MEREDITH'S HISTORIC ARCHITECTURE

A REFERENCE GUIDE

Prepared for
MEREDITH PLANNING BOARD

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Purpose Statement

Meredith's Historic Architecture: A Reference Guide provides an historical context intended to support and work in concert with the town's Architectural Design Review Ordinance enacted by the Town of Meredith on March 13, 2001.

The purpose of the ordinance is

- to encourage architecturally significant buildings and features;

- to provide guidance for property owners and design professionals to design new buildings that reflect and draw their inspiration from the architectural characteristics that are indigenous to Meredith, New Hampshire;

- to ensure compatibility with those characteristics without discouraging creativity and diversity; and

- to protect and enhance the visual qualities of the town's scenic and cultural byways.

The purpose of this Historic Architecture Reference Guide is

- to increase awareness and sensitivity among citizens, the planning board and its consultants, developers, builders, and design professionals about the distinctive, local, historic architecture of the Town of Meredith;

- to provide visual images of Meredith's historic architectural styles and building types, including orientation, scale, proportion, rooflines, massing, architectural features and details, materials, texture, use of color, and integral signs with the intent of inspiring creative, yet compatible new buildings with roots and reference points in Meredith's historic architecture; and

- to provide a reference point to those undertaking restoration and rehabilitation of existing buildings in order to ensure quality work that does not remove a building's existing characteristics and assists in reintroducing historic proportions and details.

Brief History of Meredith

Meredith's first permanent settlers arrived in the 1760s to establish farms throughout the inland sections of the town. Incorporated in 1768, Meredith originally included part of present-day Laconia. Much of the early travel through town followed the Province Road, the primary route between Boston and Plymouth, and which passed through the geographical center of Meredith. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, agriculture was Meredith's principal industry, and the town enjoyed some of the state's most fertile soil. By 1800, Meredith had four thriving industrial villages: Meredith Center, Meredith Village (present-day downtown Meredith), the Weirs, and Meredith Bridge. (The last two were ceded to Laconia in the mid-nineteenth century.)

Meredith Center soon waned in importance, but Meredith Village, with the best water power sites in town, emerged as a cotton manufacturing center replete with canal, waterfall and various mills alongside the canal. After the railroad arrived, local manufacturing interests diversified into lumber products and musical instruments, as well as other, smaller industries. With a sound, diverse industrial base and ready transportation, Meredith Village became a regional trading center for the northern lakes region.

In the years following World War One, development began to shift from inland Meredith to its lengthy shorefront. Increased automobile travel brought more people to the area, and, for the first time, growth along the shorefronts overtook inland growth. Seasonal cottages lined each of the town's five lakes. Once the town's natural barriers, the lakes were now its economic backbone.

Immediately after World War Two, the state realigned Daniel Webster Highway (Route 3) from a route that passed through the heart of the village to one that hugged the shoreline. The industries once located by the lake gradually disappeared, replaced by retail and commercial businesses which tended to cater to seasonal visitors. In recent years, the town established two parks at the head of Lake Winnipesaukee and has actively supported commercial development that enhances the enjoyment of the town's stunning setting on the lake.
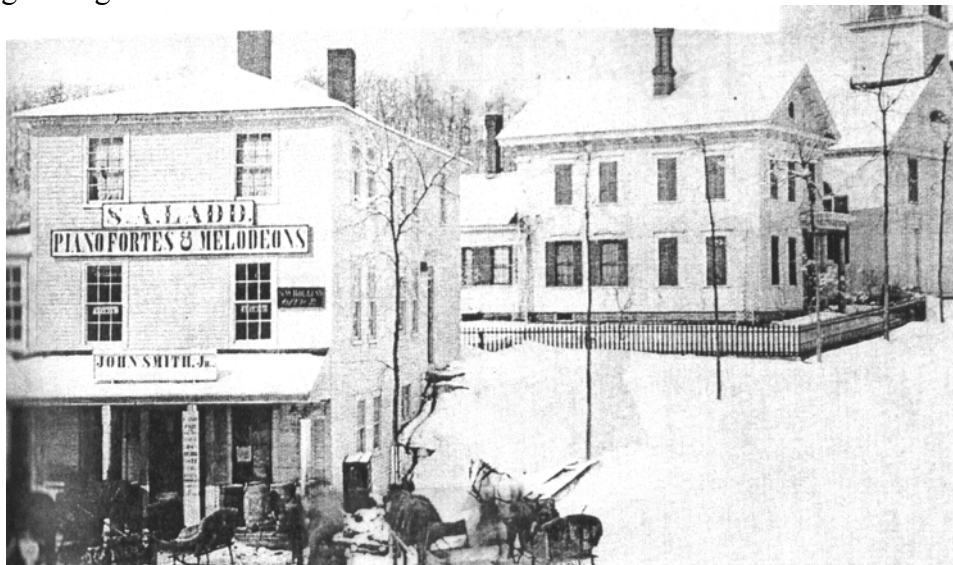
The Agricultural Landscape

Meredith's various uplands, with their sweeping views over the lakes, are particularly fertile, and throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century the town enjoyed a healthy agricultural economy that supported both family farms and larger dairy and stock breeding businesses. More than a few farms took in summer boarders -- visitors from the cities drawn to Meredith's dramatic views, many lakes, country air, and fresh, local produce.

Agriculture declined significantly during the twentieth century. From sixty operating farms in 1944, there were only a half-dozen twenty-five years later and even fewer today. Yet, the town's surviving farmhouses, barns, outbuildings, fields, stone walls, and woodlots are evident throughout the community and are highly important visual and historical assets.
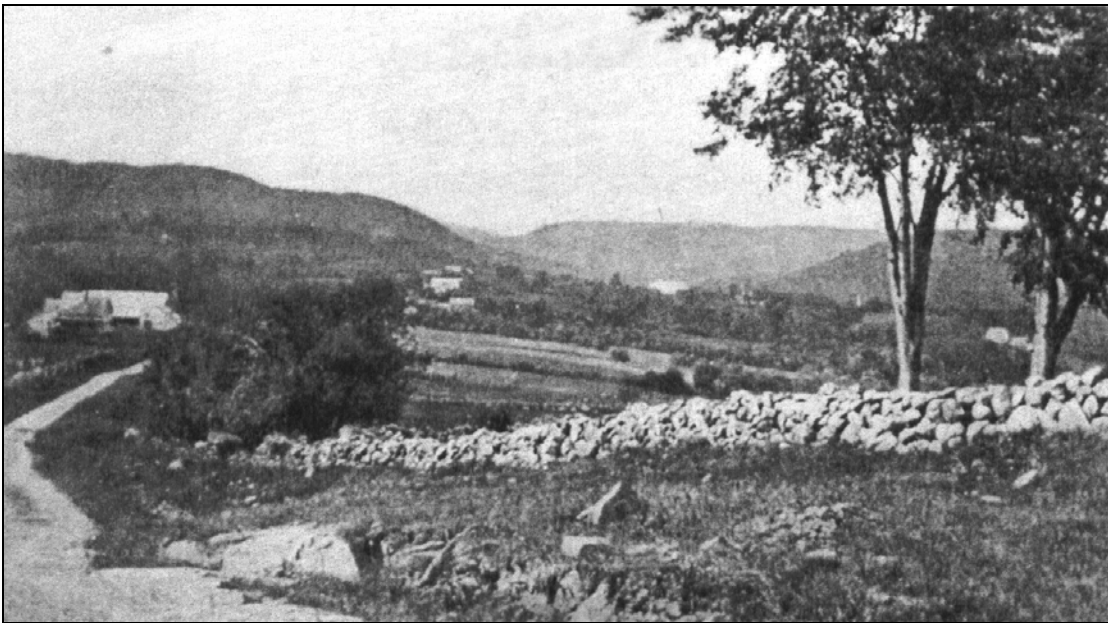
The Wadleigh House effectively merged two dwelling units into a continuous facade. Rear ells provided additional living and service space.

A lean-to (or saltbox) roofline, massive central chimney (since removed from this house), center entrances, and facades with regularly spacing of door and window openings were common features in 18th century farmhouses.

Many of Meredith's farmsteads consisted of a series of connected buildings. By joining the main house and ell to the shed(s) and barn, farm families could perform their daily chores without undue exposure to a northern winter. The main house and barn formed the outer ends of these complexes and were the largest elements. Between them were lower, narrower units. It was not uncommon for Meredith's connected farmsteads to be sited parallel to the road.

By the 1840s, houses were often sited gable front to the road. Broad, five-bay facades were not uncommon in the mid-19th century. The orientation of this main house is mirrored in the addition at the opposite end. When brick was used in house construction, granite, or in later years, concrete, was used for lintels. Much of the early brick came from a kiln at the nearby Weirs.

More typical of gable-front houses was the sidehall plan, with the entrance at one end of the facade, as shown here. The barn was a later addition to this complex and used a hipped roof, rather than the more typical gable roof, but a continuity in overall proportions and massing produced a harmonious effect. Each separate unit within this connected farm building had an entrance facing the road.

Barns were an important and integral part of Meredith's landscape. Nineteenth century barns, such as that pictured here, could be found both close to, or at some distance from the road, but rarely deviated from the rectangular, boxy plan on a sloping site. A series of smaller structures attached perpendicularly served separate functions and provided additional space without overly expanding the main barn.

The ventilator atop the barn brought critical fresh air circulation inside, as well as injecting a delightful visual feature.

Staggered shingles draw the eye upward to the gable and ventilator of this barn. Both the use of decorative shingles and the cross-gabled roof of the ventilator were distinctive Victorian-era features associated with the Queen Anne style.

In the twentieth century, gambrel roofs replaced gable roofs on barns. The shift was primarily because the gambrel provided more volume in the hayloft without increasing the height of the side walls.

Once considered some distance from Meredith Village, this farmstead, with its surrounding fields, is now a critical gateway into the center of town.

Bickford Farm, at the opposite end of the village, provides another significant visual gateway into the village that continues to convey the important role played by agriculture in the community

Though the farmstead lacked any "middle" units between the house and barn, the varied roof height and the addition of a ventilator to the barn ridge broke the massing and, at the same time, differentiated between the two functions of the building.

The dry-laid stone wall was an integral component of any agricultural landscape

Doorways were framed with side pilasters and wide trim boards in 18th and 19th century buildings. Transoms and sidelights added interior light to the hallway

The casing around windows was similarly broad and balanced the opening itself.

Corner boards were often paneled and terminated in molded caps. Molded cornices returned at the gable ends for additional visual interest and balance. Prior to 1860, 12/12, 9/12, 12/9 and 6/6 window sash was most common

When farmers took in summer visitors, they often added porches with turned posts, turned or square balusters, and plenty of rocking chairs to their houses. This guest house was further accentuated by the addition of a mansard roof (for better head room in top floor bedrooms) and a cupola, or belvedere from which one could enjoy the distant mountain scenery

The Village Landscape

Meredith Village, or downtown Meredith as it is more commonly known, has been the heart of the community for nearly 200 years. In the early 1810s, John Swasey harnessed considerable waterpower by digging a canal linking Lake Waukewan to Lake Winnipesaukee, and along which he erected a series of saw, grist, carding and weaving mills.

By the 1850s, the village had rail transportation, the town hall, and a sizable business and residential area, but the local business community did not want to leave further development to chance. In 1859, it formed the Meredith Mechanic Association to promote and develop the village's full manufacturing potential. It succeeded in attracting Seneca Ladd's piano factory, at least one lumber mill and, in its greatest coup, it lured Samuel Hodgson's hosiery manufacturing business from Lakeport. Hodgson's mill produced knitted stockings and mittens and quickly became the town's primary employer. The factory used a modern knitting machine patented by Hodgson and his partner, which had revolutionized the industry and been responsible for the development and prosperity of Laconia and Lake Village.

Joining the village's diverse industries were churches, a hotel, bank, library, grange headquarters, and a variety of stores, some created from former residences and many more built from scratch. One and two-story dwellings lined the side streets. The decline of agriculture in outlying sections brought even more residents into the village; by 1910, the village supported three-fifths of the town's population.

Meredith Village today remains an important regional trading center. The town has embraced its lakefront location and recently joined the New Hampshire Main Street Program to promote downtown revitalization and historic rehabilitation.

The vast majority of the historic commercial buildings in downtown Meredith are 2-1/2 stories high and sited gable front to the street. As Main Street curves easterly toward the lake, the buildings correspondingly aligned themselves to the road's curve.

The importance of a corner location was accentuated through the use of diagonally placed storefront entrances. When two corners were so treated, the stores also related to each other.

Though the four buildings in this Main Street view span several centuries, are of varying heights, and each has a different roofline, a common setback unifies the streetscape.

Meredith Village's location on Lake Winnipesaukee was a large part of why the railroad placed a depot there, rather than further inland. In later years, the striking views from points throughout the village enhanced its attractiveness as a regional center.

The fringe of the village retains older residences separated by lawns and mature landscaping. Though some of these three houses are now in office use, their residential scale and setting remain little altered and provide an attractive gateway into the village.

Parapet walls on the fronts of commercial buildings were common at the turn of the 20th century as a means to add visual interest to the roofline and, often, space for a name or date plate, both items rarely omitted on historic commercial blocks. This rectangular hall (1914) with its regularly spaced windows shared quarters with the Winnipesaukee Grange and the Masonic order.

The panel created by a perimeter of projecting brick on this early 20th century storefront was designed for a sign band or a building name/date plate.

Horizontal parapets also served as an appropriate spot for a building's name. Though projecting corner bays frequently defined a corner location, in this instance, the corner acknowledged a decided angle in Main Street's alignment.

These two commercial blocks were built in the 1850s and closely resemble each other even after 150 years. The gable-front orientation was typical from the mid-19th century onward, as was the use of standard-size window openings, six-over-six sash, and wide trim boards. The use of just two contrasting colors highlights the architectural details of these buildings.

For at least 100 years, the storefront above has sported a porch, enclosed to create extra display space in more recent years. The storefront below employs the common dual store design, each with a centrally positioned, recessed entrance flanked by plate glass display windows.

The Sanborn Block has long been a focal point of social and business activity in the village. The building evolved from a five-bay, 2-1/2 story, twin chimney dwelling facing Water Street into a commercial structure with an early 20th century storefront addition that projected right up to the edge of the intersection. Colored glass and plate-glass display windows, as well as the angled entry, are interesting features of the 1909 storefront.

Traditionally designed storefronts, such as this early 20th century addition to the Horne Block, featured central, recessed entrances that sheltered entering customers, flanking display windows with broad expanses of glass and protective kickboards below, pilasters at outer corners and, across the top, a molded cornice that extended the width of the storefront.

The late 20th century renovation of the ca. 1820 Ladd Block, now the home of the Meredith Historical Society, introduced a traditional storefront replete with paneled kickboard and a facade porch supported by turned posts with sawn scroll brackets.

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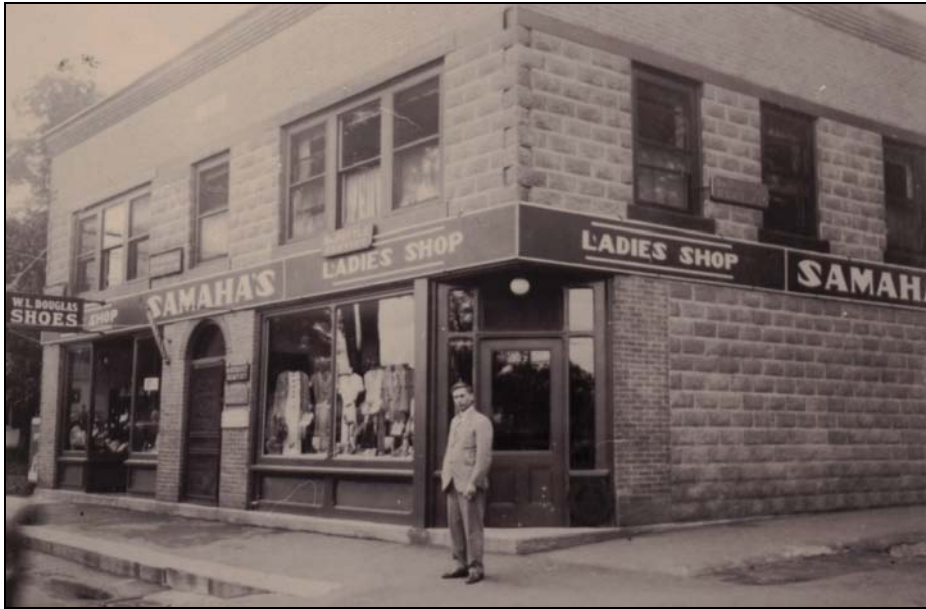
The storefront of the Samaha Block, built in 1911, lost its distinctive arched entrance, signboard, and wooden storefront when the metal storefront frame, embraced by property owners throughout the country, was applied ca. 1940s. Yet, the building's use of rusticated concrete block to simulate stone and its contrasting brickwork have survived. The angled block facing the street corner and the stepped brick cornice were effective decorative devices that simultaneously defined building edges.

The display window has been reduced dramatically on this 19th century storefront, resulting in a loss of proportions and a closed-in feeling.

Dentils, molded panels, transom windows, expansive plate glass, and brackets were typical details found on historic storefronts.

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The Humiston School and Lang Street School used different, but equally effective techniques to break up otherwise massive facades. On the former, the facade was divided into three sections, and the entrance was heightened through a projecting central bay with a stepped parapet and use of concrete quoins along the full-height entry bay. Note the ubiquitous date plate near the cornice.

Lang Street School, a lower and slightly more recent building, employed an over-scaled entry portico with multiple posts to both accentuate the entrance and provide dimension to a relatively plain facade.

Many of the in-town 19th century residences had attached ells, sheds and barns, but through varied roof lines and offset positioning, a generous amount of square footage was accommodated without introducing a massive front to the streetscape. The broad-gable front was a popular feature in the mid-19th century, as were peaked window caps, which suggested the Gothic Revival style.

The lower photo is a vernacular Italianate house, with cornice returns, paired brackets, and bay windows.

The Greek Revival style was the first to employ gable-front road orientation in the village. Though there were relatively few buildings erected in this style, which flourished in the 1840s and '50s, the house pictured above with its flush-board siding, inset porch, posts reminiscent of Greek temple columns, and entrance with full-length sidelights, represents the style well.

Many of the houses in Meredith Village were built in the Italianate style, which coincided with the village's spurt of development in the years following the arrival of the railroad. A gable-front orientation, brackets, bay windows with molded panels, window caps, simple corner pilasters, deep cornice returns, and 6/ or 2/2 window sash were among the local characteristics of that style.

(see also photographs on next page)

During the late Victorian era, use of varied wall materials was common. Clapboards and differing shingle patterns offered visual distinction, but also served to define the different floors of a building. Corner turrets, while less frequently introduced, provided a focal point to the house, as well as unusual interior space. (see also photograph on next page)

Lakefront & Automobile Tourism

Within the bounds of Meredith are five lakes, including a portion of the northwest shore of Lake Winnipesaukee, the state's largest body of water.
Beginning in the late nineteenth century and escalating throughout the twentieth, summer camps and cottages sprung up on Meredith's shorefront.

Meredith Neck, which extends far into Lake Winnipesaukee, provided particularly extensive shore frontage for seasonal cottages. In the early years, the Neck supported sizable estate "cottages" built by well-to-do people from Boston on its shoreline. The main house was generally accompanied by a host of outbuildings, such as bunkhouses, lodges, garages, and sheds. In the last fifty years, all but one of these estates was subdivided and the large cottages demolished -- now viewable only through historic images.

More commonly found on Meredith's lake frontage, especially off the Neck, were modest cottages with gabled or hipped roofs, exposed roof rafters, clapboard, novelty, or shingle siding, porches, and fieldstone chimneys. They were carefully screened from the water by trees and set in a wooded, often rock-strewn landscape.

As many as six children's camps within a single period were located in Meredith. A large, centrally positioned lodge with scattered small cabins and a lakefront location typified this resource. Like private cottages, camp buildings were sided with wood-derived materials: clapboards, novelty siding, or wooden shingles.

Not all of Meredith's seasonal architecture was found on the lakes. Tucked into hillsides, usually with dramatic views toward mountains or lakes, were Craftsman Style or bungalow residences with low-slung rooflines, inset porches, and prominent fieldstone foundations and chimneys.

Meredith's location at the intersection of two major state highways, the Daniel Webster Highway (Route 3) leading to Franconia Notch and the Whittier Highway (Route 25) leading to Crawford Notch, began bringing high volumes of traffic through town in the early-mid twentieth century. Along these routes, tourist cabins, filling stations, restaurants, and food stands appeared, catering to the traveling public.
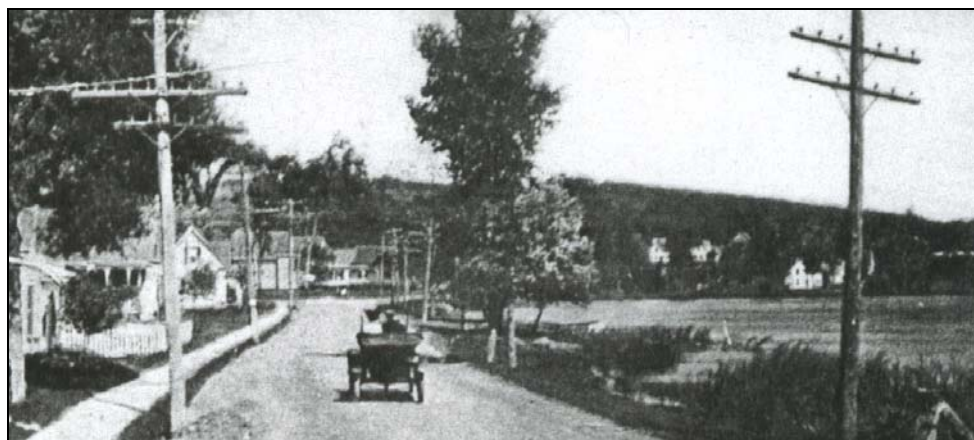
This turn-of-the-century cottage exemplifies the large, estate cottage erected on the Neck. These summer cottages were often designed in the Craftsman Style and made extensive use of native materials, including fieldstone for foundations and chimneys, even walls. Wood-shingled walls, a multitude of porches, gable cross pieces, and roof dormers were other typical characteristics.

Smaller, more vernacular cottages scattered along all five of Meredith's lakefronts also made extensive use of wood shingles, novelty siding, and fieldstone. Gabled and hipped roofs were the norm; exposed rafter tails, inset porches, and fieldstone chimneys and foundations were common.

Though the cottages were often closely spaced, a screen of native trees provided privacy and shade, without prohibiting passersby from enjoying the view.

(see also photographs on next page)

Occasionally, an entire building was constructed of local stone.

Garage doors were divided into narrow wood and glazed panels to break up their mass.

Inland summer cottages and even year-round houses of the early 20th century employed the same architectural features as those on the shore: exposed rafter tails; hipped and shed-roof dormers; fieldstone for chimneys, foundations, and stair railings; and no shortage of porches.

This Route 3 guesthouse had a row of shed-roof dormers on both roof slopes to increase the number of guest rooms and break up a lengthy roofline. The south-facing enclosed porch was probably used heavily in season.

Indigenous fieldstone played an important landscaping role in the first half of the twentieth century, and examples abound throughout Meredith, usually in the form of walls, driveway entry posts, and steps. (see also photographs on next page)

Resources for further written and visual information

Many of these reference sources are available at the Meredith Public Library and the Meredith Historical Society. The Historical Society also has an extensive collection of historic photographs and postcards that can provide excellent documentary material for rehabilitation projects, as well as inspiration for new construction rooted in local architectural traditions.

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