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Keeping time on the town's rich history

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MILFORD -- Watching over downtown for 150 years, Town Hall "reminds us of all that is good about our hometown," Milford native and Nobel Laureate of Medicine Dr. Joseph Murray once said.

Its upkeep can be a painstaking task at times, costing a large chunk of tax dollars. But longtime residents say the paybacks are many.

"If you have a good-looking Town Hall, you have a good-looking town," said former building keeper Al Calzolaio.

Another reward is a connection to days when immigrants came here in large numbers to start anew.

"This is our family history, of our town growing and having problems and solving problems," Town Moderator Michael Noferi said.

Hall of Unsurpassed Beauty

Milford, incorporated in 1780, built its first non-religious brick meetinghouse in 1819 on land Darius Sumner gave the town.

Designed by 26-year-old Thomas Silloway, construction of the present Town Hall began in 1853, next to the meetinghouse, which later became a school. Work took five years to complete, costing $20,000 -- $7,000 more than budgeted.

In March 1900, residents appropriated $25,000 to expand the back portion of the building. Architect Robert Cook, an 1892 Milford High School graduate, designed the addition creating space for the"Great Hall," or "Upper Town Hall."

Tragedy struck on April 1900 when workers began tearing down the old Town Meeting House to make room for the addition. A wall fell on April 21, killing one worker instantly and seriously injuring two others, one of whom died four days later.

Celebration followed loss on Feb. 18, 1901, when the Great Hall opened to the public with a ball hosted by the First Valencial Council, Knights of Columbus.

Calling the ball a "brilliant social event," The Milford Daily News reported the next day the new ballroom with two balconies was a "large, spacious hall that cannot be surpassed in the state for beauty."

The ball was the first of many celebrations to be held there, including high school proms and graduations, where Gov. Eben S. Draper handed out diplomas in 1909 and 1910.

Milford-Whitinsville Regional Hospital, which Draper started in 1903 with a land donation, also gathered in the hall for annual galas from 1939 to 1978. The hospital re-created the event last May as part of its centennial festivities.

Upper Town Hall has also seen Chamber of Commerce trade shows, concerts and dance recitals as well as amateur boxing and wrestling in the 1950s.

It underwent a major restoration in the late 1990s. Murray sent his remarks back home when residents celebrated the project's completion in 1999.

Selectman Dino DeBartolomeis said the repairs brought the hall back just as town officials had hoped.

"We were always of the opinion that the upstairs hall should never be redone; it should always be maintained," he said.

Selectman John Seaver said the repairs made the room the perfect venue for the Claflin Hill Symphony Orchestra performance he recently attended.

"The upper Town Hall is a magnificent setting acoustically and the surroundings the place for a top classical concert," he said.

Town Meeting

Built to accommodate the town's growing population in 1900, Upper Town Hall seats 1,500 people and has held Town Meetings for most of Milford's history.

Those meetings have had their share of controversy, with one of the most lively debates centering on the Milford Police Department on March 7, 1925.

The meeting, coming amid a selectmen race recount, voted 605-309 to place the town's officers under the state Civil Service system, but the strong divide came during discussion on giving Police Chief John J. Moloney the same protection.

State troopers responded after name calling and fist fights broke out. The meeting, called the "most disgraceful ever held," by The Daily News, finally adjourned at 1:15 a.m., though the dispute kept simmering with an appeal to the state Supreme Judicial Court.

The debates became smaller in 1934, when residents voted in a representative Town Meeting.

Noferi, the town's moderator for more than two decades, said another major change came when Milford moved meetings from March to May.

"When the meetings were in the winter time, people would just get out there to get out and the galleries would be packed with people, just watching," he said.

Town Meeting moved out of Town Hall for stretches in the 1970s after the high school opened and during repairs in the 1980s and 1990s, but Noferi, 60, said selectmen always wanted to bring it back.

"If you have any love of the history, you want to have meetings in the place where your fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers met and made the decisions," he said.

Repairs

Town Hall, listed on the national Register of Historic Places in 1977, has undergone major renovations during the past two decades, starting in the 1980s with more than $500,000 in exterior repairs followed by a $1.9 million interior project that forced municipal offices to move to Memorial Hall for two years.

The focus of the early 1990s was the Town Hall roof, the upper Town Hall restorations and exterior painting. Residents harbor different feelings about the various colors Town Hall has worn over the years.

"The white and gray they painted it brings it right out," Calzolaio said. "I think it looks real colonial."

Others are less set in their views.

"It's a beautiful building," DeBartolomeis said. "The other way, when it was gold and blue, it showed off those beautiful mantle pieces."

Fiscal 2004 is proving to be another year marked by repairs. This fall, the selectmen's meeting room received $15,800 in cable television upgrades. Selectmen also approved a $22,000 contract to replace the building's exterior railings.

The next major project is fixing up the tower, which standing at nearly 50 feet over Town Hall, holds a special place in the hearts of residents who have climbed up to visit its clock or the bell, cast at the former Holbrook foundry in East Medway, now Millis.

"It's a beautiful view of the town from up there," said Council on Aging Chairman Tony Grillo.

The bell has names of visitors scrawled all over it. "They go way to 1890, some of the signatures, up to the present and I hope they don't destroy it," Calzolaio said.

Despite the tower's recent repairs, the town's architect Max Ferro believes it needs more work because damage sustained in the 1938 hurricane has never fully been corrected, Town Engineer Michael Santora said.

November's special Town Meeting approved $400,000 in spending for the next round of work. Santora said the town is seeking bids to fix the tower as well the clock, "as an alternate," meaning both jobs will be awarded if work comes in under appropriation.

Made by Howard & Davis of Boston, the clock was given to Milford around 1858 by John Erskine, Esq. It has seen sporadic operation over its life, much of it coming from tower damage that has unhinged gears.

The clock moved to electrical operation in 1960, after James Till, the man responsible for winding it every four days, gave up the job. When it returned to manual operation, Calzolaio inherited the job of winding it up each Monday and Friday.

He recalls three or four years of steady operation after repairs in the late 1980s, but said it stopped working again when a key interior piece was bent during 1994 roof repairs.

It still gains notice even out of operation. Before retiring last year, Calzolaio used to decorate the glass dials, with witches for Halloween, turkeys for Thanksgiving and hearts for Valentine's Day.

"One woman said her daughter every time she came to town, she goes down to see the clock," he said.

Town Administrator Louis Celozzi said Japanese investors offered the town $500,000 to buy it in the mid-1990s.

"Obviously we didn't even discuss it with them because it wasn't even a question," Celozzi said.