

LOWELL CULTURAL RESOURCES INVENTORY

IDENTIFICATION 72 MERRIMACK STREET MAP SHEET # 7
 1) CURRENT OWNER Louis Saab OWNER OCCUPIED no
 2) HISTORIC NAME Church of the First Unitarian Society
 3) CURRENT NAME Saab Diplomat
 4) PROPERTY TYPE church 5) ZONING CLASSIFICATION B3
 6) TAXES: PAYMENTS delinquent since 1978 STATUS tax title
 7) WITHIN BOUNDARIES OF LHPD, Merrimack-Middle Streets

HISTORICAL ABSTRACT

1) CONSTRUCTION DATE 1832
 SOURCE document: 1855 Lowell Directory
 2) ARCHITECT OR BUILDER unknown
 3) HISTORIC OWNER Church of the First Unitarian Society
 4) ORIGINAL USE: GF commercial UF church
 5) PREVIOUS BLDGS ON PROPERTY no DATE _____
 SOURCE _____

DESCRIPTIVE DATA

1) ARCHITECTURAL STYLE Greek Revival
 2) PRESENT USE:
 GF commercial
 UF office
 3) NO OF STORIES 3
 4) PROP SQ FT 5919
 5) PLAN rectangular
 6) ROOF flat
 7) STRUCTURAL SYSTEM
load-bearing masonry
 8) OUTBUILDINGS
none
 9) MATERIALS:
 FOUNDATION
not visible



FACADE all sides: red brick w/ stretcher bond (front & sides) rear: common bond
 TRIM wood cornice, metal storefront (ground floor), granite sills/lintels (smooth)

10) NOTABLE SURFACE & LANDSCAPE ELEMENTS none

ADDRESS 72 MERRIMACK STREET

VISUAL ASSESSMENT

- 1) CONDITION OF BUILDING FABRIC. good
- 2) IF DETERIORATED, CAUSES not applicable
- 3) INTEGRITY OF HISTORIC BLDG FABRIC: GF major but reversible changes
UF major but reversible changes
- 4) SURROUNDING LAND USES commercial
- 5) INTEGRITY OF PROP'S HIST SETTING moderately disrupted historic setting
- 6) IMPORTANCE OF PROP TO HIST SETTING integral to character

ADDITIONAL DESCRIPTION

See Research Report.

ADDITIONAL HISTORICAL INFORMATION

See Research Report.

ARCHEOLOGICAL COMMENT

This structure is the first on the property and completely covers its site; therefore, archeological potential is low.

Research Report
72 Merrimack Street
Church of the First Unitarian Society (later South
Congregational Church, now Saab Diplomat)
ca. 1832

72 Merrimack Street, the former church of the First Unitarian Society, is a three-story brick structure of rectangular plan. Its main facade is an integral part of the wall of nineteenth century commercial facades which line the southern side of Merrimack Street.

Although certain Greek Revival architectural elements on the main facade point to its 1830s origins, it still is surprising to learn that this was once a free-standing temple-like structure [Fig. 1]. A narrow passageway was located along its eastern wall while a wider passageway was located to the west. The passageways lead to City Avenue (to the south). The main entrance was located in the center of the western facade.

What is now the main facade has been extensively altered on both the ground and upper floors. The granite post and lintels of the original trabeated storefronts may be still extant behind the brick facing of K's Cocktail Lounge. The ground floor storefronts are swathed in metal signs and panels.

A range of wide brick pilasters divides the facade of the upper floors into five bays. Of the original long, rectangular windows which probably lit the church auditorium, only the upper halves remain. The second floor features modern picture windows, reflecting the division of the original high second story into two floors. The third floor windows retain their finely dressed granite lintels but have cement sills. Crowning the main facade is a wooden entablature, with double rows of triglyphs appearing at regular intervals above the pilasters. The pilasters have been painted white while the entablature is black. Above the entablature is a gable roof.

To the rear is a two-story rectangular brick addition which covers most of the southern facade. Visible to the right of the addition is one of the original long rectangular windows with the finely dressed granite sills and lintels. Metal flashing covers the eaves of the roof.

The church meeting room above the ground floor was once "...neatly and tastefully finished inside" (1). The carving of the interior Greek Revival architectural elements displayed a high quality of craftsmanship [Fig. 2, 3, & 4] . It is not know whether any of the original interior features remain.

The church of the First Unitarian Society, later known as the South Congregational Church, was built in 1832, at a cost of \$32,000 (2). Lowell's First Unitarian Society had been founded on August 30, 1829 when "...a few persons met in the house of Thomas Ordway to consult as to the expediency of forming a Unitarian Church in Lowell. As a result of that meeting the First Unitarian Church was organized September 26, 1829 in the ... Stone House ...in Pawtucket Street" (3). The first religious services were held in the Hamilton Company School on Middlesex Street (later the Free Chapel, now the Visiting Nurses Association) (4). Ground was broken for the church on September 17, 1831 and the church was dedicated on Christmas Day, 1832 (5).

An 1855 description of the church reveals that "...the church is capable of holding about 900 persons [It] has an organ costing \$1,800; a free Parish Library of about 3,000 volumes, mostly standard works; and has, separated from it by the court, a vestry costing \$3,500, all of which are owned by the Society without any incumbrance" (6).

Presumably the "court" was the wide passageway situated in front of the western entrance. The vestry apparently stood on the site of the present Executive Building. The church of the First Unitarian Society became known as the South Congregational Church at some point during the early twentieth century. This building ceased to house a church congregation in 1926.

The structure first appears on the Lowell map of 1832 and retains its rectangular shape up to and including the 1924 atlas. The rear rectangular addition is apparently post-1924.

The nature of the earliest commercial enterprises to occupy the five stores of the ground floor has not been determined. During the 1840s five dry goods stores occupied the ground floor (36-44½ Merrimack Street). The roster of dry goods stores located in this building included Daniel Bradt (No. 36),

1845-1851; George Gardiner and John Wilson Jr. (No. 38), 1845-1851; Tarr and Butler (No. 40), 1847-1855; Benthall and Hilton (No. 42), 1845-1853 (followed by Hoyt W. Hilton, 1853-1876); and Jonathan P. Folsom (No. 44½), 1851-1878.

Benjamin Hodgman, hatter, occupied No. 38 from 1874 until 1900. By 1896 a variety of commercial concerns had occupied the ground floor shops once exclusively devoted to selling dry goods. J. A. Green's Bicycles, Frederick W. Baker's Sewing Machines, M. J. Montgomery--piano tuner, and the Lowell One-Price Clothing Company occupied the ground floor of the church in 1896. The Lowell One-Price Clothing Company was located at this address from 1878 until 1909. (A painted sign predating 1886 advertising that firm can still be seen on the west wall of 1-5 Merrimack Street.) From 1910 until 1954 McCarty Apparel occupied one of the stores. A shoe store has been located on this site since 1919 (Twentieth Century Shoes). Presently the ground floor of this building houses a political campaign headquarters, a cocktail lounge and Twentieth Century Shoes.

Although unsympathetically altered and hemmed in by buildings on its once open eastern and western sides, this structure displays a boldly rendered vocabulary of Greek Revival architectural elements. It is a fine example of a Lowell vernacular church structure in the 1830s.

Footnotes

- 1) Lowell Business Directory, 1855, p. 244.
- 2) ibid.
- 3) Lowell, A City of Spindles, 1900, p. 153.
- 4) ibid.
- 5) ibid.
- 6) Lowell Business Directory, 1855, p.244.

Other Sources

1832, 1841, 1850 Lowell maps.

1879, 1896, 1906, 1924 Lowell atlases.

Lowell city directories.

Coburn, Frederick W., History of Lowell and its People,
v. 1. (1920) p. 199.

Cowley, Charles, History of Lowell, 1868.

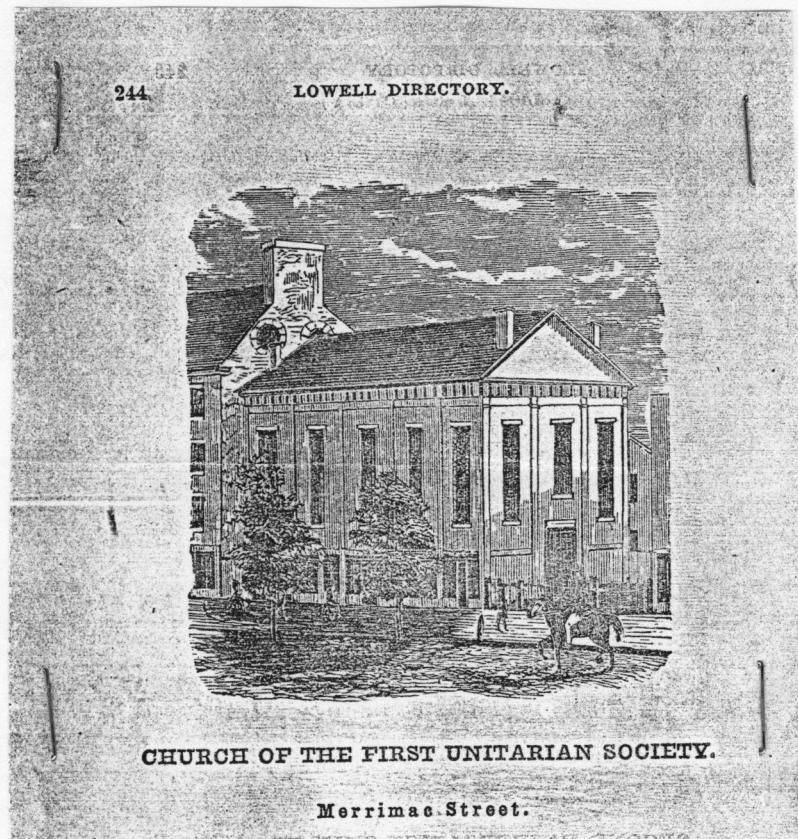
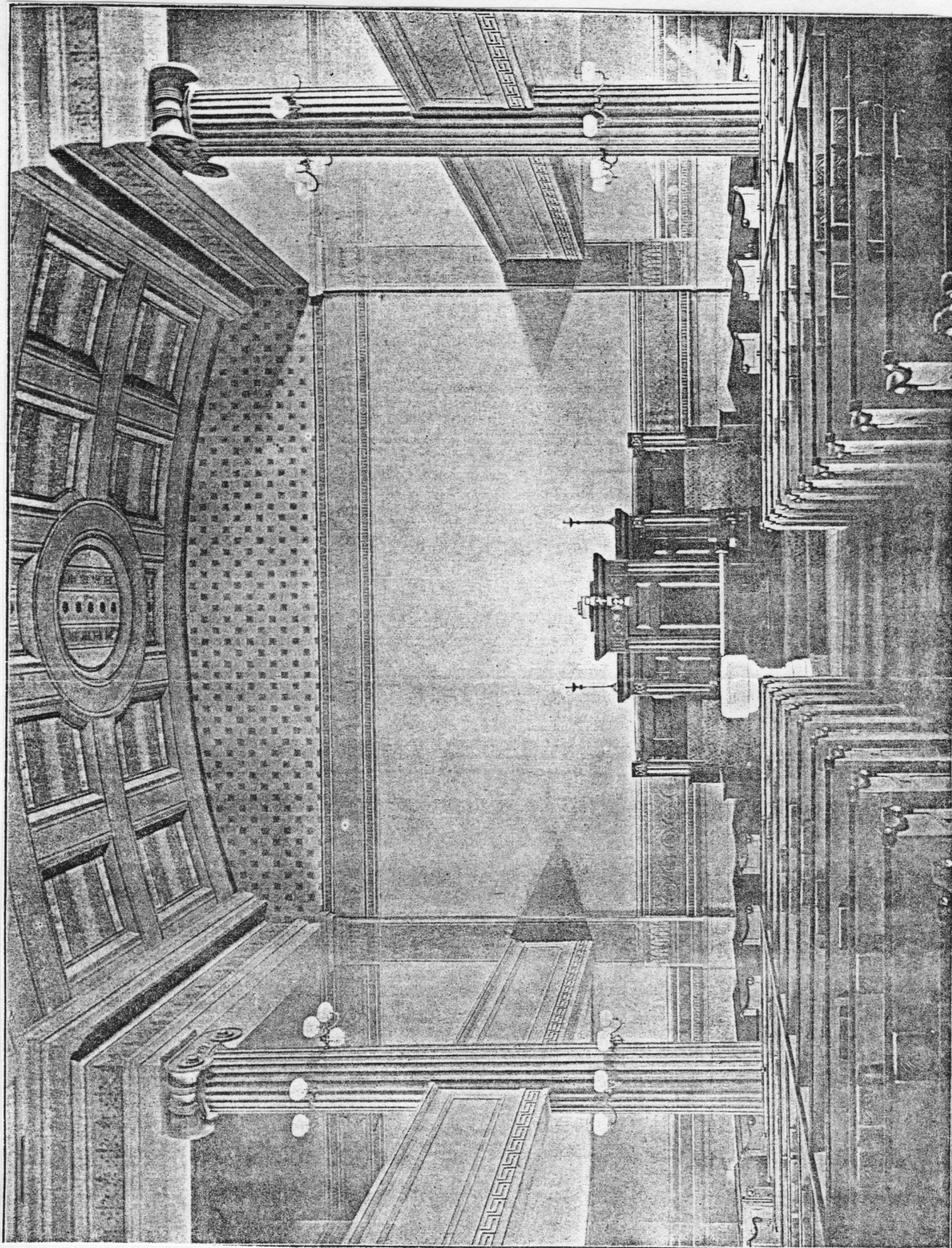


Figure 1

1855 Lowell City Directory, p. 244.



INTERIOR UNITARIAN CHURCH.

Figure 2

The Lowell Book, 1900.

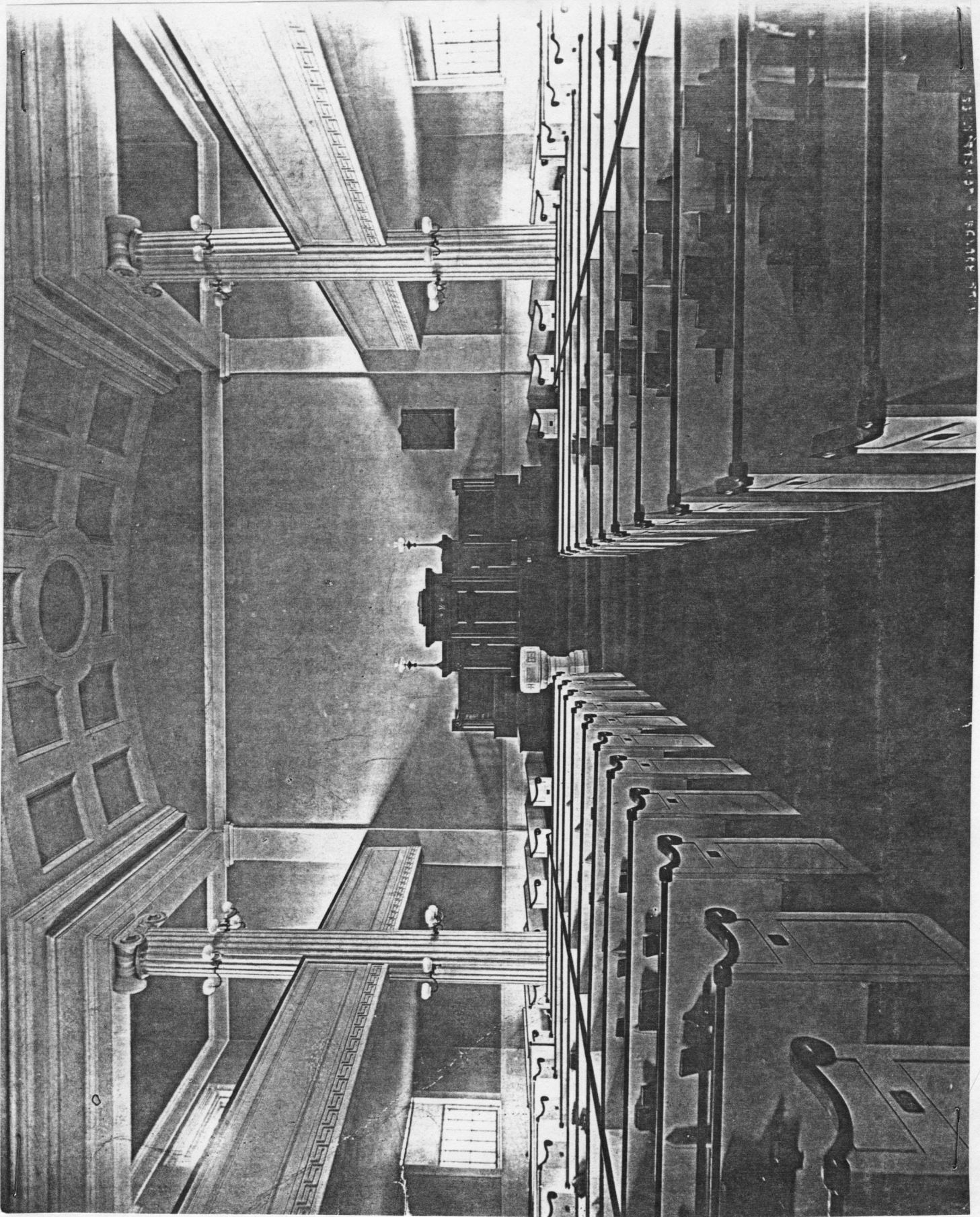


Figure 3

SPNEA photo collection.

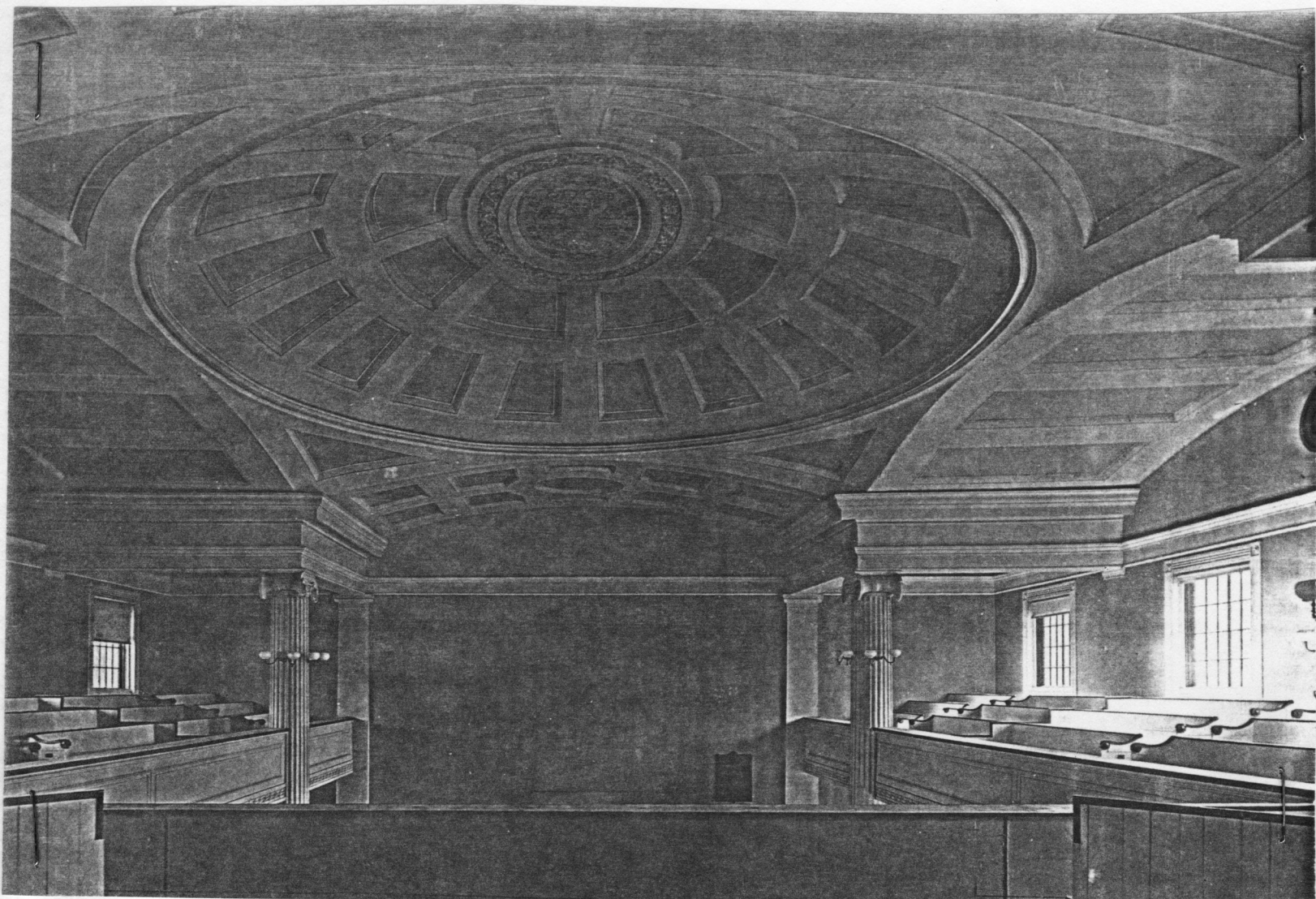


Figure 4

SPNEA photo collection.