

## Town Hall

West Newbury's Town Hall, our oldest civic structure, has been well-loved, well-used, and at times abused since it first hosted Town Meeting on October 31, 1842. According to a history in the Town's [1955 Annual Report](#), a vote was taken in 1841 to cease alternating town meetings between the two parish meetinghouses and to construct a 38' x 50' "town house" with a single center aisle. Stretched and pulled to meet new demands in the intervening years, the building has grown to 137' long. Always it has been left in care of the Selectmen with the expectation, as expressed in 1887, that they "exercise a fatherly care over their charge...."

From the outset, Town Hall served not only governmental purposes, but also hosted events such as lectures on politics and slavery [abolition](#). Commencement ceremonies, concerts, church services, Memorial Day exercises, school plays, [proms](#), entertainments, debates, performances, movies (the projector window is visible to this day) and neighborly gatherings filled Town Hall's schedule. In [1946](#), when West Newbury had a star boys' basketball team but no suitable gym, \$800 was spent to convert Town Hall into a basketball court, with painted floors and bars on the windows.

By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Town Hall was home to militants and miscreants. [Contentious Citizens](#) says that in the 1850's, after [Ben: Perley Poore](#) established a rifle battalion here, "[t]he old gallery in Town Hall was sealed up and used for an armory, the company drilling in the hall." In 1861, Union recruits ("Poore's Savages") awaiting orders at [Camp Sylvester](#) engaged in a "[peculiar drill](#)" consisting of "running around the town hall in single file, giving an Indian war-whoop and firing into the corner of the hall as we ran." In 1868, the selectmen were authorized to put a lockup in Town Hall; this was removed and sold in 1870.

Starting in the mid-1860's, Town Hall and the [Training Field](#) embraced the West Newbury Farmers' Club Fair, said to be the best agricultural fair in the county. In 1874, the [Newburyport Daily Herald](#) reported that some 3-4,000 people came to see contests and exhibits, including fruits, vegetables, and manufactured goods on display in Town Hall, which had been "beautifully decorated with autumnal flowers." At the club's [business meeting in the following year](#), "farmers with their wives, sons and daughters, to the number of

about 300, sat down to bountifully supplied tables" in Town Hall.

The Town Hall [façade](#) we now know was built in 1880, when the building was extended by 25-35'. [1881's Annual Town Report](#) identifies \$2,099 spent—about 11% of the year's expenditures—on items ranging from 5,833' of spruce timber to a granite doorstep. The distinctive ventilator atop the roof was added in 1883.

A Selectmen's office in Town Hall was first broached in [1882](#); five years later, that office was in the west anteroom. Around 1912, office space expanded with addition of the front west ell, which housed not only Selectmen but also a new vault. Electric wiring was installed in 1916, and around that time Town Hall was among the few West Newbury buildings with a public pay-for-use telephone. Town offices were sparse through the early 1960's: the building was open for business 4 hours each weekday, with a few extra hours on Saturday morning and Monday night, when Selectmen and others met. Later in the 1960s, however, an [addition](#) was built at the back (now a preschool) to accommodate growing Town government. Town offices moved to the 1910 Building, once it was no longer used as the Central School, in 1978.

Town Hall thrived as a theatrical venue in the 1940's. In 1941, the Town accepted a bequest from [Ella Augusta Kimball Brown](#) for the purpose of building a new stage and dressing rooms (the second ell to the west). Begun in 1947 under the sponsorship of [Julian Steele](#) among others, the [Town Hall Players](#), the "first community-sponsored professional theatre in the East," included such notable actors as [Martin Balsam](#). This, however, was short-lived: in 1950 Town Meeting directed that the Selectmen could "not again let [Town Hall] to the Summer Theatre players of last year until the balance of the rent is paid." Then on August 31, 1954, [Hurricane Carol](#) blew out the lower side of Mrs. Brown's ell, causing the roof to cave in, "completely disintegrating the whole section of the building." Townspeople committed to rebuild in a special town meeting held two weeks later.

Town Hall's final town meeting gaveled to a close on May 6, 2009. The dignified building remains central to the Town and its [identity](#)—and will forever be home to [Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel](#).

