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LARKIN, Page B5

NEWS FILE PHOTO
Nipmuc Vice Principal Patrick Larkin recently
received an award naming him best assistant
principal in the state.

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Future unclear for watchdog of town's past

Bellingham building in need of an overhaul

By Sara Withee
NEWS STAFF WRITER

BELLINGHAM - One of the state's three oldest municipal buildings in continuous use, Town Hall holds more than 200 years of memories of religious services, town meetings and celebrations.

Residents signaled the time had come to move the town's daily business out of the historic structure in 1997, approving \$1.7 million to erect modern of-

ices on the back of the Town Hall lot. After years of roadblocks, officials thought the delays were over last June, when Pope Construction arrived to start grading the ground.

It ended up just being the closest miss yet. "We had the design, we were ready," Selectman Ann Odabashian said. "We were ready to break



PHOTO BY JOSHUA BARNETT

This is the view of Bellingham Common from the third-floor watch tower. At right, the Town Hall is decorated for Bellingham's 250th birthday in 1969.

ground. We did break ground, in a sense."

Town Hall conflicts

Incorporated in 1719, Bellingham built its first meeting house three years later. It was sold after 50 years. TOWN HALL, Page B10



IMAGES OF AMERICA BELLINGHAM

FROM THE LOCAL FRONT

Watchdog of past needs a new lease on life

TOWN HALL. From *B1*
and Town Meetings were relocated to the aging Baptist Meeting House at no cost for several years.

Residents returned to the original 1-acre meeting house site in 1802, when the present Town Hall was built there. David Jones, the man who bought the lot from the town, gifted it back for the effort.

Construction cost \$4,000. The town contributed \$1,000 while the Baptist Society raised the rest through sale of the pews.

Tension rose over this arrangement in the 1820s, when the Baptists tried to block the Congregationalists and Universalists from using Town Hall.

The disagreement soon landed in Superior Court, where the town was found to have exclusive ownership of the building. The Baptists later built their own church across the street in 1828, modeling it after Town Hall.

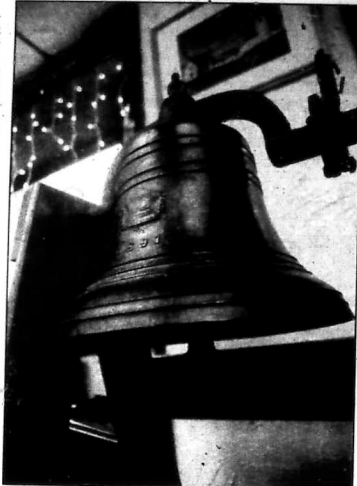
In 1840, the tower began its first run as a military post, with the Bellingham Rifles militia using the third floor as an armory through 1847. It returned to service a century later in 1941, when its fifth floor became a round-the-clock World War II observation post.

"There were housewives who manned it, boy scouts," Historical Commission member Ernest Taft said. "It pretty much ran on a volunteer basis."

Town Hall abandoned its open church-like interior in the late 1800s. The upper balconies were closed off into a second floor, where the downstairs pews were moved.

Another major renovation came in 1910, when the town spent \$3,000 installing a vault, banquet room and kitchen on the first floor. On the second floor, pews were removed to make way for a hall with a stage, which the now-dissolved Bellingham Grange put to good use with dances and minstrel shows.

Controversy returned in January 1974, when selectmen decided to seek Town Meeting approval to build a new Town



The old South School bell hangs in the Bellingham Town Hall Annex.

Hall. Within a matter of days, the state condemned the upper hall and the basement during separate visits.

After two months of debate, the March Town Meeting decided not to build a new Town Hall, instead taking the Finance Committee's recommendation to spend \$45,000 on repairs.

Town offices had to temporarily relocate while then-selectmen Wilfred Arcand was awarded the contract to restore the building, Taft said.

"It was shut down for a whole year," Taft said. "Nobody was allowed in the building at all."

Another delay

Town Meeting finally approved construction of a new Town Hall in 1997. But plans to erect a new building and demolish the Center School grounds received in the first two rounds of bidding all exceeded

the \$1.7 appropriation.

In the third round, Pope Construction came forward with a \$1.5 million offer to put up the building.

The New Hampshire contractor began grading the site last June, only for workers to then stop showing.

While Pope Construction initially claimed soil work was impeded by soil conditions, the town now knows the builder is financially unable to live up to the contract.

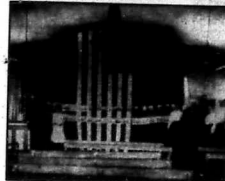
Town officials are now searching for another company to step in so the project can go forward without being put back to bid. They are also considering downscaling plans.

Employees in the historical Town Hall, with its broken heating system and worn beams, are especially disappointed.

"We are very discouraged with the delays with the new Town Hall," said assistant tax collector Teresa Ambrosio.



STAFF PHOTO BY JOSHUA BARNATT



IMAGES OF AMERICA, BELLINGHAM

"Here in the collector's office, it is very tough on us because it's very cold."

Center School

Bellingham bought land adjacent to Town Hall for a common in 1870. This area is now covered by a handful of buildings, including the historical museum, built in 1930 as the town's library, and the Town Hall Annex, constructed in 1941 using federal Work Progress Administration money. The police station went up in 1965.

Behind the police station sits the Center School, which now holds the town's building offices and police department's administration.

Historical Commission members say they fully support the town's decision to demolish the 1873 school as part of its upcoming building plans.

"Basically, there's no originality left to the building," Taft said. "It's been gutted out."

The elementary school was known as the Massey School through the early 1900s after the Rev. Joseph T. Massey, the First Baptist Church pastor

who built it.

The second floor sat empty until 1894, when high school students moved in. In 1899, the high school was closed and older students began attending classes in Medway, Franklin and Woonsocket, R.I., with the first-year bill coming to \$500 for 17 pupils.

Residents moved to create space for older students in April 1901, with a \$13,000 appropriation to expand both the North and Center schools. The Center School remained an elementary school after the renovations.

Historical Commission member Florence McCracken, who attended grades 1 through 6 there in the 1930s, recalls having the same teacher during four of those years and that two grades shared the same classroom.

"You can imagine two grades in one room," the 78-year-old said. "While the teacher was teaching one grade, the other was doing their homework."

Historical Commission members want to preserve these memories despite the town's demolition plans by eventually

obtaining grants to restore the North School, across from St. Brendan's Church.

"The Center School and North School are exact duplicates," Taft said. "The reason we're putting our efforts in the North School is the North School is still original from the 1901 reconstruction."

Future of old Town Hall

Taft is concerned for the old Town Hall, which joins the one in Wales as the second oldest in the state to be used without interruption. The 1798 Town Hall in Peru is the oldest.

Part-time boards will take over Town Hall's first floor when the new building is complete. Community groups will continue using the upstairs meeting room.

With offices gone, Taft worries some residents may want to restore it to its church-like interior. He wants to take care of a few areas in the upper hall, such as fixing peeling wall and ceiling paint and removing carpeting that covers part of the wooden floor.

But he wants to keep it circa 1910, the condition he feels it can be best utilized.

"If you renovate the building to the period 1802, what do you do after?" he said. "You have a meetinghouse that you can't use."

He also worries curious visitors will try to access the tower and employees will not be on site to stop them.

"We don't want people wandering in and out of the tower because the stairs aren't safe," he said.

He wants to restore the tower and make a documentary or keep a written account of it and the tower's history. Then, he wants to keep it largely closed off.

Though Taft has long wanted to seek grants for these efforts, he said the town's building plans mean the Historical Commission must do it soon.

"If you don't make the repairs, if you don't protect the building, someone else is going to come in with an idea for upstairs," Taft said. "It's being the watchdogs of history just want to maintain what we had."

The stairs to the third floor watch tower show the numbered slots where militia once stored arms. At left, residents in 1896 celebrate in front of the upstairs meeting room in Town Hall.