59 South Prospect Street

city, town Hartford state Connecticut

7. Description

Condition		Check one	Check one
___ excellent	___ deteriorated	___ unaltered	X original site
X good	___ ruins	X altered	___ moved date ___
___ fair	___ unexposed		

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

The Centerbrook Congregational Church is sited prominently on a knoll above the north side of Route 153 (the former Middlesex Turnpike), about 50 feet from the highway (Photographs #1, 2, 3). A cut granite retaining wall runs along the road in front of the building. Built in 1790 and extensively remodelled in the nineteenth century, the church has a post-and-beam frame and a gable-to-street orientation. The original main block of the church (45'x60') rests on a coursed ashlar granite foundation. It contains the audience room and a vestibule. One-story in height, it has a wood-shingled gable roof. With the exception of the facade gable, which is shingled, the walls are sheathed in narrow clapboards. A modern two-story addition (35'x75'), constructed in 1972, extends from the north (rear) end of the main block. The Sunday School, a parish hall and a modern kitchen are located there (Photograph #4).

The 1889 projecting pavilion on the south facade gable, which extends above the ridge as a square tower, contains the present main entrance to the church. The tower is capped by pyramidal wood-shingled roof. Above the ridge of the main roof, double arched openings with louvers are located on each wall of the tower. At the lower level of the pavilion a recessed arched opening with a pediment frames the double entrance doors. Oval windows are located on both side walls at this level (Photographs #5, 6).

Wide corner boards define the corners of the main block and terminate at the cornice returns. The heavy molding of the main cornice dates from a later 1839 remodelling (see below). There are no corner boards on the tower; its upper half is sheathed with imbricated (fish scale) shingles, as is part of the facade gable wall.

Large double-hung windows are found throughout the main building. Fourteen windows are arranged in a double tier on each of the side elevations. Each contains twenty-over-fifteen sash, some of which may be original. Similar windows are found on the gable ends.

The original framing of the attic remains intact. The king post trusses that span the building have double top chords. Principal purlins support the common rafters on either side, which are framed together and pegged at the ridge. The bottom chords display equally spaced empty gains which originally contained the joists for the 1792 flat ceiling of the audience room.[1]

As originally constructed, the plan and form of the church were more typical of early eighteenth-century meetinghouses. The building was sited parallel to the road, with the main entrance doors in the long south wall.[2] The pulpit was located on the north wall, directly opposite the doors. Stairways to the galleries were located in the main room. A square belfry tower, with an elongated pyramidal roof, was located entirely outside the main block on what was then the west gable end.

The building was first remodelled in 1839. In keeping with the more "modern" churches of the early nineteenth century, it was rotated on its axis to the present orientation with the gable end facing the street. Tradition holds that 100 left-over Revolutionary War cannonballs were used as rollers and the building was turned by a team of 40 oxen.[3] The exterior belfry tower was removed. The main doors were relocated in the now, slightly projecting tower in the south gable. Greek Revival-style elements were added to the plain eighteenth-century exterior at this time. Interior changes dictated by the

new orientation included the relocation of the pulpit to the north end of the nave. A vestibule at the south end was partitioned off with stairs to the galleries at either end. The eighteenth-century box pews were replaced with slip pews and new galleries were constructed (Photographs #7, 8, 12). They are supported by thin columns in a modified Roman Doric order. A simple Greek Revival molding caps the plain balcony railing. Molding from the same period is also used around all the doors and windows except in the vestibule, where the original trim was retained (Photograph #11).

Although the existing projecting pavilion and belfry were constructed in 1889, the major impact of this last renovation can be seen on the interior (Photographs #7, 8, 9, 10). With the exception of the sash,[4] all remaining traces of the original eighteenth-century interior were hidden. The walls were furred out to the thickness of the original posts in the main room and finished with a varnished oak dado up to the level of the window stools, then plastered and painted above. The original flat ceiling was reconstructed to have a slight segmental arch in cross section and sheathed with matched-and-beaded, narrow pine boards. The original floor was covered with narrow matched boards of maple. The present pews of varnished oak, described by Kelly as "painfully modern ... in the Gothic style," were installed in 1901.[5]

8. Significance

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

Criterion C

Specific dates 1790, 1839, 1889 **Builder/Architect** Captain John Dennison

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

The 1790 Centerbrook Congregational Church is an exceptionally well-preserved building which is architecturally significant primarily because of its age and unique building history (Criterion C). Three distinct ecclesiastical architectural styles were incorporated in the church during several phases of modernization, reflecting the changing preferences of the church community from 1790 to the 1900s. It is historically significant as the oldest surviving church building in Middlesex County and one of the oldest in Connecticut.

Architecture:

Almost a century of alteration has transformed the original 1792 meetinghouse into the church building that stands today. The process of modernization in the nineteenth century, however, failed to obscure its eighteenth-century origins, making for a study in contrasts. The nineteenth-century facade is markedly different in appearance from the eighteenth-century elevations. Although stylistically understated, it reflects the successive popularity of the Greek Revival influence and the later Victorian preference for more elaborated surfaces. Some of the changes are readily apparent. For example: The nineteenth-century treatment of the facade and its tower is clearly not original construction; other changes are less obvious. In fact, the most radical of the alterations to the building, its rotation on its axis, has left no physical trace but requires a study of the surviving church records.

Underlying all these alterations was equally as radical a change in values and taste. As built, the church as a remarkably old-fashioned building, more typical of earlier eighteenth-century meetinghouses. In a period when gable-to-street churches in the Adamesque or Federal style were replacing the customarily unadorned, rectangular meetinghouses, the Centerbrook congregation chose to build in the traditional manner. Its church was twice as large but probably quite similar to the original 1730 building, although all that is known about the first meetinghouse is its size (30' x 40') and the materials used (oak framing and clapboards). The interior plan of the new building was typical of the early eighteenth-century meetinghouses as well. From the records it appears that even the "modern" notion of slip pews was only briefly considered and discarded in favor of more traditional box pews. The addition of a bell tower to the 1792 building was somewhat of a departure but hardly surprising given the increased emphasis on funereal display and ceremony in the post-Revolutionary period. In the year of construction detailed instructions for tolling the bell at funerals in Centerbrook first appeared in the surviving church records.

Tradition gave way to popular taste in the first remodelling of the nineteenth century. No expense was spared to make the Centerbrook church resemble the temple-form Greek Revival-style churches that proliferated in the period. Most impressive of these changes was, of course, changing the orientation of the building to have the gable end face the street, but Greek Revival-style details were added throughout the building to

9. Major Bibliographical References

A Brief History of the Second Ecclesiastical Society of Saybrook, 1722-1972.

J. Frederick Kelly. Early Connecticut Meetinghouses, Vol. I. New York: Columbia University Press, 1948.

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of nominated property 1

Quadrangle name Essex **Quadrangle scale** 1:24,000

UTM References

	Zone	Easting	Northing
A	18	726240	4585800
B			
C			
D			
E			
F			
G			
H			

Verbal boundary description and justification

No deed is recorded for the Centerbrook Church, hence no deed reference. The property is identified as Lot 41 on Map 44 on Tax Assessor's Maps.

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries N.A.

state	code	county	code
state	code	county	code

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Jan Cunningham, National Register Consultant, edited by John Herzan, National Register Coordinator

organization Cunningham Associates **date** 6/24/86

street & number 98 Washington Street **telephone** (203) 347 4072

city or town Middletown **state** Connecticut

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

___ national ___ state X 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 John W. Shannahan

title Director, Connecticut Historical Commission **date** January 8, 1987

For NPS use only

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

Entered in the National Register

for Melone Byrne **date** 2-12-87

Keeper of the National Register

Attest: **date**

Chief of Registration

bring it up-to-date. Vestiges of this phase are still visible, notably the pediment over the entrance, the cornice returns, and some of the interior details.

The congregation's exceptional concern for being up-to-date in the latest stylistic mode continued later in the century. The 1889 alterations cannot truly be assigned to any one style but generally are influenced by Victorian taste. Hence the new imbricated shingles or the wood ceiling in the nave in the Gothic tradition, attempts once again to further modernize the church. Despite the fully Victorian interior, the essential eighteenth-century form of the church remains.

History:

Centerbrook was originally part of the Potapaug, or North Quarter of the Saybrook Colony, an area that also encompassed the present-day towns of Deep River, Chester, Essex, and Ivoryton. In 1648, 13 years after the settlement of Saybrook, the North Quarter was first laid out (surveyed), but it was sparsely settled until the eighteenth century. By 1722 enough people lived in the quarter to form their own church. Upon petition to the general court, they were granted permission to establish the Second Ecclesiastical Society of Saybrook.[6] Plans were made that same year to "settle" a minister. The Reverend Abraham Nott, a Yale graduate, first invited to preach in the newly formed society in 1723, was ordained as its minister in 1725. As was customary, the society was authorized to tax the inhabitants to build a meetinghouse. The first meetinghouse was begun during this same period but not completed until 1732. It stood a few rods east of the present church, near the southeast corner of the minister's homelot. In typical fashion, the North Society was further subdivided as the population of the area increased. The first and only group to "hive off" in the eighteenth century was located in the area known today as Chester, which broke away in 1732. Deep River, Essex, and Ivoryton did not form their own churches until the nineteenth century, between 1834 and 1877.

The first meetinghouse built by the Second Ecclesiastical Society of Saybrook served the parish until 1792. In that year the building was sold at public auction and moved to the Essex waterfront, where it was put to use as a boat builder's shed. Prior to the move, however, the glass, lath, and lath nails were removed to be used in "finishing the new meeting house."[7]

Construction on the present church began in 1790 under the direction of Captain John Dennison, a master builder. In addition to the money raised from the sale of the old church, the parish relied on voluntary subscriptions to pay for the building. Evidently the 500 pounds subscribed by this latter method was not sufficient, since it petitioned the General Court to hold a lottery to raise an additional 350 pounds to complete the building in 1792. Operating expenses of the church were provided by two traditional methods: a rate tax was collected to pay the minister and seats in the new meetinghouse were sold to parishioners.

Despite the proliferation of new denominations and the disestablishment of the Congregational Church in 1818, the Centerbrook church continued to thrive. In contrast

to other churches of this denomination, the membership more than doubled under the leadership of the Reverend Aaron Hovey. He was the second minister of the present church, from 1804 to 1843, and the last minister to be "settled" for life. The increase in membership was largely due to the religious revivals that took place between 1816 and 1835. Although 42 church members left to form the new church at Deep River in 1834, the Centerbrook church remained financially sound and able to undertake its extensive remodelling program in 1839. It also weathered the formation of the two other "daughter" churches in Essex and Ivoryton later in the century.

Innovation in church services and the formation of new church organizations characterized the history of the church in this period. A "Singing School" was established in 1821 to provide music for worship services, a radical change from eighteenth-century practice. The "Young Ladies Friendly Society" formed in 1822 (still operating in 1972) for charitable purposes was soon followed by a similar group for the men in 1824. In 1831 a Sabbath School Society founded the Sunday School and library. The typical missionary and Christian Endeavor Societies of the late nineteenth century were also established, both still functioning in the twentieth century.

The Second Ecclesiastical Society of Saybrook is still operating today, 263 years after its founding. One of the oldest continuously operating church societies in Connecticut, it owns the land and buildings of the Centerbrook church, although it has relinquished control of the congregation and the operation of the church.

Notes:

1. J. Fredrick Kelly, Early Connecticut Meetinghouses, Vol. I. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948), p. 78. Visual inspection by the author was prevented since access to the attic of the nave is no longer possible.
2. Ibid., p. 76.
3. A Brief History of the Second Ecclesiastical Society, 1722-1972, pp. 10, 11.
4. Kelly, p. 78. The dado of horizontal boards is also visible on the front wall of the vestibule.
5. Ibid., p. 78.
6. Ibid., p. 75.
7. Ibid., p. 76.