

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

ROUND CHURCH

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United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: ROUND CHURCH

Other Name/Site Number: Old Round Church

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: Bridge Street

Not for publication: N/A

City/Town: Richmond

Vicinity: N/A

State: VT County: Chittenden

Code: 007

3. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property

Private: X

Public-Local: X

Public-State: \_\_\_

Public-Federal: \_\_\_

Category of Property

Building(s): X

District: \_\_\_

Site: \_\_\_

Structure: \_\_\_

Object: \_\_\_

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing

1

\_\_\_

\_\_\_

1

Noncontributing

\_\_\_ buildings

\_\_\_ sites

1 structures (road)

2 objects

3 Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 1

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing: N/A

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**4. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this \_\_\_ nomination \_\_\_ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property \_\_\_ meets \_\_\_ does not meet the National Register Criteria.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Certifying Official

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property \_\_\_ meets \_\_\_ does not meet the National Register criteria.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Commenting or Other Official

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal Agency and Bureau

**5. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION**

I hereby certify that this property is:

- \_\_\_ Entered in the National Register \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_ Determined eligible for the National Register \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_ Determined not eligible for the National Register \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_ Removed from the National Register \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_ Other (explain): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Keeper

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Action

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**6. FUNCTION OR USE**

Historic:	RELIGION SOCIAL	Sub:	Religious Facility Meeting Hall
Current:	SOCIAL RECREATION & CULTURE	Sub:	Meeting Hall Museum

**7. DESCRIPTION**

ARCHITECTURAL CLASSIFICATION: Early Republic: Federal

## MATERIALS:

Foundation: Stone

Walls: Weatherboard

Roof: Shingle

Other: Copper (Belfry roof)

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**Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.**

The Round Church, situated on a small common south of the Winooski River in Richmond village, is a rare, unaltered, sixteen-sided meetinghouse. Built in 1812-1814, the two-story clapboard church has modest Federal style detailing inside and out. Each side of the symmetrical building, except the wall behind the pulpit, has windows with twelve-over-twelve sash with simple surrounds. Paneled doorways on three sides are flanked by pilasters supporting an unadorned entablature. The roof is sixteen-sloped, crowned by a two-tiered bell tower. The interior is noteworthy in that it is relatively unchanged and retains the original enclosed pews and pulpit. Restored in 1981 and retaining its historic integrity in terms of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association, the church is an excellent example of a rare, early nineteenth century, sixteen-sided meetinghouse.

The Round Church is set well back on Bridge Street, one block south of the Winooski River, in what was originally the commercial and social center of Richmond village. Because the commercial district shifted three blocks north of the river following the arrival of the railroad, the common and buildings surrounding the Round Church were left relatively unchanged, and today the setting appears much as it did in 1812. Approximately fifty feet in diameter, the Round Church, is a sixteen-sided, two-story wooden building with a sixteen-sloped roof that approaches a shallow cone in form. The walls are covered with clapboards and the roof has cedar shingles. The roof is capped by a short octagonal tower topped by an open, eight-columned belfry and cupola. The foundation projects approximately two feet above grade and is constructed of rubble stone with mortar joints. Narrow vertical cornerboards separate the sides. The windows are simple doublehung rectangular windows with twelve-over-twelve sash that are in vertical and horizontal alignment. Each of the sixteen bays contains a window on each floor except for the north, west and south sides which have a door on the first floor level, and for the east side which has no windows on either level. (The east side has the pulpit on the interior.)

In all but its shape, and the adaptations that requires, the Round Church is a traditional meetinghouse. The doorway on the west side is the main entrance to the building and consists of two raised panel doors supported by wrought iron strap hinges and framed by pilasters surmounted by an unadorned entablature. The north and south doorways are similar except each has a single door. The north and south doorways are each separated from the main doorway by three sides.

The two-tiered octagonal cupola is situated at the roof apex. The first tier is sheathed in clapboards and has small six-over-six windows covered by louvered shutters on three sides, so that one window is above each of the three doorways. The second tier consists of an open belfry encircled by an arcade of wood columns surmounted by a copper-clad, bell-shaped roof capped by a weathervane.

The interior is a round adaptation of the standard meetinghouse plan. A small vestibule, with stairs climbing at either side, leads into the round meeting room, which occupies the remainder of the structure. A broad aisle leads from the west door to the pulpit on the east wall. The design for the pulpit appears to have been patterned after

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one appearing in Asher Benjamin's 1797 *County Builder's Assistant*. Supported by four Tuscan order piers and a full-entablature base, the elevated pulpit serves as the focus of the room and is reached by a narrow stairway with square balusters. The entablature base is finely detailed, featuring an intricate denticular bed molding. The pulpit is five-sided with paneled half-walls, one panel with bead molding surround per side. The north side (perpendicular to the back wall) is open to the stairs, and the diagonal walls are convex. A recent paint analysis suggests that the pulpit was originally painted blue with wood graining painted later, possibly by an itinerant artist. The left panel is signed by the artisan: "[R. or S.] Marten." Evidence suggests that the pulpit was lowered several feet after 1850. It may be then that the sounding board [typically suspended above the pulpit] was removed.

The wall surface of the room is plaster. Enclosed box pews line the walls and stand in four rows, two rows on each side of the main aisle. Each box pew has a paneled door supported by iron "H" hinges. The balcony, a horseshoe facing the pulpit, and ceiling are supported by six wooden columns on bases with simplified doric capital order.

The balcony consists of enclosed wallpews and two rows of open slips. The outside of the balcony rail is painted to simulate wood grain, but the pattern is broader than the pulpit, suggesting a different hand.

The attic was originally framed with a series of heavy timber trusses carrying the roof, the ceiling, and the eight columns of the belfry. In 1927, new trusses, beams, columns, steel hanger rods, and bracing were added, apparently to correct a tilting tower and sagging ceiling. This construction was redundant and possibly unsafe.

The church sits back from Bridge Street, set off from the main artery by a triangular-shaped common or green. A narrow drive angles from Bridge Street to pass between the church and the green, giving the common a park-like ambiance. Native granite monuments mark either end of the treed common. The northern monument is rough cut granite, 52' tall x 20' wide x 42, deep, and was dedicated c. 1925 to the veterans of World War I. The southern monument, designed by Robert P. Young and Victor Rosselis of Barre, Vermont, depicts a skier navigating through a slalom course. The monument was dedicated July 4, 1972 as a tribute to the Cochran family, a local family of alpine skiers, in commemoration of Barbara Cochran's gold medal performance at the 1972 Olympics. The road and two statues are considered non-contributing as they were added to the site after the period of significance.

The Round Church was used for church services until c. 1885 and for Town Meetings until 1973, when state officials closed the building for public gatherings due to structural deterioration. In 1976 town residents voted to deed the church to the Richmond Historical Society for the purpose of restoration. After several years of grant applications, architectural and engineering studies, and raising money, the restoration was started. All work followed the Secretary of the Interior's Standards using an historic structures report prepared by the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities. Throughout the restoration, the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation was regularly consulted.

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Due to the severe deterioration which existed in the structural members of the belfry, the entire belfry was rebuilt. Nearly all the vertical members had rotted at some time and been replaced or strengthened with new members scabbed onto them. In some cases, the repairs themselves were decayed. The belfry was removed in one piece by a large crane and placed in a protective building while careful drawings were made of it. The bell, as well as the railing and the arched pieces between the columns, were removed for reuse. The belfry was removed from the temporary building and a new belfry was constructed from pressure-treated southern yellow pine, spruce framing members, and fir plywood. The original belfry had been constructed of the same material as the rest of the church: spruce framing timbers, pine sheathing, and spruce clapboards.

The foundation was reinforced and new foundation piers were built under the church to support the six interior columns.

The attic required substantial remedial work. The root cause of the problem lay in the inherent design weakness of the original structure. The attic above the ceiling was reframed and supplemental trusses added to provide the strength necessary to support the twelve ton bell and belfry. An enclosed stairway from the balcony to the attic, not part of the original building, was removed, and pews, floor boards, window sash and clapboards were repaired. By 1981, and at a cost of \$180,000, the church was again open to the public. In its restored state, the Round Church is an excellent example of a rare early nineteenth century, sixteen-sided meetinghouse.

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**8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

Nationally: X Statewide: \_\_\_ Locally: \_\_\_

Applicable National Register Criteria: A\_\_\_ B\_\_\_ CX D\_\_\_

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions): AX B\_\_\_ C\_\_\_ D\_\_\_ E\_\_\_ F\_\_\_ G\_\_\_

NHL Criteria: 4

NHL Exception: 1

NHL Theme(s): XVI. Architecture  
C. Federal (1780-1820)

Areas of Significance: Architecture

Period(s) of Significance: 1812-1813

Significant Dates: 1812-1813

Significant Person(s): N/A

Cultural Affiliation: N/A

Architect/Builder: William Rhodes

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**State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.**

The Round Church, built in 1812-1813, is a rare, well-preserved example of a sixteen-sided meetinghouse. Digressing from the traditional rectangular form, Richmond, Vermont architect and builder, William Rhodes, displayed a level of skill and imagination that is normally reserved for "high style" architects. Traditionally, eighteenth and nineteenth century meetinghouses were rectangular or occasionally square in form. Popular builders' pattern books published by Asher Benjamin and Minard Lafever further standardized the rectangular Wren-Gibbs architectural type. Experimentation was generally limited to decorative detail, steeples, porches or the orientation of the entrance. Rhodes chose a sixteen-sided plan, rare, if not unique. Nevertheless, in all but its shape, the Round Church is a traditional meetinghouse with restrained Federal style detailing. Inside, the church remains as it was built with box pews and a horseshoe gallery. Recently restored, the Round Church is significant as a singular, and possibly sole, surviving example of an early nineteenth century sixteen-sided meetinghouse.

Richmond is a typical, small Vermont community, set in a northern valley near Burlington. The town provides dramatic views of the Green Mountain range and is crisscrossed by both the Winooski and Huntington Rivers. Its situation, ideal for farming, must have been a powerful attraction to the earliest settlers, who began to arrive about 1775. In 1794, the town was organized, and as early as 1796, residents voted to have a committee of five "look in the different places in the Town and report to the town the most convenient [sic] place to set a meetinghouse."<sup>1</sup> But as often happened in New England towns, the location of the meetinghouse became a controversial issue as different sections of town vied for the building. The issue was not settled until 1812, when tavern-keeper Thomas Whitcomb and his neighbor, shop-keeper Isaac Gleason, donated sixty rods each for the meetinghouse. William Rhoads, Esq. (usually spelled Rhodes), Isaac Gleason and James Butler were elected to draw up plans and advertise pews for sale, with no preference being given to anyone because of his religious tenets or creed. "Each of the denominations who become builders and proprietors should peaceably enjoy their share of said house."<sup>2</sup>

William Rhodes, blacksmith, builder, and holder of many town offices, served as head carpenter for the meetinghouse. His handwritten journal provides a detailed record of construction.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Richmond Town Record. Town Meeting, December 6, 1796. On file at the Richmond Town Center, Richmond, Vermont.

<sup>2</sup> Richmond Town Record. Town Meeting, February 7, 1812. On file at the Richmond Town Center, Richmond, Vermont.

<sup>3</sup> Copies of Rhodes' records are available at the Vermont Historical Society Library, Montpelier, Vermont; and University of Vermont Bailey-Howe Library Special Collections, Burlington, Vermont.



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Worksheets indicate that the frame was raised, boarded and shingled before November 12, 1812, taking fifty-one days to raise the frame. By the time the building was completed, Rhodes and seventeen men had worked 922 days. His ledger indicates that the cost for materials and labor amounted to \$2,305.42. In a letter to his parents, Rhodes wrote that he had contracted to build the Richmond meetinghouse for \$3,000.

Money to pay for the building was raised in advance by the sale or "Public vendull of pews. A record of the amount each proprietor paid was recorded under his particular church denomination: five Baptists paid \$214.00; two Methodists, \$60.00; six Christians, \$201.58; twenty-three Universalists, \$1,072.44; and twenty-nine Congregationalists, \$1,531.84. Total subscriptions equaled \$3,079.86. (Two surviving promissory notes for pews indicate that each buyer promised to pay William Rhodes, James Butler and Isaac Gleason \$37.50 in salable meat cattle on the first day of October, 1813, or marketable pork or grain on the first day of July next to be delivered at the premises to be built.) By early 1814, the Richmond Round Church was in use for religious services and town meetings.

The Round Church is one of the few early nineteenth century churches built in a circular genre. It was erected at a time when only the most sophisticated American architects were employing anything but the rectangular plan. Charles Bulfinch, for example, limited himself to an occasional oval or octagonal room. His only major use of another shape was the octagonal New South Church, built in 1814. Beginning in 1804, Robert Mills built a series of four round or octagonal churches: the circular, neoclassical "White Meetinghouse" in Charleston, South Carolina, which burned in 1861 and was replaced in 1891 with a round Richardsonian structure; the Sansom Street Baptist Church in Philadelphia that was generally a concentric design; an octagon church in Philadelphia built for the Unitarians; and the famous Monumental Church in Richmond, Virginia, built in 1812. Unlike the Richmond [Vermont] Round Church, Mills placed his altar or lectern in the center, possibly in reference to early Huguenot Christian churches. Early on in Christianity, the round form was generally found to be ill-suited for religious ritual. As Christian tradition evolved, positioning the clergy conspicuously away from the congregation, a rectangular or cruciform form with a longitudinal axis became the norm. Nevertheless, examples of round churches persist throughout England and Britain.

There is no indication that Rhodes was aware of Mills' work. Scholars agree that Rhodes' inspiration likely came from two churches in New Hampshire; in Concord and Claremont. In 1802, the population of Concord had grown to the point that an addition to their traditional rectangular meetinghouse was essential. The form of the 1803 addition (burned in 1870) was an eight-sided, semi-circular addition to the church's south side. A similar addition was made to the rectangular Claremont meeting house in 1807 (demolished in 1895). In both cases, the clapboard additions adopted restrained Federal style detailing and fenestration patterns similar to that found on the Round Church. Rhodes' parents lived in Claremont, and because he took frequent trips to New Hampshire, he would have been aware of both the Concord and Claremont designs.

In 1815, two years after the Richmond Round Church was completed, a sixteen-sided, brick church was built, again in Claremont. In 1843, the Claremont parish split, and

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within a few years the new congregation felt prosperous enough to replace "the old inconvenient chapel." The Claremont Round Brick Church was demolished in 1852, replaced with a Stick-Style church. A ca. 1852 painting by Miss Marion Richard of Claremont provides the only representation of the building. Aside from material, the Claremont Brick Church is strikingly similar to the Richmond Round Church: two-story, sixteen-sided with two windows per side and a sixteen-sloped roof crowned with a three-stage, octagonal belfry with cupola. The Claremont Brick Church is clearly a copy of the Richmond Round Church, though in the absence of documentary evidence, it is impossible to determine Rhodes' role in the design. The Richmond meetinghouse may have simply served as a model, or Rhodes may have actually provided plans, drawings, and instruction for the Claremont church. Directly or indirectly, however, the design must be attributed to William Rhodes.<sup>4</sup>

For many years, the Richmond Round Church served as a place for worship and for town meetings. As their membership dwindled, the Baptist Church of Christ ceased to exist in Richmond in 1843. In 1845 the Congregationalists talked about building their own church, and did so in 1850. In 1879 the Universalists withdrew to build their own church. The Methodists are said to have continued in the Round Church until c. 1885. Town meetings were held each March in the Round Church until 1973, when structural problems closed the building for public gatherings. At the 1976 Town Meeting, residents voted to deed the church to the Richmond Historical Society, thereby enabling them to secure grants for a major restoration. Through the generosity of many individuals, public agencies, and private foundations, the church was again opened in 1981 following a \$180,000 restoration. Today, the Round Church is one of Vermont's best known and most unusual historic buildings. The church is open daily throughout the summer and fall, and, staffed by volunteers, welcomes visitors without charge. Field trips by school children, bus tours, concerts, weddings, public gatherings and special events are regularly held in this historic building.

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<sup>4</sup> David Ruell, "The 'Round' Meetinghouses of New Hampshire and Vermont," *Historical New Hampshire*, Summer/Fall 1981, pp. 171-194.

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**9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES**

Hart, David McLaren, & Associates. *Round Church, Richmond, Vermont. Construction Documents for Structural Stabilization, Repairs and Improvements.* Boston, Massachusetts, 1979.

Hecker, John. *Round Church, Richmond, Vermont. Survey of the Building Fabric and Proposed Work Items and Preliminary Cost Estimate.* Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities. Boston, Massachusetts, 1977.

Kennedy, Roger G. *American Churches.* New York: Steward, Tabori and Chang, 1982.

Mallery, Peter T. *New England Churches and Meetinghouses 1680-1830.* New York: The Vendome Press, 1985, pp. 152-155.

Rhodes, William. Assorted letters and journals on file at the Vermont Historical Society Library, Montpelier, Vermont; and the University of Vermont Special Collections, Burlington, Vermont.

Richmond Town Record. Town Meetings: December 6, 1796, and February 7, 1812. On file at the Richmond Town Center, Richmond, Vermont.

Riggs, Harriet. "Early Richmond and its Old Round Church." *Rural Vermonter* 2 (Winter 1964), p. 13

\_\_\_\_\_. Lillian Baker Carlisle, ed. *Look Around Richmond, Bolton and Huntington, Vermont.* Burlington, Vermont: Chittenden County Historical Society, 1974, pp. 10-11.

Ruell, David. "The 'Round' Meetinghouses of New Hampshire and Vermont." *Historical New Hampshire* Summer/Fall 1981, pp. 171-194.

Shivell, Kirk. North Fort Myers, Florida. Interview with author, September 9, 1994.

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

\_\_\_ Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.

Previously Listed in the National Register.

\_\_\_ Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.

\_\_\_ Designated a National Historic Landmark.

\_\_\_ Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: #

\_\_\_ Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: #

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**Primary Location of Additional Data:**

- State Historic Preservation Office  
 Other State Agency  
 Federal Agency  
 Local Government  
 University  
 Other (Specify Repository):

**10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA**

Acreage of Property: 1.0 acre

UTM References: Zone Northing Easting  
A 18 659320 4917910**Verbal Boundary Description:**

The boundary of the nominated property is shown as the solid line on the accompanying map entitled "Plat of Survey Showing Town of Richmond Meeting House Property."

The nominated property includes the Round Church and common, deeded January 3, 1814, from Isaac Gleason to the Proprietors of the Richmond Meeting House Property as recorded in Volume 3, Page 130 of the Richmond Land Records.

**Boundary Justification:**

The boundary includes the building and surrounding grounds which have historically been a part of the Richmond Round Church and which maintain historic integrity.

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**11. FORM PREPARED BY**

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Date: September 14, 1994

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