

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

For NPS use only

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

received NOV 14 1984

date entered DEC 13 1984

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

1. Name

historic First Congregational Church - Unitarian

and/or common Unitarian Church (preferred)

2. Location

street & number Exeter Road n/a not for publication

city, town Hampton Falls X vicinity of 400' south of Brown Road

state N.H. code 33 county Rockingham 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 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	Public Acquisition	Accessible	<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 checked="" type="checkbox"/> n/a	<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> other:

4. Owner of Property

name (see continuation sheet)

street & number

city, town vicinity of state

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Church deed is missing.
Abutters deeds and plans are on file at:
Rockingham County Registry of Deeds

street & number Rockingham County Courthouse
Hampton Road

city, town Exeter, state New Hampshire 038833

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title None has this property been determined eligible? yes no

date federal state county local

depository for survey records

city, town state

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 <u>n/a</u>
<input type="checkbox"/> fair	<input type="checkbox"/> unexposed		

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

This rectangular (39' wide, 49' deep), one story, white, symmetrical, wood framed church covers the entire 2,000 sq. ft. parcel on which it stands. This nomination includes the adjacent privately owned churchyard (an additional 2,200 sq. ft.) comprising a roughly rectangular parcel delineated by bushes on the north, wood rail fence on the south and east, and Exeter Road on the west. Although situated at the geographical center of town, the church's immediate surroundings have always been rural. Only a dozen houses (most built prior to 1900) are located within a $\frac{1}{2}$ mile of this site; the church's congregational predecessor was historically the only other non-residential building in this part of town. The church is situated atop a gently rising hill at the northwest corner of a $10\frac{1}{2}$ acre hayfield, set back 30' easterly from the paved portion of Exeter Rd. (NH Rte.88), and 400' south of Brown Rd.. A sprawling 500-acre apple farm extends beyond the hayfield to the south and east, while residential buildings are situated to the north and west.

The building rests upon a foundation of cut granite blocks. The church's side and rear are clapboard sheathed; the front wall (west elevation) is composed of flush board siding. Three double-hung 20 over 20 sash windows flanked by black louvered shutters are evenly spaced along each of the building's side walls (north & south elevations). Pilasters frame the side walls. An 11' wide aspe projects 4' from the building's rear (east elevation), lighted on the north and south sides by simple 4 over 4 sash windows ($1\frac{1}{2}'$ by $4\frac{1}{2}'$), and covered by a shed roof.

the building's main facade (west elevation) is dominated by two free-standing columns supporting a pediment atop a full entablature which runs along the front and sides of the building. The height of the tapering columns ($H=13'8''$) equals $5\frac{1}{2}$ diameters (D at base= $30''$). Each column contains 20 elliptically shaped grooves. The only other observed variations from classical architecture are inset trefoils just below the capitals on the rear pilasters and a somewhat steeper roof pitch that is more in keeping with New England snow loads.

The recessed porch may be ascended by four wooden steps, each running the width of the building. Two identical doorways flank a 2' by $6\frac{1}{2}'$ center window, situated $5\frac{1}{2}'$ above the porch, and composed of 9 over 9 double hung sash. The sash is flanked by black shutters, which in turn are enclosed on the sides and above by trim with recessed panels. Raised rectilinear frets embellish the surround just below the upper corners. A 2' long recessed rectangular panel is centered above the sash.

The two identical front entries are each enclosed by pilasters and a full entablature. Raised rectilinear frets are set within the pilasters' 1" wide recessed panels. Recessed rectangular panels like those above the adjoining window are centered above the doors' cornices. Three paned sidelights extend halfway toward the porch floor. The single doors each have six recessed panels, latches, and a pair of inset rectilinear frets on the lock rail aligned vertically with the panels. Modern electric lanterns have been installed over each door.

The interior of the building is symmetrical in every respect. Remarkably effective trompe l'oeil wall paintings depicting mostly rectilinear raised and recessed paneling cover the church's interior walls and ceiling. The color of the paint ranges through numerous shades of gray, beige, and white. Most of the painting remains in excellent condition; however, cracking and peeling due to a condensation problem is particularly evident along the south side of the ceiling.

continued....

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 type="checkbox"/> 1600–1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> social/ humanitarian
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700–1799	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> theater
<input checked="" 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 c. 1838 **Builder/Architect** Unknown

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

In antis style churches may be found throughout the eastern United States; this building, however, appears to be the only surviving one in New Hampshire.¹ The church's condition is superb; it remains virtually unaltered since its construction in 1838. Architectural trompe l'oeil interiors are rare; pre-Victorian trompe l'oeil such as this are rarer still. The building clearly possesses integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association. As the least altered of Hampton Falls' churches and the lineal descendent of the town's oldest congregation, the building is associated with events that may have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of the town's history and to that of Unitarianism in New England. The church embodies high artistic values, skilled craftsmanship, and a vernacular interpretation of classical architecture as expressed in modern American materials. An in-depth study of ecclesiastical architecture in coastal New Hampshire indicates this building to be the only steeple-less, temple-like church in Rockingham County.² The design precedent of this venacular building is unknown.

This building was erected in 1838 as a Unitarian Church, built to replace a 1768 Congregational meetinghouse which stood across the road until 1842. The builder and interior painter remain unknown. An unsubstantiated 1952 newspaper article (Hampton Union, 8/14/52) indicates that the new foundation was in place by June 1838 when the Unitarian Society formally acquired the land. The referenced deed, however, is not on record at the Registry. An Exeter News Letter article (1/8/1839) details the dedication of this building on January 1, 1839.

Many an unwary traveler on NH Route 88 has no doubt been startled at the sight of this bright white building set on high ground in the midst of an agricultural district, alone among the hayfields and apple orchards. The monumental columns and meticulous attention to detail are all the more dramatic within the context of this unlikely rural setting.

Some elements of the building's facade might possibly have been influenced by Asher Benjamin's Practical House Carpenter (Boston: 1830).

1 Bryant F Tolles, Jr., New Hampshire Architecture: An Illustrated Guide. Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1979, p. 55

2 Phillip Zimmerman, "Ecclesiastical Architecture of Rockingham County" Diss. Boston U. 1984.

9. Major Bibliographical References

(see continuation sheet)

10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of nominated property 4,200 sq. ft.

Quadrangle name Exeter, N.H.

Quadrangle scale 1:24000

UTM References

A 19 345790 4754940
Zone Easting Northing

B
Zone Easting Northing

C

D

E

F

G

H

Verbal boundary description and justification

(see continuation sheet)

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

state N/A code county code

state N/A code county code

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Thomas J. Morgan

organization Rockingham Planning Commission date March 1984

street & number One Water Street telephone (603) 778-0885

city or town Exeter, state New Hampshire 03833

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.

Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer signature

title New Hampshire Deputy Historic Preservation Officer

date 10/26/84

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

for Helene Byers
Keeper of the National Register

Entered in the
National Register

date 12-13-84

Attest:

Chief of Registration

date

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Owner of Property:

Church: First Congregational Society - Unitarian
Exeter Road
Hampton Falls, New Hampshire 03844

Churchyard:
Dr. & Mrs. Charles Bailey
Exeter Road
Hampton Falls, New Hampshire 03844

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The arched ceiling forms a slightly curving tunnel vault along a west/east (front/rear) axis. A large rectilinear (painted) panel which dominates the center of the ceiling is truncated at its four corners by (painted) quarter circles. This panel is itself surrounded by eight separate square and rectangular (painted) panels. The ceiling's decorative centerpiece (painted, approximately 10' in diameter) features numerous floral designs situated within and around two concentric rings.

The apse at the building's east end, and the choir at its west end, are each framed by a broad arch resting upon (painted) pilasters. Each arch is flanked by two pairs of large raised panels whose upper edges conform to the profile of the vaulted ceiling. Whereas the choir arch's pilasters are completely trompe l'oeil, the apse arch's pilasters are only partially so; the portion of the capitals of these latter pilasters which face the apse are in fact three dimensional wood.

The elliptically vaulted apse projects eastward 4' in the shape of an ellipse. A blind arcade of seven round (painted) arches runs along its curved wall. A 4 over 4 sash window is set in each of the end archways. The arcade is separate from the vaulted ceiling of the apse by (painted) crown molding which adjoins and matches the pilaster capitals. The decorative trompe l'oeil ribs of the apse's fan vault ceiling align vertically with the arcade piers and rises to an apex immediately behind the crown of the arch. The two center ribs enclose a painted depiction of a torch-like lantern.

The dimensions and shape of the fan vaulted choir at the opposite end of the building are quite similar to those of the apse. The painted molding is the same, but the pilaster capitals are completely (rather than partially) trompe l'oeil. One 9 over 9 sash window flanked by shutters is set in the center of the choir's rear wall (west end of the church). The choir ceiling and walls are bare. A decorative lyre set in a bed of flowers is depicted over the window just above the molding. The choir rest on a one foot high platform, and is set off from the remaining floorspace by a 4' high wooden partition. Doors from each side of the choir lead to 4' by 8½' front entry vestibules.

Rectangular trompe l'oeil raised panels, slightly smaller in size than the adjacent windows, line the side walls of the church's interior at regular intervals. A three-dimensional wooden molding runs the length of the building immediately above these painted panels and windows.

Three clusters of pews (eight rows each) are divided by two aisles which run from the front (west) entry vestibules toward the apse (east). Two additional clusters of pews (four rows each) face the pulpit from the church's northeast and southeast corners. Curved arm rests embellish the aisle end of the pew. All pews face the pulpit, except for two near the east end by the side walls, which appear to be a throw-back to a colonial box pew arrangement.

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The pulpit is screened from most of the congregation by 2½' high velvet curtains hung from rails which connect a row of four wooden mini-pilasters. The middle curtain is enclosed by an oval shaped wooden frame whose four corners are incised with decorative leaves. Furniture which appears to be contemporary with the building's construction includes an Empire sofa behind the pulpit, and two small painted tables.

With the exception of the condensation problem noted above, this building and its furnishings are in superb condition. The only known alterations since the church's construction in 1838 include installation of two modern electric lanterns over the front entries, metal railings by the front steps, and a new roof to replace the one which blew off in a 1949 hurricane. Two stoves, and their accompanying stovepipes which ran the length of the building suspended from the ceiling, were removed during the 1940's. Long-time residents also tell of a 'big' rock which came through the ceiling in 1915 due to careless dynamiting. The trompe l'oeil painting was touched up by Allyn Cox of New York in 1951. Eight local residents aged 40 to 94, recall no other alterations within their lifetimes.

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Local tradition attributes the trompe l'oeil interior to two itinerant Italian artists working 1839.

A survey by Nina Fletcher Little, entitled American Decorative Wall Painting 1700-1850 (NY: Studio Publications, 1952, p.114), singles out this church's architectural trompe l'oeil as an outstanding and presumably unique example of this "little known phase of American interior decoration," "a genre which, on this side of the Atlantic, generally possesses a primitive and naive character. Architectural trompe l'oeil survives in only two other area buildings: St. John's Church in Portsmouth (painted in 1848 by Daniel Shepard of Salem, Mass; obvious Italianate influence evident), and the Unitarian Church of Kennebunk, Maine (very primitive). Of the three, only Hampton Falls' church succeeds in achieving a three dimensional effect.

Due to the loss of church records, very little is known of the congregation's history. Illustrious former members include Ralph Adams Cram, and Frank Sanborn, "the Sage of Concord." Since the 19th. century, services have been held only during the summer months.

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MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

1. Benjamin, Asher. The Practical House Carpenter. First Edition. Boston: Benjamin, R.P. & C. Williams, and Annin & Smith, 1830
2. Brown, Warren. History of Hampton Falls, Vol. I
Manchester, NH: John B. Clarke Co., 1900.
3. Brown, Warren. History of Hampton Falls, Vol. II
Concord, NH: The Rumford Press, 1918.
4. "Dedication" Exeter News Letter, 8 January 1838, page 3.
5. Little, Nina Fletcher. American Decorative Wall Painting 1700 - 1850.
NY: Studio Publications, 1952.
6. Sawyer, Roland D. "Views and Reviews...of Old Rockingham."
Hampton Union, 14 August 1952
7. Tolles, Bryant F., Jr. New Hampshire Architecture: An Illustrated Guide.
Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1979.
8. Interviews (March 1984): John Anderson, Dr. Charles Bailey, Martha Batchelder, Peter Benes, James Garvin, Nicholas Isaacs, Rev. Robert Karnan, Pearl Marston, Nancy Merrill, Roberta Pevear, Lois Perfect, Rev. Peter Richardson, Beverly Powell, Emmons Sanborn, Richard Sanborn, Eric Small, Rev. Henry Stonie, Eleanor Vigneau, and Phillip Zimmerman.

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VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION AND JUSTIFICATION

The nominated property is designated as Lot #16 on Map 5 of the Town of Hampton Falls Assessors' Map, and is outlined in yellow on the attached sketch map which was excerpted from a survey of land belonging to Dr. Charles & Virginia Bailey by John W. Durgin Associates dated April 20, 1981, File #1212, Plan #5937. Note that the Baileys hold title to the churchyard while the First Congregational Society owns only the land on which the church stands.

The delineated churchyard has been a churchyard since 1838. The adjacent hayfield has been a hayfield since time immemorial. It is not the intent of this nomination to nominate anything other than the churchyard and church.

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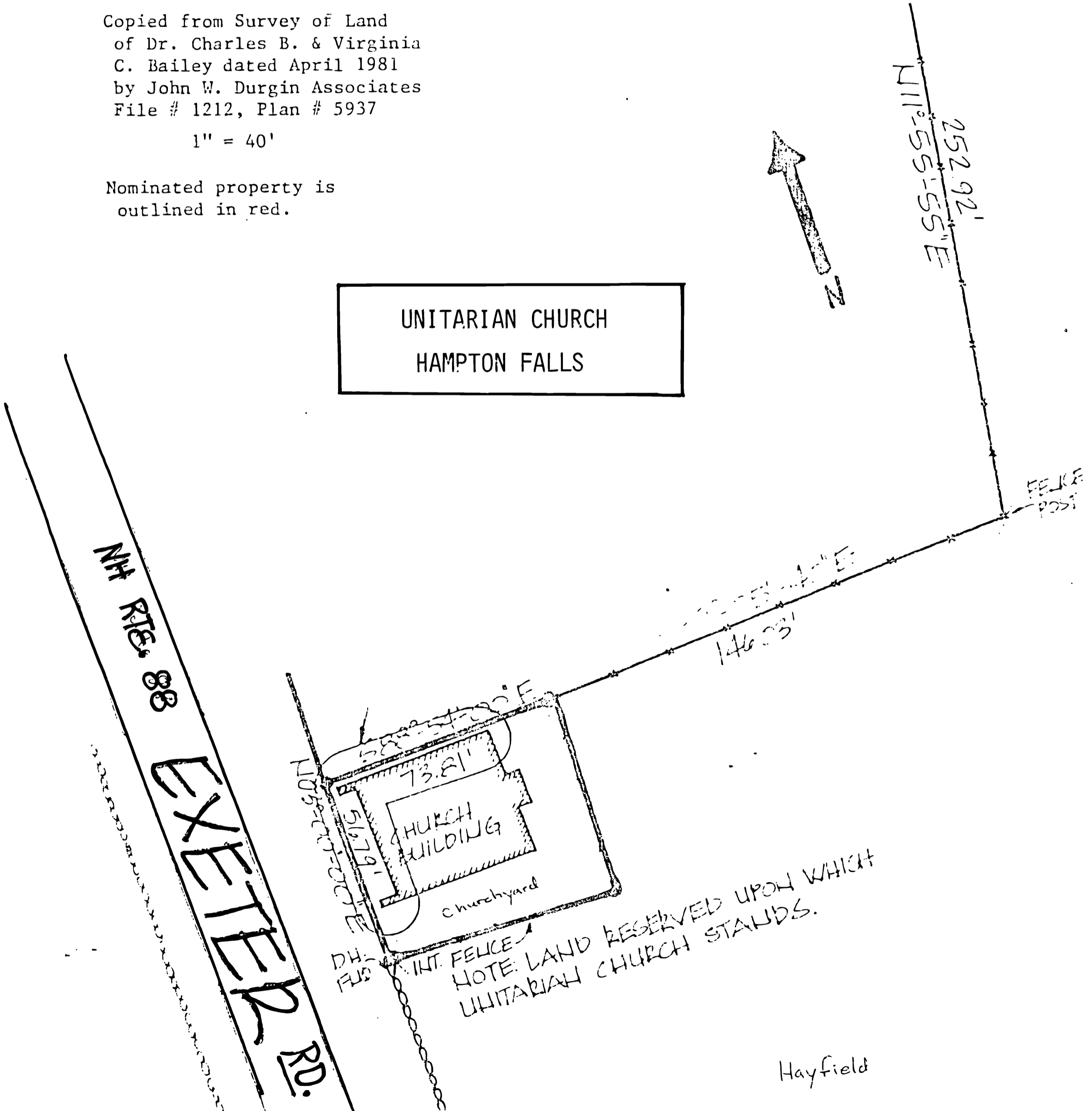
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Copied from Survey of Land
of Dr. Charles B. & Virginia
C. Bailey dated April 1981
by John W. Durgin Associates
File # 1212, Plan # 5937

1" = 40'

Nominated property is
outlined in red.



NOTE: LAND RESERVED UPON WHICH
UNITARIAN CHURCH STANDS.

Hayfield