

TOPSFIELD TOWN HALL



Past, Present and Future

In 1870, the population of Topsfield was about 1,200. The idea of building a Town Hall met stiff opposition when it was proposed by a Citizens' Petition in 1872. After numerous deliberations, committee reports, special town meetings, and efforts to change the location, the decisive Town Meeting was held on June 9, 1873. This last meeting brought out 210 voters who met on the Town Common. The voters lined up in two lines - those in favor and those against. By a vote of 108 to 102, Topsfield voted to build a Town Hall.



The Town determined to do the project well. They hired the Salem and Boston architectural firm of Lord and Fuller to design the building and noted local builder John H. Potter to handle construction.

LORD & FULLER, ARCHITECTS

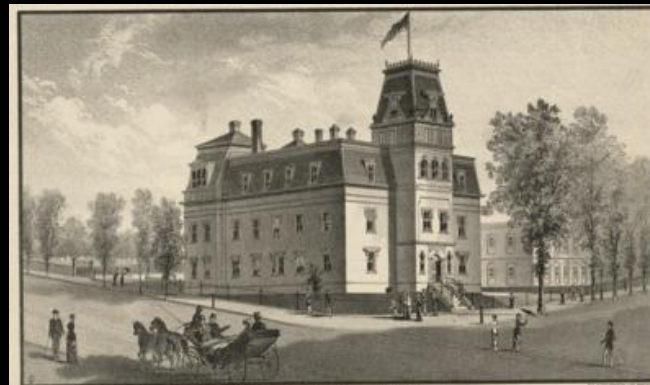
Based in Salem and Boston, the well-established architectural firm of Lord & Fuller designed many prominent buildings all over the State, including school-houses, stores, churches, town halls, and public work of all kinds. They were noted for their quality designs and attention to matters of drainage, ventilation, light, and acoustics. Topsfield paid them a fee of \$360.50 to design Town Hall.



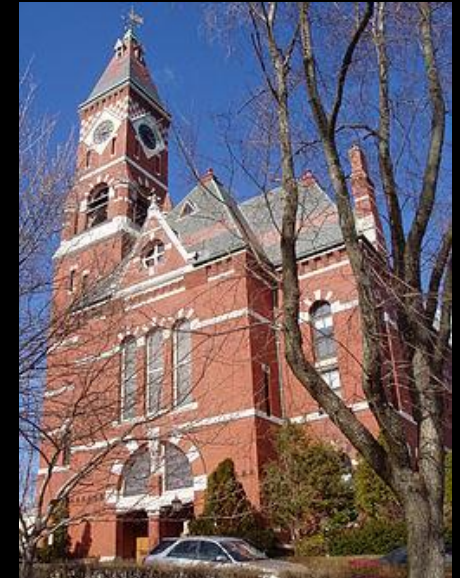
Saugus Town Hall



Kinsman Block, Salem, MA



Salem Normal School



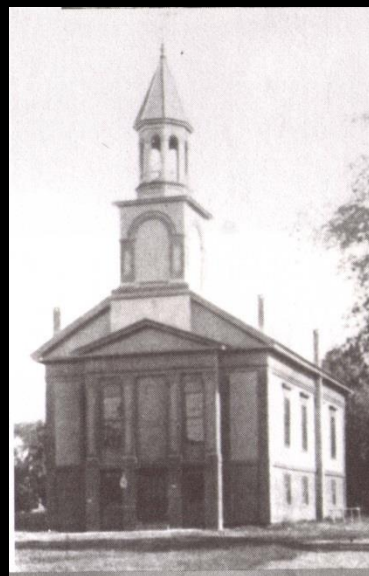
Abbot Hall, Marblehead
Town Hall

JOHN H. POTTER, BUILDER

John H. Potter had considerable local distinction as a skilled builder. In John H. Towne's "Topsfield Houses and Buildings," *The Historical Collections of the Topsfield Historical Society, Vol. VIII, 1902*, Topsfield, MA, George F. Dow, Ed., there are nearly sixty references to Potter's work in the last half of the 19th century. Along with houses, barns, additions and remodeling projects, he built the Methodist Meeting House, the Hook and Ladder House, an addition to the Topsfield Academy and the Town Hall. John Potter received \$3,064.39 for all of the carpentry work. The cost of building materials, foundation and other work, furnishings, and other expenses was \$9,806.03. In total, the cost of construction was \$12,870.42.



Topsfield Academy



Methodist Meetinghouse,
now the Commons

The new Town Hall was designed in the Second Empire Style with an elaborate front façade featuring steeply pitched roofs with polychrome slate, a clock tower, wood detailed to imitate rusticated stone, and a porch surrounded by a cascade of wooden steps.

The interior grand staircase led to an auditorium with a stage and balcony.



Historic photo from an undated postcard



The Town Hall was the center of government and a focal point for the Common.

This picture shows the Town Hall decorated with patriotic bunting. The Topsfield seal occupies center place with the State seal to the left and a cameo of George Washington to the right.



AUDITORIUM

The second floor auditorium was used for Town Meeting until it was no longer large enough. It was also used for theatrical productions, community dances, and assemblies for various purposes.

MAIN FLOOR

Before the Town Library was constructed in 1935, the Public Library was housed in what is now the Treasurer's Office. The American Legion and kindergarten classes shared that space when the Library moved out. At the same time, the Town's once piece of fire-fighting equipment was housed in the basement. For a time, the Police Chief had space in Town Hall. When the Water Department was created, a room was fitted out for its equipment. It is believed that the central switchboard for the Town was also located in Town Hall at one time.

THEATRE ROYAL LEEDS

FRANCIS LAMBE Manager
 MONDAY, JULY 24th, 1916
 AND during the week at 6-50 & 9

TWICE NIGHTLY
 6-50 & 9

JOSEPH WILLANE'S NO. 1 CO.
 featuring Mr. CHARLES FRANCIS and Miss FLORENCE CHURCHILL
 in a New and Original Play entitled

WHEN THE HEART IS YOUNG
 BY T. HALL

MONDAY, JULY 24th, 1916
TWICE NIGHTLY PRICES.
 ORDINARY DOORS. NO CHARGE FOR BOOKING.

GALLERY	PISTON	UPPER CIRCLE	PROSCENIUM STALLS & SEVERAL CIRCLE	BOXES
3d	6d	8d	1/-	10/-
1/6	1/3	1/2	1	7/6

Shows Discontinued by this company will not be taken after 8.30 or 9 o'clock previously paid for. THEATRE OFFICE, LEEDS. 10. 11. 12. 13. 14. 15. 16. 17. 18. 19. 20. 21. 22. 23. 24. 25. 26. 27. 28. 29. 30. 31. 32. 33. 34. 35. 36. 37. 38. 39. 40. 41. 42. 43. 44. 45. 46. 47. 48. 49. 50. 51. 52. 53. 54. 55. 56. 57. 58. 59. 60. 61. 62. 63. 64. 65. 66. 67. 68. 69. 70. 71. 72. 73. 74. 75. 76. 77. 78. 79. 80. 81. 82. 83. 84. 85. 86. 87. 88. 89. 90. 91. 92. 93. 94. 95. 96. 97. 98. 99. 100.

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CLOCK TOWER

The clock in the tower was purchased in 1879. For the first 124 years of its existence, volunteers climbed unlighted and unheated stairs to rewind it every eight days. There were long periods when the clock was not wound and therefore was out of operation.

Thanks to modern volunteers, as of 2004, the clock has been reconstructed to no longer require constant attention, and it is in current working order.



PAST REPAIRS AND THEIR PRESENT CONDITION

Over the years, the Town has funded maintenance and repairs for the Town Hall, which have included some design changes.

CHIMNEY

The elaborate chimney was rebuilt in concrete block. The chimney is no longer used because of the new boiler.



ROOF



The slate roof was replaced, perhaps in the 1950's, and the banding of the original design was not recreated. Further work was done on the roof in 2003 in connection with gutter replacements. The slate appears to be black Monson, and it is largely in good condition with a few broken or missing slates. Some valley flashings cause leaks under certain conditions.

EXTERIOR WORK

Repair work in the 1990's included reconstruction of the front porch. The front porch has lost a column from the clusters of three which originally marked its corners, and the pyramid of steps on three sides has been reduced to a single flight in front.



Many of the trim elements now show signs of significant rot, especially at the bases of the columns.

EXTERIOR PROJECTS

Repair work in the 1990's included reconstruction of the front porch and the construction of semi-enclosed vestibules over the exterior landings and steps at the north side entrances. One of these vestibules was demolished in 2014 because it was in danger of collapsing. The second will be removed this spring for the same reason.



EXTERIOR SIDING, GUTTERS, AND PAINTING

The Town also received matching grants from the Massachusetts Historical Commission and the Department of Housing and Community Development to undertake preservation and repair projects. A significant project in 2003 included re-siding of much of the building, gutter replacement, repairs and painting that recreated the original color scheme. More than ten years later, this work is in good condition with the exception of the paint that has, as one would expect, begun to fail in many areas.

During this project, the fire escape was removed from the south side façade. It was not replaced in anticipation of future renovations to Town Hall. The second floor door is secured by exterior bars. The first floor door shows significant deterioration.



PAST INTERIOR WORK

At some point, a suspended ceiling was added to the first floor, and the original wooden floor was covered with vinyl tile. In another round of work, the vinyl tile was covered with carpeting in office areas. Over time, some of the tiles have been replaced. The tiles are asbestos vinyl tiles that are cracking and breaking, especially in areas prone to regular flooding from leaks. The carpeting is split and worn. One of the main support pillars for the building rises in the middle of the main hallway on the first floor.



OTHER ALTERATIONS

The building has been sprinklered.

Accessibility improvements include a ramp to the westerly entrance on the north side and a first floor accessible toilet room.

The boiler has been replaced with a high efficiency natural gas unit, and programmable thermostats were installed throughout the building.

New suspended lights were added to the auditorium and energy efficient lighting installed elsewhere.

PRESENT CONDITIONS

This picture captures where we are. The original structure is sound and stands as testimony to the quality of construction over 140 years ago. On the other hand, deterioration has set in throughout the building. Here, above the front portico, the central window and trim features are rotted. This area lets water in. The water finds its way through the emergency exit light to flood the front foyer where the asbestos vinyl tiles have lifted. A rubber mat covers the gap in the tiles.



BUILDING ENVELOPE

The most pressing concern is to stabilize the building envelope to prevent further deterioration inside and outside the building.

The Town commissioned the firms of Adams and Smith, Architects, and Finch and Rose, Preservation Consultants, to conduct a Building Envelope and Window Restoration Study. The full text of their report is available [here](#).

The major elements of concern are the windows, the foundation, and the roof.

WINDOWS

Windows throughout the building are in poor condition. Last winter, a pane fell out of one on the second floor, exposing a heating pipe that froze and then burst, flooding the Treasurer's office. Other second floor windows have been secured with plywood and/or duct tape to hold them in place.



WINDOWS

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FOUNDATION

This interior photo shows the fieldstone foundation below grade and the brickwork above grade. The brickwork shows defective mortar joints.





INTERIOR OF CLOCK TOWER

The top level of the clock tower houses the clock mechanism shown here. The horizontal shafts link the clock movement to the clock faces. A sheet of plastic has been set up to protect the clock mechanism from occasional leaks coming from the top of the tower.

PLAN FOR IMMEDIATE ACTION

The cost of repairing the windows, the foundation, and the most pressing exterior issues is \$227,000.

Windows will be repaired or replaced, depending on the severity of their condition. Storm windows will be added to the second floor windows to protect them from the elements and to improve the energy efficiency of the building.

Rotted elements on the front façade will be replaced or repaired.

The foundation will be repointed.

The remaining north-side exterior vestibule – or “dog porch,” as it is called – will be removed.

The Town Hall Building Committee has begun the procurement process so that costs, vendors, and other matters will be in place before Town Meeting.

An article will appear on the warrant for the Special Town Meeting that takes place within the Annual Town Meeting requesting borrowing for this work. This article is on the Special Town Meeting warrant so that work can begin immediately.

INTERIOR OF TOWN HALL

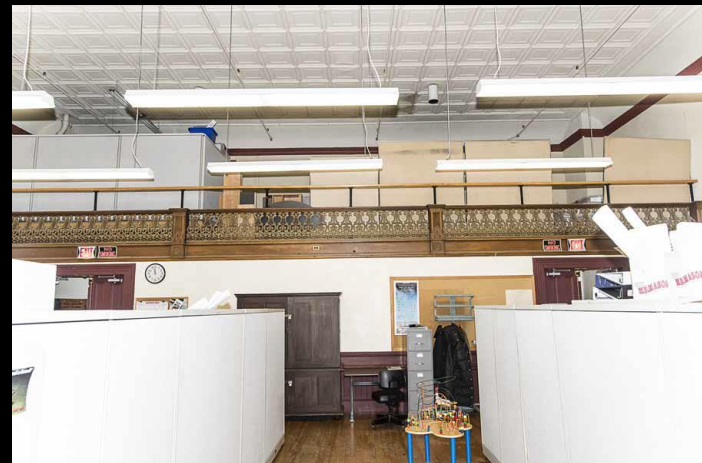
Stabilizing the exterior is only the first step in addressing the issues of Town Hall. The building does not meet ADA standards for accessibility. The interior is also deteriorating because of leaks and aging. Additionally, the space is not configured appropriately to accommodate the needs of the departments housed there.

THE AUDITORIUM TODAY

The auditorium has been sectioned off with partitions to accommodate various Town offices, including the Board of Health, Inspectional Services, the Conservation Commission and the Veterans' Agent.

The walls throughout the meeting hall are covered with paper that has been painted. The paper is stained and starting to lift at its joints.

Vestiges remain of the old auditorium. A mural by noted local artist Larry Webster adorns the wall over the now-barricaded stage. Original wood- and iron-work line the balcony.





THE BALCONY AND STAGE

The balcony and stage areas are used for storage. Old water stains mark the walls. Cable TV equipment occupies a portion of the balcony level with its own HVAC equipment to maintain temperature and humidity levels.



HALLWAYS AND STAIRWAYS



Front stair hall and second floor landing. The stair and wainscot woodwork are original. The stairs lead to the auditorium on the second floor.



Second floor landing of the front stair. The stair in the background leads to the mezzanine of the meeting hall. The door on the extreme right is original and leads into the meeting hall. One of the main support pillars for the building rises in this area.



HALLWAYS AND STAIRWAYS

The plaster walls in hallways and stairways have not been painted or otherwise repaired for many years. They show cracks from long past structural movements of the building, stains from leaks, and superficial efforts to address such problems.



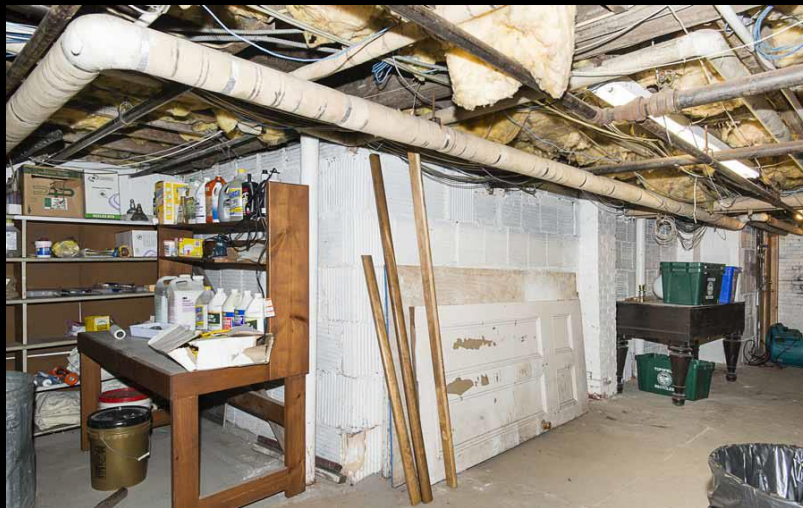
OFFICES AND FUNCTIONAL SPACE

Offices are cramped and antiquated. The server and copy room requires a window-mounted air conditioner to maintain appropriate temperatures. Bathrooms are outmoded and occupy space inefficiently. The waste pipe in the one shown here let go, soaking a storage closet in the Council on Aging office below. It was repaired but with no guarantees from the plumber that it won't happen again.



THE BASEMENT

Steep stairs lead to the basement that is used largely for storage. Water stains on the floor indicate past leaks and flooding. Various types of insulation have been used to seal the foundation from leaks and outside air infiltration.



NEXT STEPS

For over twenty years, Town Hall Building Committees have studied these problems. We have a wealth of information about space and accessibility needs. These need to be revised to reflect changes that technology has brought to Town government. This is called the “building program.”

We do not need another “study.” Now, we need to take the information that we have, as revised to reflect twenty-first century needs, and develop a plan for the renovation and modernization of Town Hall. This will require an architect who will produce a schematic design that will achieve the needs of the “building program” in the most cost-effective way possible.

We do not approach this with any pre-conceived ideas about how to do this. Perhaps the “building program” can be accommodated within the existing footprint of the present Town Hall. Perhaps an addition will be necessary. The goal is to maximize functionality and minimize cost, however that might be accomplished.

An article will appear on the warrant for the Annual Town Meeting requesting \$100,000 to develop the schematic plan for the renovation of Town Hall. The architect hired to perform the work would: 1) review and update as needed the “building program;” 2) conduct public informational sessions to solicit input and answer questions; 3) produce a cost-effective plan for the bringing Topsfield’s Town Hall into the 21st century.

This schematic design would be the basis for a building project, the proposal for which would be presented at a future Town Meeting.