

**MILFORD
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NEWS

Town Hall holds the ghosts

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UXBRIDGE -- Built on a former cemetery more than 200 years ago, Town Hall stands in shadows and holds ghosts of days gone by.

The ghosts take shape in the crumbling chimney, shutdown meeting hall and abandoned basement, all part of \$3 million in improvements the building needs to return to its luster, according to a 2002 report.

A year later, discussion over those repairs has yet to really begin, overshadowed by Uxbridge's long-running debate over replacing its 1937 high school on Capron Street.

The school controversy has temporarily quieted down after voters defeated a \$34 million plan last July and the state implemented a moratorium on building assistance funds, but Town Hall is still unlikely to reap much additional attention, Town Manager Allan Klepper said.

"We're heading into a second year of a difficult fiscal situation and aid cuts for the state," he said. "I am certainly not about to lead a crusade for cuts and cost reductions and at the same time spend \$1 million on the Town Hall."

'Brilliant Spectacle'

Originally part of Mendon, Uxbridge was incorporated on June 27, 1727, and named after a community in Middlesex County, England.

Residents held the first two Town Meetings that summer at the Cornet John Farnum House on Mendon Street, voting at the second gathering to build a meeting house.

In 1878, a new Town Hall was built by Ira Southwick further down South Main Street, on the site of the former burying ground. Remains had been dug up and moved to the Prospect Hill Cemetery on Mendon Street.

Designed by Worcester architect A.P. Cutting, the Victorian Gothic structure was dedicated on Feb. 25, 1879, with a gala that raised \$135 to buy shutters.

Another early gathering was the high school association's first ball, held on March 19, 1880.

"Never was such a brilliant spectacle of a ball room scene witnessed before and indeed we believe that it is not every day when other places can boast of its equal, judging from the comments of many present," stated an account in the "Uxbridge Year by Year: 1727-1927," compiled by Beatrice Putnam Sprague.

In 1882, jail cells were built in the basement, where the police station and dispatch center later operated. Come 1914, the state would condemn the lockup, which the town eventually replaced decades later.

The library was also in Town Hall until 1893, when Edward Thayer of Keene, N.H., gave the town a building in his parents' honor.

The Uxbridge native spent \$33,500 on the Thayer Memorial Building: \$28,000 for construction, \$4,000 for its North Main Street parcel and \$1,500 on furnishings from Boston's Paine Furniture Co., whose founders once lived in Uxbridge.

Town Hall remained a hub of activity, across the street from the Uxbridge Passenger Depot, where President William Howard Taft stepped out in 1909 and yelled the famous line, "Uxbridge! I suppose I have more relatives here than any other place in the country."

A 1928 expansion gave the town a central fire station for \$26,000. But a decade later, a hurricane knocked the fire department's whistle and the Town Hall's tall tower over into the police station. The north tower was rebuilt to mirror the shorter south tower.

The building's upper hall was frequently used in the 1930s and '40s despite the accident, hosting dances, plays, basketball games and rollerskating, town historian Mae Edwards Wrona said.

"All the school functions were held there in its heyday," the 83-year-old said. "During the period that it was very active, school graduations, school plays anything to do with the schools, it was held there. It was a beautiful stage."

Celebrating history

It is a time of celebration at the town's original meeting space, the Cornet John Farnum House on Mendon Street near the Mumford River falls.

Farnum and his wife, Mary Tyler of Mendon, built the house there in 1715, before Uxbridge became its own town.

It remained a private residence through 1926, when the house was purchased and restored by the owners of the Uxbridge Worsted Company mill across the street, now the Bernat mill complex.

Today, the town-owned building serves as headquarters for the private Uxbridge Historical Society, which opens it to the public for tours during the summer and runs educational programs for schoolchildren there.

The society recognized its 35th anniversary with a party there this past week. But historical society members say the celebration is about the Uxbridge Room.

The group has spent the past year there cataloguing its historical collection of documents and artifacts, such as the former Center School bell and several "Uxbridge Blue" uniforms the Uxbridge Worsted Company produced for the Army during World War II.

"Any new person that gives us a new memento from their family or anything, we have devised a method where the item gets catalogued, what it is and how it was used," said Historical Society President Raymond Strom.

'Not much space'

One of the first arguments over building a new high school played out in Town Hall at the 1892 Town Meeting, when residents voted to build a \$25,000 high school on the Capron family property now used as the St. Mary's Church parking lot.

More than a century later, that debate has resurfaced with a vigor. Residents have defeated four high school proposals after emotional battles over the past four years, most recently a \$34 million plan last July.

And Uxbridge's school woes keep escalating. The New England Association of Schools and Colleges placing the high school's accreditation on probation, the high school's cement steps are crumbling and the School Committee recently decided to give up using the condemned Blanchard School.

These developments come as residents need to pay attention to Town Hall, according to a 2002 report prepared by McGinley Hart & Associates of Somerville.

For \$3.2 million, the report found Uxbridge could bring the National Register of Historic Places site back to full use and make better use of its space.

Among other renovations, this work includes restoring the upper hall, the basement the police department vacated in 2002 for its new station on Rte. 16 and the former police chief's office on the first floor.

Two key improvements include installing an elevator to comply with the federal Americans With Disabilities Act and a fire alarm system. Right now, the building has no sprinklers and is only protected by smoke detectors.

This makes Town Clerk Holly Gallerani worry about Uxbridge's birth and marriage records and town reports she keeps in her office.

"These are all the records of the town," she said.

Gallerani fully agrees that space utilization is a problem, saying her 300-square-foot office feels overcapacity with even a couple visitors.

"We're on top of one another," Gallerani said. "There's not much space."

Building Inspector Nick Gazerro closed the upper hall for public use in February 2002, citing insufficient exit signs near doors.

Wrona is less concerned about the lack of exit signs than she is with the boxes that keep piling up in the hall.

"It just shocked me," she said. "There's nothing, they're storing everything in there. It just looks like somebody's garage."

Klepper agrees the building needs work, but has no immediate plans for the upper hall.

Instead, he plans to seek Town Meeting approval to spend \$108,000 already sitting in accounts to make the building handicapped accessible.

He hopes to stretch the money as far as he can among three projects: installing a staircase chairlift, making the second-floor bathrooms handicapped accessible and adding privacy screening for first-floor bathrooms.

The only other possible upcoming change is Klepper may move his office to the former police chief's office. He wants to be in a more central location than his current spot behind the selectmen meeting room.

"If I'm in charge, I should be more readily available," he said.

Wrona understands money is tight, but misses upper Town Hall's glory days.

"It would be wonderful if they could restore the upstairs because it was gorgeous," she said.

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