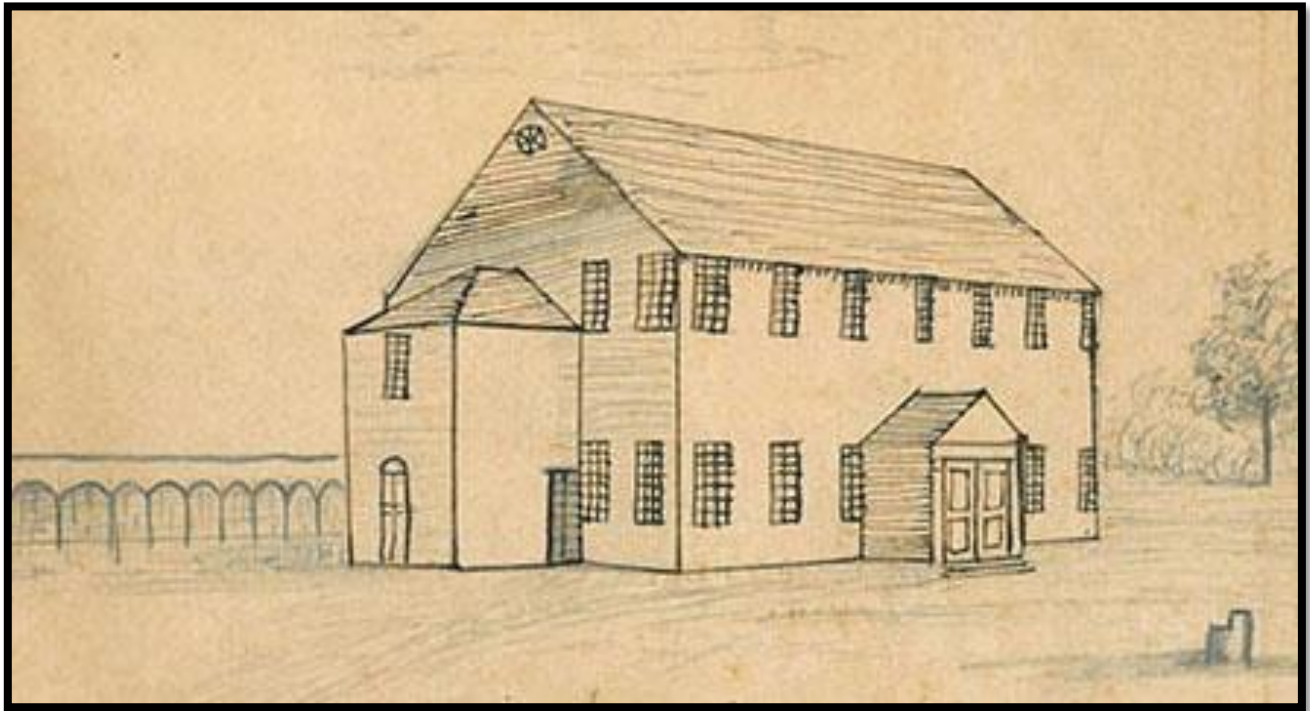


First Parish Meeting House Site (1712)



A sketch of the First Parish church as it looked in 1712, by Timothy Newell Smith.

In 1711, when Needham separated from Dedham, the legal definition of a town was a church, a school to teach children to read the Bible, and taxation to support a Minister. The parish defined the town, so the Meeting House was – by definition – the town center. The Meeting House was also the town's only public building, and was the center of both spiritual and political authority. Every couple of weeks, after service was over, the minister would step down from the pulpit and the Moderator would take over, and Town Meeting was held. Religious and civic affairs were intertwined, and would remain intertwined until MA state law finally separated them in 1834.

The first Meeting House was raised in 1712, with the Parsonage (site #3) and the Cemetery (#10) nearby. It was rebuilt twice – in 1774 when it burned down (arsonists from West Needham, it is said), and again in 1836 (current structure). It was moved to Dedham Avenue in 1878, after the town center shifted to the Great Plain to take better advantage of the railroad.