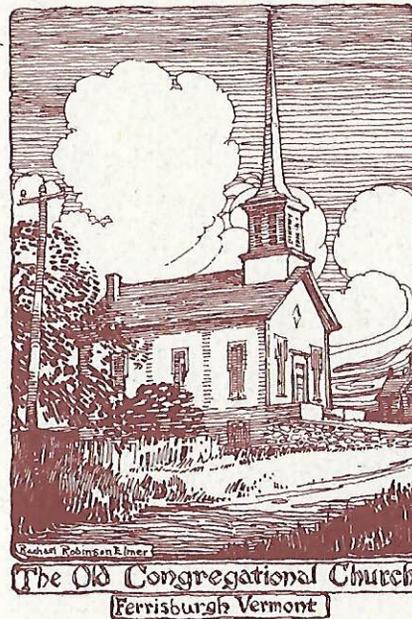


Ferrisburgh Grange Hall

COMMUNITY LANDMARK



The stately Ferrisburgh Grange Hall rises tall above the village of Ferrisburgh Center with a noble presence that speaks of its origins – and of its future. Constructed in 1868 as Ferrisburgh's first Congregational Church in the Italianate style fashionable in that era, the wood-frame building features pilasters and corner quoins, large, hooded windows and front entryway, and the double bracketed cornices typical of this style. Its high-rising walls and imposing proportions give it, nevertheless, a somewhat austere, New England look. Originally the tower was topped with a slender spire appropriate to its Congregational beginnings. This was destroyed by a lightning strike in the 1890s and replaced with the present cupola. Since 1949 the building has served the community as the Grange Hall of Ferrisburgh Grange No. 539.

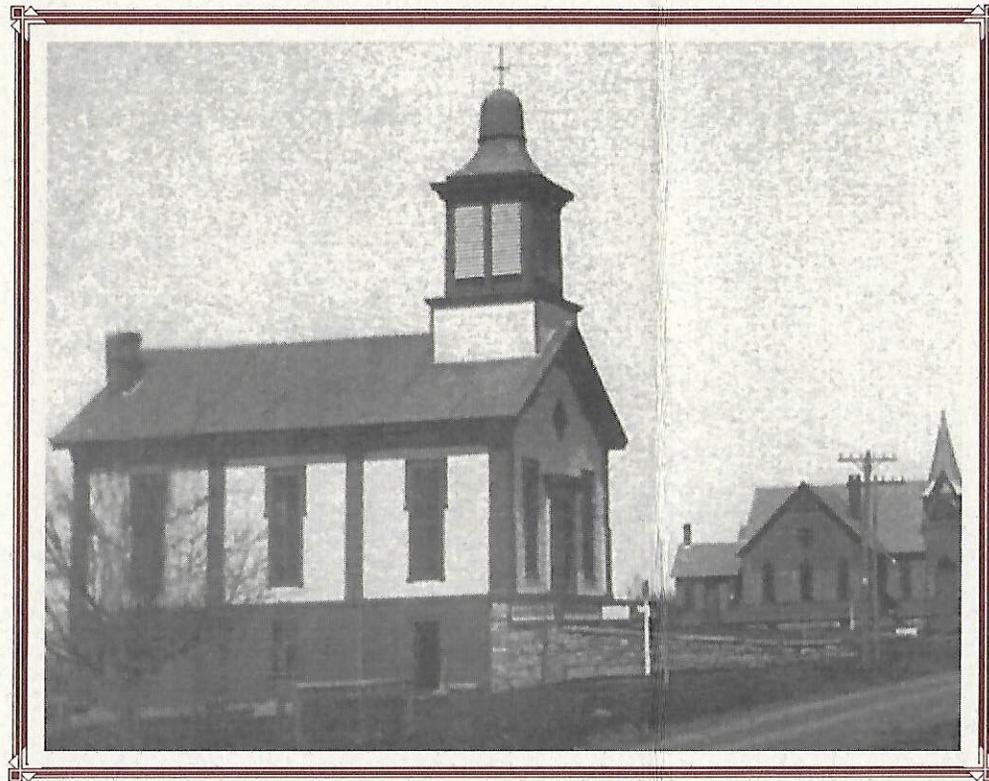
Congregational Origins

The first religious gathering of record in Ferrisburgh was held in the 1780s at the home of one of the earliest settlers, Nathan Walker, with a Baptist clergyman officiating. The first location set aside for worship was a room especially fitted out as a place of worship in the wood frame house built by Zuriel Tupper in the 1790s, and this was conveniently put to use for town meetings as well. Religious denominations of Ferrisburgh's early years included the Baptists, Methodists, Congregationalists and Friends, but by the 1840s, only the Society of Friends and the Methodists (North Ferrisburgh) were large enough in number to have their own meeting houses. The remaining congregations shared the Union Meeting Hall, erected in 1840, which to this day still presides over the village green.

The Congregational Society of Ferrisburgh was organized in 1824, and for their first 16 years they met in Ferrisburgh's first town hall, the "Town House," which stood at the south end of the village green, opposite the present Town Clerk's office. A historic marker commemorating the 160th anniversary of abolitionist Frederick Douglass's address at the Town House in July of 1843 now marks the spot. In 1840 the Congregationalists joined with three other denominations as the Union Society to build the Union Church facing west over the green, where they continued to meet for the next 27 years. (The Union Society endured until 1898. When it dissolved the Town took over the Meeting House as its Town Hall, and the original Town House was razed).

A New Church Is Built

By 1868 the Congregational Society membership was sufficiently strong to build a church of its own. The energy and organizing force behind the undertaking, seem to have come largely from one man, the Reverend Harvey Leavitt, pastor of the Congregational Church in Vergennes from 1836 to 1860. Reports in the *Vergennes Vermonter* (April 17 and June 5, 1868) commend his leadership and credit him for "his energy and success



Ferrisburgh Congregational Church, circa 1915

in procuring the necessary funds" to build the new house of worship. A generous gift of \$7000 from Paulina Walker (younger sister of town resident Charlotte Tatro's great grandfather) and an opportunity to purchase a lot in the village enabled the vision to be realized.

Construction on the new church began in the spring of 1868 and was completed by fall. Its progress can be followed in regular reports from the *Vergennes Vermonter*. The Congregational Society hired Erastus Daniels of Bristol as their builder. In 1866, Vergennes was booming, and "Boss" Daniels was the area's most prodigious and influential builder. He built factories, upgraded hotels, and constructed some of those magnificent Main Street houses in Vergennes. The church's frame was raised on April 1 and on a Saturday morning in early June "the citizens of Ferrisburgh Center, about 200 in number, assembled. . . to witness the elevation to its place of the spire of the

new Congregational Church" (VV, June 12, 1868). Mr. Alanson Edgarton of Charlotte, who had been hired to build the 123 foot steeple, supervised the proceedings. The paper reports, "Although weighing some six tons the immense body was safely landed on its destined foundation without the slightest accident." On this, as on other occasions, refreshments were served in the vestry by the ladies – the proceeds going toward the furnishing of the church.

On October 16, 1868, the new church was dedicated, with President Kitchell of Middlebury

College preaching the sermon. The church had cost \$ 7,500. The assembly room was large, 34 by 45 feet and 20 feet "in the clear," and the newspaper noted that there was "ample room to seat 250 people, even with the prevailing amplitude of dress" (VV, June 12). As these were days of horse and buggy, horse sheds were constructed out back, with members responsible for their own sheds.

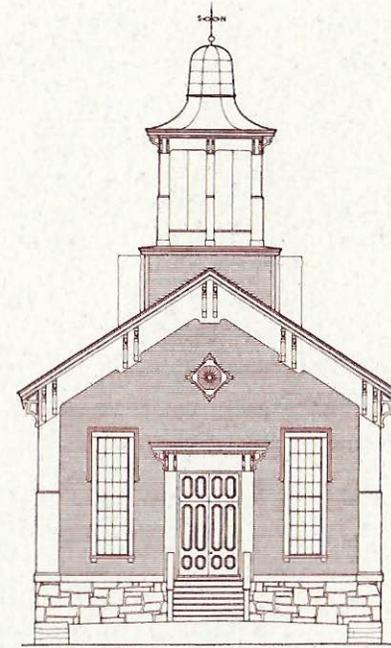
The Congregationalists met in the building for about 70 years. Oyster suppers, children's days, fast days, Easter services, strawberry festivals, sweeping days in the spring, all noted in the local press. "Filled with children's singing," "profusely decorated with cut flowers" – happiness at the weddings, sorrow at the funerals – for seventy years, an institution. Eventually, however, the Ferrisburgh Congregational Society stopped using the building. In the 1820's, its founders had withdrawn from the Vergennes Congregational Church to start their own. One hundred and twenty years later the Society reunited with the Vergennes church.

A Second Life— The Ferrisburgh Grange

A new life emerged for the church in the 1930's as community groups began meeting in the church's vestry. The Ferrisburgh Farmer's club, the Vergennes Rotary Club, and the Ferrisburgh Grange all met in the building, and for many years the collective graduations from Ferrisburgh's one-room school-houses were held there. Ferrisburgh Grange No. 539 was organized on June 28, 1940, and on April 9, 1949, the former church was conveyed to their ownership, with a clause in the deed stating the Congregational Society's intention that the Grange "shall keep and use the said lands and premises as a community center...for the benefit of the community of Ferrisburgh at large."

The Grange of those days was a large national organization with smaller chapters at the state and local level. It functioned as an educational and agricultural advocacy organization (in its early years it had enabled farmers to pool their resources and negotiate as a group for better prices for their goods and supplies), and as a center of social life for its members. The Ferrisburgh Grange had a few hundred members at one time and owned a freeze locker building for members' use. They were, and are, believers in rural self-education — assisting farm families like themselves to lead safer, healthier, more efficient lives on the farm. For 63 years, Ferrisburgh Grange No. 539 followed their mission, and cared for their building. But with so few people farming, membership numbers have fallen. The members came to realize that they could no longer maintain their building.

In March 2004, following months of research, planning, organizing and fund raising, the citizens of Ferrisburgh voted to accept ownership of the Grange Hall and convert it into the new Town offices and Community Center. After 70 years as a Congregational Church, and 60 years as a Grange Hall, this historic landmark is poised to become again a vibrant center of community life. It seems appropriate and in keeping with our New England tradition of thrift that this building, originally constructed for the Ferrisburgh Congregational Church and later adopted by the Grange, should continue to serve the people of Ferrisburgh.



1864 - 2004

This history of the Ferrisburgh Grange Hall was researched and written principally by Silas Towler of the Ferrisburgh Historical Society, and edited by members of the Town Office Committee. It was designed by Futura Design and produced with the assistance of a generous grant from the Vermont Community Foundation's New Castle Fund II.

The drawing by Rachel Robinson Elmer is reproduced courtesy of Rokeby Museum.



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