

**MILFORD
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NEWS

A changing of the guard

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MILLIS -- More than a century after residents gathered stones for its construction, Millis' first town hall no longer holds municipal offices.

But while the Lansing Millis Memorial Building was vacated in 1999, residents say the former railroad station remains the heart of the town.

"I think there would be a lot of opposition to ever selling it," said Sue Lockett, a town employee who retired last June. "Because it is unique and it is part of the history."

That history began with the town's incorporation on Feb. 24, 1885, after residents petitioned the state's General Court seeking a split with Medway, arguing the 5-mile long Black Swamp that is now Rte. 109 created a natural separation.

Residents named the town for Lansing Millis, the New York businessman who came to work in Boston as a railroad soliciting agent and established a summer home at Oak Grove Farm.

The railroad executive died just six weeks after the town's incorporation, yet his family remained committed to his vision for a combination Town Hall and railroad station.

His son, Henry L. Millis, who later served on the state's General Court, promised to erect the Exchange Street building if the town contributed \$500 to level the nearby road.

Residents donated unusual-shaped stones for the building while friends of the town's namesake had granite engraved with initials of companies in which he held financial interests.

These stones, the building's tower, the Holbrook bell displayed out front, and a first-floor, half-circle window have endeared the former town hall to many.

"It was a charming building," said Jacqueline Anderson, a former assistant to Millis Town Administrator Charles Aspinwall, who worked there from 1979 to 1999.

Leaving the station

In the town's early years, the building's first floor housed a train station, with police and fire dispatchers, a library and other town offices upstairs.

In the late 1950s, dispatchers left the railroad station and the police and fire departments moved out of Niagara Hall for a new station built on Main Street. The library left in 1967, after a new \$152,000 facility was built on Auburn Road.

By the mid-1990s, the town was ready to leave the building altogether.

"The conditions of both Niagara Hall and the train station were deteriorating and handicapped access was an issue," selectmen Chairman Jeff Hardin said.

The train station lacked an elevator as required by the federal Americans With Disabilities Act, forcing selectmen to meet at the library. Space was another major problem.

With the completion of the Clyde F. Brown Elementary School expansion, the town's third-, fourth-, and fifth-graders moved out of the 90-year-old Memorial School on Main Street.

The next step was clear, Hardin said.

"We had this big old school building that we needed to do something with and these buildings were woefully inadequate, so the obvious solution was to move to Memorial School," Hardin said.

Residents agreed in May 1995, approving a \$2.1 million debt exclusion to rehab the former school. The overhaul took more than three years, largely because the town's contractor went bankrupt and walked off the job.

Some still weren't ready to leave after the delay.

"I think when you had worked in a building as many years as I did, you miss it," said Roma Curran, 76, who worked in the railroad station from 1958 to 1999. "It was warm and cozy and fun."

Curran, an assistant town clerk, has since come around and many agree.

"There were really no advantages to the old building, other than its charm," Anderson said. "And there were all sorts of advantages to the Memorial Building. Space, everything being together in one building, which is great."

More space, new memories

Large enough to hold employees from both the railroad station and Niagara Hall, the Memorial School brought the majority of town business under one roof for the first time -- and right across the street from the police and fire station.

"It was space, but it was also efficiency," Hardin said.

The building also had basement space for the Council on Aging, which had previously operated a senior center two mornings a week from a local church.

But with the additional space came the question of Niagara Hall, built for \$675 in 1878, and the Lansing Millis Memorial Building.

A committee suggested selling Niagara Hall, until Hardin stepped in and highlighted the building's history. Today, the building is undergoing a restoration and the town is considering establishing a nonprofit group to oversee it.

Selling the railroad station was never considered, Hardin said. "It's too much of a centerpiece," he said.

An initial plan to lease the building out for offices garnered little interest, though. It sat empty until 2001, when Lewis Randa, director of Sherborn's Peace Abbey, approached the town about leasing it for the group's Strawberry Field School for mentally handicapped adults.

The town entered into a 10-year lease with the school that raised \$10,000 the first year and \$11,025 the second.

The school covers maintenance costs and paid to outfit the building for its use, making the former town clerk's office a kitchen, and renaming the former selectmen's meeting room the Lansing Millis Sitting Room.

"It works out very well for us," teacher Ruthanne Grundfast said. "There's plenty of room."

'Community building'

Meanwhile, the community has started to settle into the Memorial School on many fronts.

Elections can now be held right in town hall and the gym and extra meeting rooms bring in more people than ever, Anderson said.

"It's a community building most of all and I think that was part of the sell on putting up funding," Anderson said.

And while it lacks the history of the railroad station, the building has become a place for reflection in its own right.

"Architecturally, the building is nothing compared to the railroad station...But the Memorial building has its own history," said Anne Mertz, an artist and former Millis resident who sold prints of a watercolor painting of the railroad station in the mid-1990s as a library fundraiser.

Built as a five-room schoolhouse in 1913, the Memorial School saw two expansions in the 1920s and 1930s that made it large enough to hold all the town's students through the 1950s.

Curran, a 1944 Millis High School graduate, remembers the days when the town clerk's office she works in belonged to the principal. The combination gymnasium and auditorium where she spends election days reminds her of student activities long since passed.

"We had our class play and our junior prom and our graduation there and at that time, the basketball court was a full-size court," Curran recalled. "We used to have basketball games there."

Lockett, who worked in the building inspector's office, has heard plenty of stories from visitors taken back by the building's wooden floors and the chalkboards that still line office walls.

"I wish when I had moved in there, I had written down all the names of people who came in and said 'My kid had so-and-so in this room,'" she said.

Veterans have memories there, too. Originally named the Millis Consolidated School, the building was renamed Memorial School in honor of the town's World War II veterans and memorial headstones were placed outside.

In 1999, it became the Veterans Memorial Building after a group of veterans submitted a petition seeking more recognition.

History is also on display, with the Hindy Rosenfeld Collection of town memorabilia showcased throughout the building. Rounding out the memories are bottles and other keepsakes from the Clicquot Club Company, the soda business that operated in town through most of the 1900s.

Seeing visitors take in these displays, Town Administrator Charles Aspinwall said the town has succeeded with the building.

"Anytime someone who has never been here comes to this building, they say, 'What a great building,'" Aspinwall said.

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