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Charles E. Clark.
The Meetinghouse Tragedy: An Episode in the Life of a New England Town.
Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1998.

by
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Using a little-known ballad to return a long-forgotten accident to historical consciousness, Charles Clark's The Meetinghouse Tragedy: An Episode in the Life of a New England Town reminds us that memories are the building blocks of history. In September of 1773, a meetinghouse under construction in Wilton, New Hampshire, suddenly—though not without warning—collapsed, plunging from its rafters fifty-three men. Five died; none escaped injury. Clark pieces together the events of that fateful day in remarkable detail, but his analysis is more concerned with how those who witnessed the episode understood and explained it. Bringing a host of primary and secondary sources to bear on the problem, along with his own considerable knowledge of colonial communications, Clark finds that the community developed what he calls a "mixed mentality"; varied responses to the accident informed by an amalgam of cultural sources.

Wilton was a young but expanding community in 1773. Most of its inhabitants had migrated from towns in northern Massachusetts, primarily Salem and Andover, between 1739 and 1749. Its character was rural, with most families engaged in agriculture. As Clark notes, there was no printing press within fifty miles of Wilton, and it supported neither a post office nor a bookseller. The primary forum for discourse was the local meetinghouse, which had lately become inadequate for the task. Funds were approved in September of 1772 for a more commodious meetinghouse to be built in the center of town, on a lot adjacent to that of its predecessor. Both by necessity and custom, its construction would be a community event.

One of the real delights of Clark's book is his discussion of colonial construction practices, complete with illustrations and an index of terms for readers unfamiliar with the process. The author also has a knack for vividly recreating the texture of such an event as a house-raising. From the women and children who prepared food and drink to the mulatto man who entertained spectators with his feats of dexterity, the construction of the Wilton meetinghouse was a celebration of community that drew in people from neighboring towns as well. But when a support beam broke and fifty-three workers hurtled to the ground amid a bevy of falling tools and timber, the affair turned tragic and left the celebrants to ponder its meaning.

As much as his sources permit, Clark is able to detail the backgrounds of those who were victims of the meetinghouse tragedy, including their friends and families. Though his evidence is far from conclusive, the author draws a generally predictable composite portrait of the men who fell. However, Clark is surprised to find that, on average, the men may have possessed considerably more property than most locals, which, given their youth and vigor, suggests to him a possible correlation in colonial America between physical competence and economic success. Most of the men would recover from their injuries, though none would long forget their ordeal. Nor would their descendants.

Clark claims that "Every community needs a story" (99). Wilton's became the meetinghouse tragedy. News of the event spread through time and space by both oral transmission and what historians term "scribal culture." Clark's own introduction to the episode came through a written version of a ballad composed shortly after the tragedy. His reading of the ballad reveals elements of "popular" or "vernacular" culture in the eighteenth century and suggests its manifold character. In the ballad's theme of divine judgment, Clark finds "more than a hint of old-time New England providentialism" (80). And yet in its generally Arminian bent, one also finds evidence for the evolving nature of religious thought in eighteenth-

century New England. The ballad was reproduced at various times to various degrees and seems to have persisted in oral form for several generations before falling silent.

As for the meetinghouse itself, work on it resumed shortly after the accident, and it was completed the following year. Though it no longer stands, its vestiges were evident as late as 1997, when its foundation was covered with gravel for a parking lot. Thanks to the memories of its congregants and to the exhaustive research of an historian and his assistants, however, the Wilton meetinghouse and its tragic tale will remain in the historical consciousness for generations to come.