



The History of the Oak Hill/Pottle Free Will Baptist Church

By

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The former Oak Hill Free Will Baptist Church, also known as the Pottle Meetinghouse, is located on Winona Road in Meredith, New Hampshire. Built in 1801, it is one of the oldest buildings still standing in the town. It was acquired by the Meredith Historical Society in 1950. After years of use as its headquarters, the building was converted in 1998 into a historical museum displaying decades-old farming equipment used during the seasonal cycle of farming in early New Hampshire.

Early Meredith

The township that became Meredith was granted to some 60 Seacoast colonists by the Masonian Proprietors in 1748. Planning for settlement in the new township got underway fairly quickly, and the colonists named their prospective new home 'Salem' (shortly changed to 'New Salem' as there was already a town named 'Salem'). At that time, the Lakes Region section of New Hampshire was almost entirely vacant of inhabitants as a result of decades of conflict between the English and the French and their respective Native American allies. The nearest colonial settlements were in the Concord area, although the vast majority of the colonial population lived on the Seacoast in the towns of Portsmouth, Stratham, Exeter, and Dover.¹

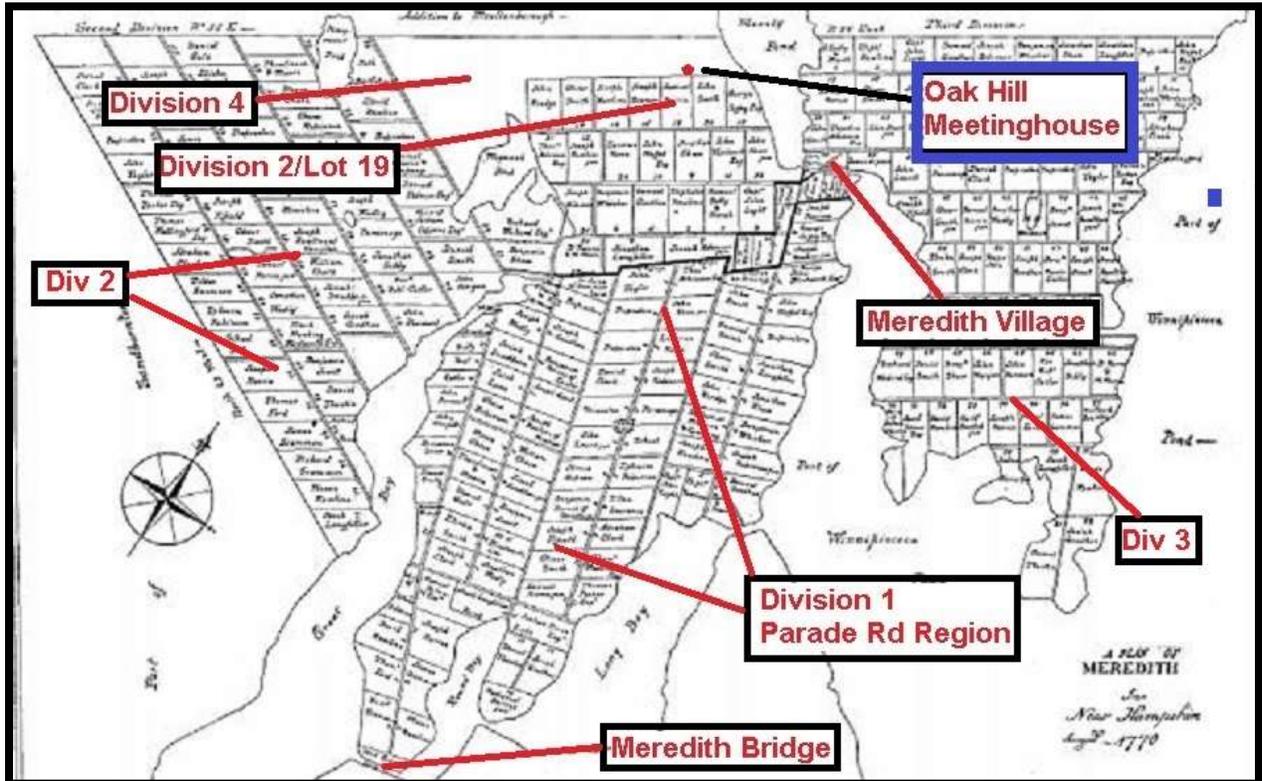
It was not until 1763, after the English and the colonists defeated the French and Indians, that the first settlers began developing farms in New Salem. Development occurred slowly at first. In 1768, there were still perhaps only 50 inhabitants on the 15 or so farms in the township. Although small, this was still enough for the Provincial Legislature to recognize New Salem as a 'town', changing its name to Meredith at the behest of the Provincial Governor who was currying favor in London.

Expansion occurred slowly during the 1770s, in large part due to the Revolution. Among the key developmental accomplishments of the town folk was the building of the Province Road from the southern tip of the town (then called Meredith Bridge, now known as Laconia) to the southern boundary of the town of New Hampton. The Province Road was the Provincial Governor's attempt to link the commerce of the developing interior to the Seacoast. More importantly this road, and others, enabled the expansion of the colonists further into the large, uninhabited sections of land that comprised the town.

By the late 1770s, several families had established farms on the northern stretches of the Province Road. Today, these sections of the Province Road are named

¹ There are numerous sources that recount this history. The best is Jere Daniell: Colonial New Hampshire (1981).

Pease Road and Winona Road. Among others, the families of Benjamin Pease and William Pike settled along Winona Road on what was delineated in a 1770 survey of the town as Division 2, Lot 19. Just north of them, David Boynton built his farm in the undivided land that became known as Division 4. A little further north on Winona Road, and just across the boundary in New Hampton, Robert Smith also developed a large farm.



Ebenezer Smith's survey of Meredith, 1770

After the Revolution, Meredith grew rapidly. By 1780, there were perhaps 400 people in the town. They were almost all farmers, scattered throughout the three main Divisions that made up the town. Their farms were fairly large, encompassing perhaps 30 acres on the low end to 200 acres or more on the high end. As part of the still forming United States, their efforts to develop institutional structures on the frontier were in the formative stages as well. One of these was in the area of religion.

Meredith's Religious History

During the first 15 or so years of settlement in Meredith, there was no established church in town. There were several reasons for this. First, there were no ministers among the earliest settlers. In fact, there were relatively few ministers throughout the entire colony. Second, the colonists were not unified in their religious beliefs. New

Hampshire settlers had various religious leanings, ranging from Congregational to Anglican to Protestant to Baptist to even Quaker. These religious differences were respected as part of the American experience. While the original grantors of the township, the Masonian proprietors, had insisted that a church and minister eventually become part of each new township, they did not address the issue of denominational differences. And these hardy settlers were not shy about expressing their opinions. Thirdly, the religious bedrock of the earliest colonists was roiled by waves of new thinking during the 1700s. Initially, the Enlightenment or Age of Reason spurred people to consider alternative 'answers' to life's biggest questions. Then in the 1730s and 1740s, the First Great Awakening brought itinerant preachers from England whose ideas challenged many of the basic tenants of belief held by the Anglicans, Congregationalists, and Baptists.

The earliest manifestation of formal religion in Meredith apparently occurred in the 1770s when an itinerant Baptist preacher named Reverend Samuel Shepard,² from the Seacoast town of Brentwood, NH, occasionally visited the interior towns such as Meredith, preaching the gospel. His efforts bore fruit in 1779 when a small group of Parade Road farmers organized a 'church' at the home of William Mead, one of the early leaders of the new town. The following year 1780, their existence was formalized. They took the name Anti-Pedo Baptist Church of Meredith.³ They adopted the Calvinist doctrines, a key component of which was the concept of predestination. In broad terms, this was an 'exclusive' church into which only the chosen few could aspire. Nicholas Folsom became its preacher. In 1782, the group sought to make Folsom the 'town minister'. Drawing upon the Masonian mandate, this would have meant that town taxes collected from everyone would be used to pay him. But the voters of Meredith rejected this proposal due to Folsom's doctrinal views that they did not share.

It was not until ten years later, in 1792, that the town finally found enough votes to pay a town minister. In this case, it was a Congregational minister, Reverend Simon Williams, who was recruited from Windham, NH to formally establish a church. A few years thereafter, the town voted to build a meetinghouse on the Province Road (i.e. Parade Road) for this church. It became known as the old North Meetinghouse.⁴

But the presence of divergent religious beliefs continued to flourish throughout the town and New Hampshire.

² See: Hurd: The History of Merrimack and Belknap Counties, p. 845; William R. Cutter: Genealogical and Personal Memoirs Relating to the Families of Boston and Eastern Massachusetts (New York, 1908), p. 702.

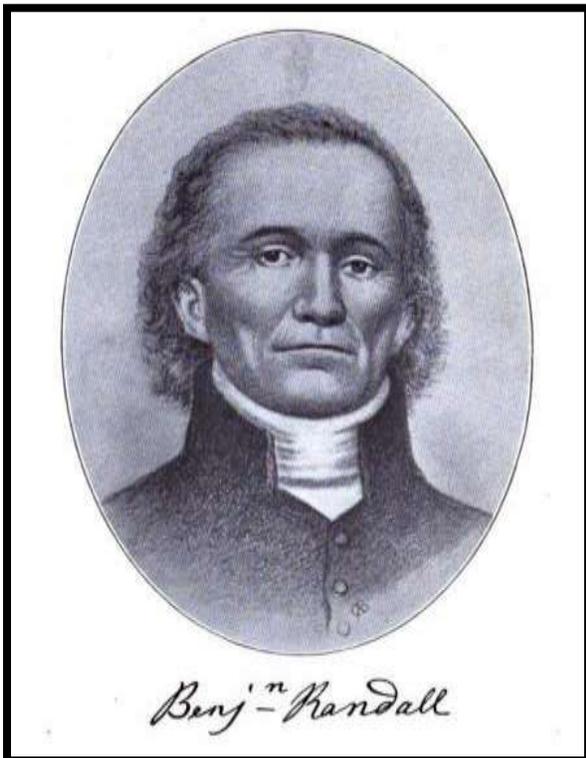
³ "Anit-pedo" was a term borrowed from the southern Baptists. It stemmed from their belief in predestination and referred to their opposition to infant baptism.

⁴ It was located near the still existing cemetery and town pound on Parade Road/Route 106.

The Free Will Anti-Pedo Baptist Church

One manifestation of this was the emergence of the Free Will Anti-Pedo Baptist Church.⁵ This was a new denomination founded in 1780 by Benjamin Randall of New Durham, New Hampshire. Randall (1749-1808) was raised a Baptist, but he grew to reject the Calvinist doctrine of predestination. His thinking was initially influenced by the remarkable English evangelist, George Whitefield. Spurred by Whitefield's preaching and then death in 1770, Randall rejected the concept of predestination and embraced the idea of universal or general atonement. As a result, he was expelled from the Baptist church in 1779. He and a few others then began their own church, developing a set of principles built around free grace, free will, and free salvation. The appeal, of course, was to the multitudes of people excluded from the Calvinist churches' preaching the gospel of the 'chosen' few.

Randall's New Durham Free Will Baptist church became a gradual success. It spurned centralized control. The general idea was that all Freewill groups should be independent and operate autonomously. In 1783, Randall and his cohorts began



developing an overarching, organizational structure around the growing groups of adherents. The term '**Monthly Meeting**' was adopted to describe each of the local organizations or churches. A next layer was the establishment of a **Quarterly meeting** comprised of Monthly Meeting churches to develop cohesion. Then in 1792, a **Yearly Meeting** of all Quarterly Meeting churches was established.

The Freewill Baptist church grew fairly rapidly. By 1785, Randall had helped found 12 Monthly Meetings in New Hampshire and Maine. He was personally indefatigable. He rode thousands of miles on horseback, spreading the word, despite meeting in some cases with violent opposition. By 1800, he had ordained a total of 31 Freewill ministers. All were

⁵ There are various sources that cover the history of the Free Will Baptist Church. One of the most detailed and interesting is: Rev. G. Burgess and Rev. J. Ward: Free Baptist Cyclopaedia. Historical and Biographical (1889). Another is I. D. Stewart: The History of the Free Will Baptists, for Half a Century (Dover, 1862).

itinerants who traveled widely to reach the dispersed farmers who were not included in the Congregational and Baptist churches.

The Lakes Region was a natural and productive area for this outreach. Freewill Baptist churches sprung up in Wolfeboro (1792), Gilford (1797), and New Hampton (1799). The Gilford church had a big influence on the development of the Oak Hill church. It was established and led by the popular Reverend Richard Martin who subsequently came to preach frequently in Meredith. The New Hampton church had an even greater impact.

An itinerant Freewill minister named Winthrop Young had come to New Hampton from Canterbury in 1799. He was a charismatic preacher. As Randall himself observed: "We have no man among us that can pray like Brother Young." Young evangelized for nearly two years in New Hampton, formally establishing the Freewill church in January 1800. By then he had 64 members, and the number grew to 114 over next eight months. Strong local leadership soon developed in the persons of Dr. Simeon Dana and Josiah Magoon who were both ordained in 1803. A still-existing Meetinghouse was built in 1800 and became known as the Dana Meetinghouse.⁶

Elder Young's quick success in establishing the Freewill Monthly Meeting in New Hampton undoubtedly had a salutary effect on Oak Hill. A counterpart of Young, Elder Simon Pottle, came to Meredith during the latter half of 1800. He was a former Baptist from Stratham, New Hampshire who had been ordained by Randall only the year before. Pottle found a welcoming audience on Oak Hill. He baptized nine people in Lake Waukewan during August 1800.⁷

Thereafter, the Oak Hill church grew fairly quickly. Reverend Richard Martin of Gilford itinerated twice in September 1800, baptizing 25 more members.⁸ The Oak Hill church then consisted of 34 members, some 21 of whom belonged to only four families

⁶ On one remarkable occasion, Benjamin Randall came to New Hampton in May 1801 to hold the New Durham Freewill Quarterly Meeting there in support of the church's issues with town taxation.⁶ The Freewill congregants had refused to pay taxes to support the town sponsored Congregational minister. Randall's horseback cavalcade of 40 or so followed the Province Road up through Meredith. The party stopped at Samuel Crockett's farm near Meredith Bridge (Laconia) to eat before continuing on to Oak Hill for festivities with the Freewill church there led by Deacon Benjamin Pease. The next day, with their numbers growing to one hundred, they rode on the New Hampton, singing songs along the way. Attendance at Randall's Freewill meeting in New Hampton was said to approach 500 people.

⁷ Stewart, p. 228.

⁸ Much of the following detail is derived from Mary E.N. Hanaford: Meredith N.H. Annals and Genealogies (Concord, 1932), pp. 56-65.

that lived nearby along Winona Road. The four were the Pease, Pike, Smith, and Boynton families. Benjamin Pease and Nicholas Smith became Deacons.

Nicholas Smith's father was Robert Smith (1724-1816) who lived in New Hampton just a mile or two down the road from the Oak Hill Meetinghouse. The Smith Cemetery straddles the N. Hampton-Meredith line. As was typical of early New Hampshire neighborhoods, there were numerous intermarriages between local families. In this case, for example, Robert Smith's daughter, Phebe Smith (1762-1857), was married to William Pike (1748-1804). Their daughter, Rebecca (1749-1835), had married Benjamin Pease in 1773 (before they came to Meredith).

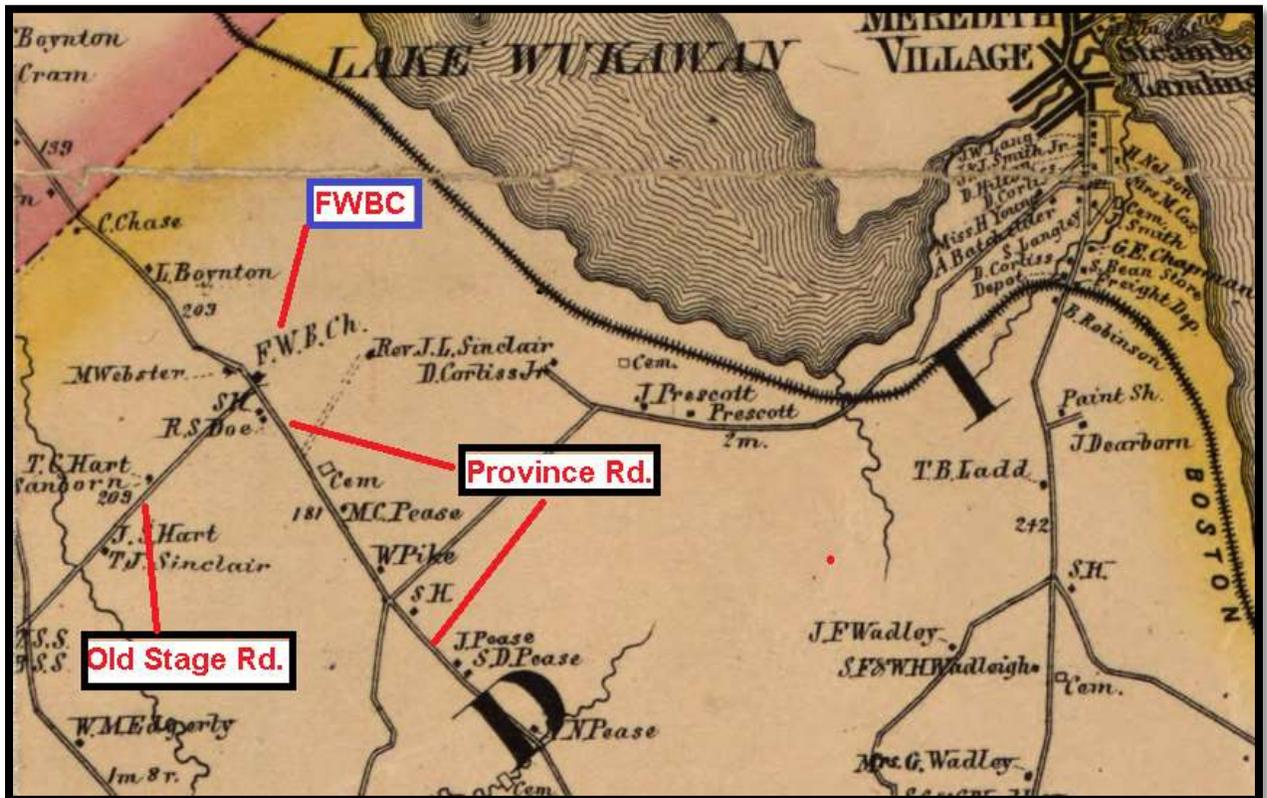


Pictured above: Benjamin Pease house, 21 Winona Rd.; David Boynton house, 107 Winona Rd.; Robert Smith house, 278 Winona Rd.; and the Smith Cemetery straddling the Meredith/New Hampton boundary line next to the Smith house.

In October 1800, the nascent Oak Hill church appealed for formal recognition as part of Randall's New Durham church. It was accepted, calling itself the Monthly Meeting of Meredith. Oak Hill grew rapidly thereafter. Among other things, it began holding meetings in Center Harbor where new members from that town were baptized in

November and December 1800. During 1801, additional Monthly Meetings were held at various homes in the area, attracting more new members, including at least a few from Sandwich and Moultonborough Neck. Not long after, however, some of these widely dispersed members from Center Harbor and Moultonborough Neck left to form their own groups.

Meanwhile, the Oak Hill Monthly Meeting laid down permanent roots along Winona Road. Construction of a Meetinghouse was undertaken in 1801 on land owned by James Pease, a son of Deacon Benjamin Pease. The building was located at the intersection of Old Stage Road with the Province Road (i.e. Winona Road). During 1801 and 1802, the church sold pews to members to finance the building. In April 1802, Oak Hill entered into a 999 year lease for the property. The total cost was \$10.00 or just over one penny per year. The lease was signed by David Boynton of Meredith and Nicholas Smith of New Hampton on behalf of the Oak Hill church.



From the 1860 Woodford map

Oak Hill FW church prospered

The Monthly Meeting of Meredith grew steadily, reaching 134 members at the end of 1802. The growth did not come, however, without some controversy. In 1804, its

founding Elder, Simon Pottle, was dismissed from the Freewill Baptist church by Benjamin Randall. Pottle was found guilty of improprieties: at a group meeting, he had refused to agree with all the other Freewill ministers that they were not exempt from sin. Pottle sold his Meredith house in 1805 and left town.

In his absence, New Hampton Elders Simeon Dana and Josiah Magoon frequently stepped in to preach over the ensuing years. They were periodically joined by numerous others. Several of these Elders came to own the house across the street from the Oak Hill Meetinghouse (60 Winona, pictured below). Pottle, in fact, might have been its first owner. Subsequently Freewill Elders who lived there included Moses Cheney (c. for several years beginning c.1816), David Moody (c.1827), Gordon Smith (c. 1827), and Benjamin Manson (c. 1832).⁹



60 Winona Road, known in the 1800s as “the Cheney seat”

As one might expect, there were some very close ties between the parishioners and the Elders. The ties of Deacon Simeon Pease put an exclamation point on this phenomenon. He named one son Simeon Dana Pease and another Moses Cheney

⁹ See among others, Belknap County Registry of Deeds: B/P 9012/65; 9012/85; 9014/252; 9018/128.

Pease. The latter, in turn, named one of his sons Simeon Pease Cheney. Another of Cheney's sons lived with Simeon Pease for an extended period.¹⁰

With its broad appeal among rural townsfolk, the Oak Hill church did not remain the only Free Will organization in Meredith. A small group informally organized a Freewill church in Meredith Center in 1810. They called themselves 'The Second Freewill Baptist Church of Christ' in Meredith. It too prospered and grew. In 1822, it sent a representative to the New Durham Quarterly Meeting. This group was formally recognized by New Durham in 1830. A Meetinghouse was built in 1831. This church was serviced by many of the same Elders who serviced Oak Hill, including Cheney, Moody, and Manson.¹¹

In the latter 1830s, two groups of Oak Hill members broke off to form their own Freewill organizations nearer their homes. By this time, the Oak Hill Monthly Meeting had grown to nearly 350 members, drawn largely from the confines of the town which now boasted a population of nearly 2,700 (up from 1,940 in 1810). Large pockets of members lived in Meredith Village and on Meredith Neck. By this time, Meredith Village was a thriving business center, evolving rapidly in the decade and a half after John Bond Swasey's canal was completed in 1818. In 1838, several members split off to form their own church in Meredith Village. The new church did not have a Meetinghouse until 1859 when the Old North (Parade Road) Meetinghouse was moved to Lang Street.¹²

The separation of the Village group triggered an additional separation of Freewill Baptists on Meredith Neck. In July 1839, a group of 41 Neck residents petitioned the Meredith Village Free Will Baptist Church, requesting approval to break away from it to establish their own meetinghouse. The rationale was simple: it would be far more convenient for them. The entire group of petitioners, which included many Bear Island farmers, came from only 12 different families. Three families provided more than half of the signers. There were nine Nichols, seven Bickfords, and five Lovejoys amongst the 41 petitioners. The group built a church halfway out on the Neck on Boardman Hill.

¹⁰ In an echo of the Pottle dismissal, Reverend Cheney was expelled from the church in 1821 for proclaiming his belief in the Calvinist doctrines of the Baptist church.

¹¹ Hanaford, pp. 65-74.

¹² Hurd, p. 850.



Original Freewill Baptist Church on Meredith Neck

This organization was short lived, however. It abandoned the Freewill faith in the early 1840s during the regional existential frenzy created by Adventist preacher William Miller who forecast the coming of the apocalypse in 1843. The Neck church was taken over by the Adventists not long afterwards.¹³

Later Years



Meetinghouse c. 1890s

The Oak Hill church remained an active religious body until the mid-20th century, although it experienced its share of ups and downs that were characteristic of most religious groups in the Northeast. Some of the highlights of these later years suggest that the church enjoyed periods of real vibrancy. In the latter 1840s the church members remodeled the Oak Hill building fairly extensively. In 1881, a new organ was added, which can still be found in the building today. In 1909, the church added the vestry to the rear of the building.

But the Oak Hill church finally met its demise after the challenging years of the Depression (1930s) and World War II (1940s). It closed for good in 1946 after serving the community for 145 years. The pews were sold to a church in Keene the following year. In 1950, the building was sold to the newly formed Meredith Historical Society.

¹³ Hanaford, pp. 81-83.

The old Pottle Meetinghouse became the headquarters for the Historical Society for the next 44 years. Society meetings and other events were conducted in the vestry room in the rear. In 1960, a small triangular piece of land around the building was acquired by the Society to straighten out the lot. In 1986, the building gained listing on the National Register of Historic Places, one of only two such listings in Meredith.

This pattern of usage came to an end in 1994 when the Historical Society purchased the Ladd Building in downtown Meredith Village. All of its regular activities were moved there. A few years thereafter, in 1998, the old Oak Hill Meetinghouse was given a new life. It was quite aptly converted into a professionally designed museum displaying the four seasons of activities carried on by those early, hardy settlers who founded the town and the church so many decades before.



Oak Hill Meetinghouse today: the Meredith Historical Society's Farm Museum