

A History of the
Town
Common

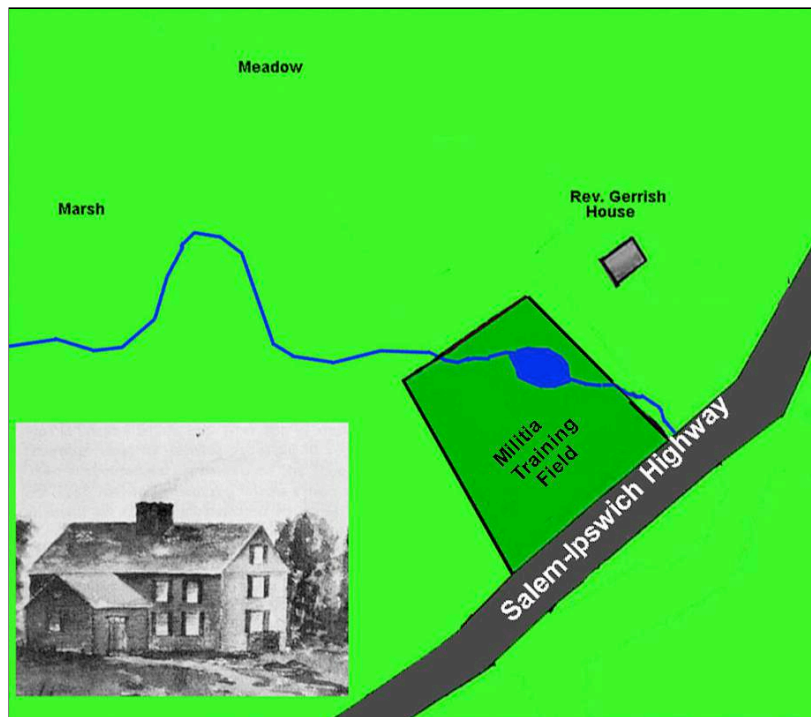
From 1643 to 2012

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Jack E. Hauck



The Town Common

What today is known as Main Street – originally was the Salem-Ipswich Highway – may not have passed along its current path. The path of the main highway running through Wenham may once have passed across the back of what is now the town hall property.

In 1969, Joseph Harrington, Jr., gave a talk, "Historical Outline First Church in Wenham, Congregational," in which he said, In the mid 1600s, the Salem to Ipswich highway ran alongside the Great Pond; then, along a valley somewhat to the east of the present road where it now lies, and then over the knoll behind the H. Tarr house, and upon which the church was built; from there, past the Claflin-Richards house; and, then, along the area now behind the town hall and out to the current path of Main Street.

That may well have been the original route, but most historical documents refer to the highway basically following the current course of Main Street.

What now is known as the town hall property originally was a militia training field. In 1637, Massachusetts formed militia regiments. The militia included all able bodied men organized into training bands. In 1645, decrees ordered each town militia to have thirty percent of its men ready on a half hour warning for any service requirement.

Militia Training Field

However, Wenham did not have an established militia training field, until 1680. That year, "*Samuel Smith, of Wenham, deceased, did give to the towne ten acres of land ... as the fence nowe stands downe to ye pond by Mr. Gerrishes howse ... the high waye on the north and the Swamp on the east to the towne for a trayning place and not to be disposed of to any other use but shall lye in Common.*"¹

The town had many commons. These were properties that belonged to all the residents of Wenham.

The militia field was cleared of trees and shrubs, leaving an open, ten-acre expanse. Running across the area, from east to west, was a narrow brook (*Pond Brook*) feeding into a small pond. The brook exited the pond, on its west side, and flowed toward what is now Monument Street, and eventually into what is now called Pleasant Pond.

Next to the common was the Gerrish house: Rev. Joseph Gerrish was pastor at the church across the highway.

In the Massachusetts Bay Colony, all able-bodied men between the ages of 16 and 60 were required to participate in their local militia. During periods of peace, the militia generally met for training, as an entire unit, two to four times a year. When war loomed, the militia trained three to four times a week.² Considering that there were only about thirty men in the town, a ten-acre lot was ample space for "a training place."

Captain Thomas Fiske drilled his company on the training field. Fiske was the leading military man for many years in Wenham. He was chosen "*clerk of ye band to ye company 28: 9: 1654.*" *October 10, 1683, the General Court "ordered that Thomas Fiske be captaine of the ffoot company at Wenham, Charles Gott be his leiftenflt, & WTM. Fiske bis ensigne.*" At the time Capt. Fiske was 61 years old. Wenham had its own military company, until the old militia, throughout the State was disbanded, about 1840.³

At the opening of King Philip's War in 1675, each county had its regiment of trained soldiers according to colonial laws; each foot company had sixty-four soldiers. The Massachusetts Bay Colony impressed over five-hundred men for defense. Wenham's quota was five men, Mark Batchelder, Richard Hutton, Thomas Kemball, Samuel Moulton and Philip Welch. In addition Thomas Abbe, Caleb Kimball and John Dodge volunteered. Caleb Kimball was killed in the ambush at Bloody Brook, near Deerfield, in June 1675. Mark Batchelder died in the Great Swamp Fight, near the present town of Kingston, RI, in December 1675.¹

Some towns in Massachusetts had a long history of designating a portion of their militia as minutemen, "Minute companies" were special units, within the militia system, whose members underwent additional training and held themselves ready to turn out rapidly ("*at a minute's notice*"), for emergencies, hence their name.

There were fifteen Minute Men from Wenham, who had nine months of training before the Battle of Lexington. However, one-hundred and thirty-seven men from Wenham fought in the Revolution. The conclusion of that war did not release the local training band as they were requested to continue their training and keep their equipment in proper condition.¹

Cattle grazing

In addition to being used as a militia training field, the town allowed people to use the area for pasturing of their livestock. Considering how seldom the common was used for militia training, it should not be surprising that cattle grazing generally occupied the field.

There were a number of town-owned properties where the townspeople pastured their livestock, including Wenham Swamp, and the cemetery, where each year sheep were allowed to graze.

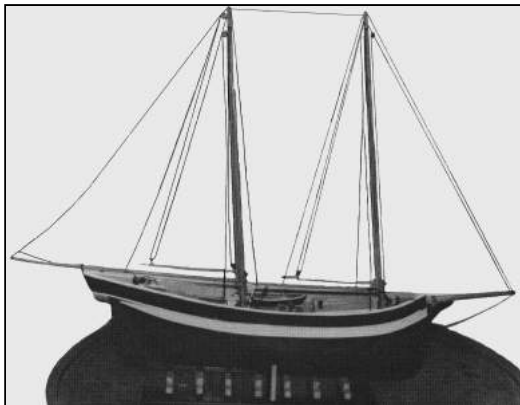
Boatyard

Despite Samuel Smith's will stating that the field "*not to be disposed of to any other use*" than for militia training, buildings eventually were erected. The earliest recorded non-militia use of the site was when a boat was built there.¹

The boat, named Lily, was a Chebacco, a small schooner, which got its name from the Chebacco Parish of Ipswich. It had a narrow stern and shallow draft and was a type used for off-shore fishing. John Thorn Dodge and Billy Thorn Dodge, both house wrights, built the Lily. When construction was completed in 1816, they hauled her to Beverly, on four-wheeled cart, pulled by oxen. The Lily was launched from Ober's wharf, near Essex Bridge.¹

Andrew Prince was one of the crew. Three others were Nathaniel Bunker, skipper, Captain Matthew Leach, and Stephen Cook of Wenham. Nathaniel Both Bunker and Matthew were experienced sea captains.¹

Her first trip was for cod fishing, in the Atlantic Ocean. They



The Lily, a Chebacco, built in 1816 on the Common.

Adapted from Wenham Museum photo



Vestry, as moved from the common.
Photo courtesy of Wenham Museum

took ten thousand fish.¹ A model of the Lily is on display in the Pickering Library, at the museum.

Church Vestry

In June 1835, the town leased, to Edmund Kimball and other church members, some of the land at the back of the training field, to build a vestry. The lease was for 30 years.

Both the town government and the church regularly used the one-story building for meet-

ings. In addition, a private school used the vestry, and in later years, town school classes were held in the building. However, its small size was a major inconvenience, especially for town meetings.⁴

With time, the often-used vestry grew tired looking. In 1854, the building had “dingy walls and huge blackboard at the back of the room, benches with swinging shelves in front for roguish boys and girls to accidentally let fall during prayer time.”⁵

When the town hall was built in 1854, the vestry was moved a short distance west of its original location, by the pond and brook. Two years later, in 1856, the church moved the vestry to Arbor Street, just back of the church.

Hearse House

One of the earliest services provided in Wenham was a horse-drawn hearse service to the town cemetery. After building the vestry, the town erected a carriage house, to garage the hearse, at back edge of the training field. It was set on the east side of the vestry.¹ Access to these buildings was along a path running from the highway (Main Street) to John Friend’s house, which was further back of them.

On Apr. 16, 1849, the town voted to remove the hearse house to the old burying ground, on Main Street.¹⁸ The hearse service lasted until at least 1892, when Wellington Pool was the driver. A Benjamin Conant photo shows Pool sitting on the hearse in front of the hearse garage in the cemetery.

Fire Engine House

Also in 1835, the town authorized a fire engine house to be built on the common, between the vestry and the school house: the engine house was on the east side of the hearse house.¹⁹

The fire company took down the pumper house in 1849. They moved

The pumper to a new, single-bay, 2-story garage on Main Street, which today is 150 Main St.¹⁸

Willows

No date can be found as to when the town planted willow trees along the front edge of the common. However, in 1900, Sarah M. Merrill wrote about her school days at the 1840 Center District School, saying,

“The old willow trees that bordered the common, where the birds caroled their sweetest songs and the oriole hung his nest high amid their branches, under which the merry children spent many happy hours, are all gone.”

Willows grow quickly and spread quite wide. The row of willows must have provided a continuous screen along Main Street, at the front of the common. However, willows have a relatively short life - on average about thirty years.

In 1868, the unsightly willow trees were removed. The selectmen said other trees were to replace the willows, providing this could be done “*without expense to the town.*”¹¹ No replacement trees were planted.

For many years following, there were few if any trees along the front of the common. In 1964, there were four large trees at front. However, in 2007, the town removed the two in the middle so that the renovated and expanded town hall was not obstructed from view.

Pond and Brook

About the pond and brook, the aforementioned Sarah Merrill wrote,

“The pond, where in summer the frogs sent forth their mournful dirges at evening, and the children fished with willow twigs for poles and pins for hooks to catch the tadpoles upon its borders, or in winter all joined hands for one good bend-a-bow across the ice before the bell called us into the schoolroom, is seen no more.

*“On summer evenings, we would have heard frogs croaking their mournful dirges. Fall days, children would be shouting when, with willow-twig fishing poles, they caught a tadpole. On winter mornings, children’s skates could be heard sliding upon the ice, before a bell called them into the nearby school house.”*⁵

There are, among records for the time, accounts of children, upon leaving the nearby school, challenging each other to jump across the brook. Many could not make the jump, and would return home and to explain why their clothes were wet and muddy.

With time, the once free-flowing brook became clogged with weeds, and other debris. Eventually the pond became stagnant and devoid of any frogs. Town records often cite it as an eyesore and dismal looking.

Part of the brook’s path, coming from a marsh area and leading to what was the pond, is still visible across Friend Court near where the police



Parsonage, built in 1849, was a back of the common. A path from Main St. led to the house . The property, about an acre, was sold to the town in 1904. Lumber from the house was used to build a house on Perkins St.

Photo courtesy of Wenham Museum

station now stands. There is a ditch that was the brook's path. The brook exited the pond and wound its way to Pleasant Pond. There once was a path alongside the brook.

Parsonage

At the back of the common, on the slight rise, there was a church parsonage. It was on the other side of the brook and separated from the common by a picket fence, which ran around the entire common site, and out to the street, at both ends.

In 1849 the Wenham Congregational Society, needing a house for their pastor, bought a pie shaped lot behind the common, from Mary Ann Richards, on which to build a parsonage. Rufus Dodge was the builder. It was a two-story house, with a one story ell, shed and barn.

There was a carriage path from barn behind the house out to Main Street. It ran along the property line of the Richards and common properties. Part of the old path still exists: it is the driveway leading to the upper parking-lot behind the town hall.

About the parsonage, Dr. Allen wrote, "*It is located on a little eminence, removed from the noise and bustle of the village, and is admirably adapted to be the study and home of a country pastor.*"⁴

In 1904, the Wenham Congregational Church and Society donated the parsonage property and house to the town. The fifty-five year old parsonage was torn down. The lumber was used to build a new house, at 20 Perkins St., then the home of William Cummings.¹ With the acquisition of the parsonage property, the original common was enlarged, at the back right area, by slightly over an acre.



Town garage, at back of town hall site, began as the old West schoolhouse, in 1924. The garage was removed from the town hall property in 1976.

Photo 1976 Wenham Annual Town Reports

In 1985, the town sold a small, square, section, at the back of the parsonage property, to the Brown family. The plot, 4,589 sq. ft., abutted the back of the Brown property (*130 Main St.*).¹⁴

Town Garage

In 1924, the schoolhouse, in west Wenham, was moved from the corner of Cherry Street and Topsfield Road, to the hill at the back of the town hall site, where it became the center section of the town garage.¹⁵ Various vehicles were kept there.

In 1976, the town garage was torn down, when the Highway Department moved to the Iron Rail Property.¹

Friend Court

The eastern border of the common became more defined in 1860, when Friend Ct. became an official town road. It was an unofficial town way for many years before. John P. Friend had built his house in 1856, and originally it was the way to the 1779 school house.

Town Hall

It would not be until 1854, that Wenham would have a town hall, separate from the church meetinghouse. This was twenty-one years after the Massachusetts state government mandated that town governments could not meet in church meeting houses.

In building the town hall, the pond was filled, as was the brook feeding it, and which drained from it. These actions would come back as a problem, about a hundred years later, when the town hall basement would have recurring flooding problems.



Town hall, in 1890, had a public library on the first floor. The building had been refurbished in 1874. Also, there was an iron-rail fence running around the edge of the property.

Photo courtesy of Wenham Museum

In 1854, the cost to build the town hall was \$5,908.77: this would be about \$140,000, in today's dollars. In 2008, the refurbishing and expansion of the building of this structure cost about \$3.5 million.

For the first four years, the original town hall was not just a town hall: there also was a private school on the first floor. Next, it became a town schoolroom, and in 1858, it became a library.

In the basement of the old town hall, there originally was a boarding room, for transients. It could house eight people, although not comfortable. During the 19th century, transient tradesmen traveled about looking for work in the small towns.

In 1905, the small boarding room became a prisoner cell.¹ In 1919, the prisoner cell became the police station. James L. Cole worked out of the small room. In 1977, the police chief's office became a library study room. There still was a window with bars, but there was not a cell door.

Also in 1868, to make the common better defined, the town built a fence around it. However, in 1871, the fence, at the east end running from the highway and alongside Friend Court, had to be altered, because it was set beyond the boundary of the common and on the property of Jeremiah Choate, Jr. At the same time, the path of Friend Court also was straightened.¹⁰ The fence ran around the entire common site, and out to the street, at both ends.

Perhaps the second most-significant change to the common, after the erection of the town hall, happened in 1963. A "Special Projects Program" resulted in the building of a combined fire and police headquarters, renovation of the town hall, expansion of the town library, and creation of off-the-street parking. A parking area was built behind the town hall.⁹

In 1964, the town built a large extension, at the back of the town hall, to be the new public library. When the Hamilton-Wenham Library was built in 2001, the library became vacant. It was removed in 2007, when the town hall was re-built and expanded.

Photo Bing Map



In 1964, a curved driveway on the northwest front corner of the town hall site was created. With the parking area in back of the town hall often being used by library visitors, the front driveway provided easier access to the town hall. Several trees also were planted in front of the town hall.

This driveway was replaced, in 1965, by a semicircular driveway in front of the town hall. In 1991, this driveway was removed.

In 2002, Wenham residents, at a Town Meeting, voted for \$3.7 million to renovate the town hall and construct a new police station. Shortly after, it was learned that another \$1.37 million would be needed. On Aug 20, 2003, voters rejected the request for more money.

Then, it was decided to tear down the town hall. At a November town meeting, townspeople voted to demolish the building and build a new structure, for housing both the town government (*2nd floor*) and police department (*1st floor*).

A year later, on Oct. 5, 2005, Wenham residents, at a Special Town Meeting, voted (224 to 76) to rebuild the town hall to build a new town hall and a separate police station on Friend Court.

In May 2006, reconstruction of the town hall began, with the removal of the interior of the building, as well as taking down the library addition.

The refurbished and expanded town hall was opened early in 2008.

Library

Wenham's first library was in the town hall. In 1858, the Wenham Library Association was allowed, by the selectmen, to keep books at the town hall, and hold meetings. The library room was on the first floor, at the end of the corridor, on the left hand side rear left side.

In 1884, the Wenham Library Association donated its books (700) to the Wenham Free Public Library. The recitation room in the town hall became the library. ^{1,8}

In 1907, when a new schoolhouse was completed, the large room, on the first floor of the town hall (*occupied by the grammar school*) became vacant. At the March town meeting, it was voted to remodel the first floor of the town hall and to include a library. The new town library opened in the spring of 1908. ¹

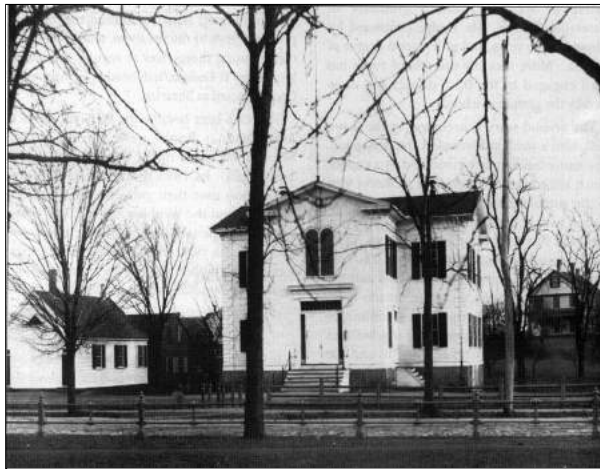
In the late 1950s and early 1960s, there were many discussions concerning the "library and town hall problem." Town government wanted more space, as did the Library Committee. Some people wanted to move the library to another location.

In 1964, the town built a large extension, at the back of the town hall, to be the new public library.

The filling of the pond and brooks, in 1854, and building the town hall where they had been, would come back as a problem, when the library was built: the town hall basement and lower floor of the library would have recurring flooding problems.

In early 1975, the Library Trustees developed a plan to renovate the basement, in the town hall, for use as a children's library and to make related improvements on the main floor. In 1977, the prisoner cell, in the town hall basement became a library study room. ¹

Nov. 10, 2001, with the opening of the new joint Hamilton-Wenham Library, in Hamilton, the library space in the town hall became office space for the town government. In the abandoned library extension, the Wenham Council on Aging had an office. As yet, the Council did not have a meeting place for senior events and services.



The center school, in 1890, was to the left of the town hall, and in front of the Choate paint shop. Previously, the school was at the back of the common. Behind the town hall can be seen the church parsonage. Photo courtesy of Wenham Museum

School Houses

There have been several schools, as well as school rooms in other buildings, on the common.

In 1770, it was voted, "*that a grammar-school be constantly kept, in Wenham, the year ensuing, and that provision be made for the support of the same,*" and "*that a committee be chosen to provide a schoolmaster, and to apportion said school, according to the tax in this town.*"

The first schoolmaster was Capt. Thomas Fiske. At first, classes were probably held in his house, which is the present Claflin-Richards house.⁷

The town built a separate school building, in 1779. The one-room grammar school was located next to the town common, on an area that now would be on Friend Court. Capt. Fiske continued as the schoolmaster for several years. Rev. Swain was the next teacher. (*He also was pastor of the Congregation Church.*) The school was taken down in 1839.

In 1840, the town built the Center District schoolhouse next to the Enon One fire wagon garage. It must have been quite exciting for the children, when the fire alarm sounded.

In 1900, Sarah Merrill wrote about her school days at the 1840 center school, saying, "*How well I remember that old school house with its slanting floor, rude desks resembling our grandmother's meal chests, and wooden benches for seats that were very apt to be raised from the floor suddenly if one's seat mate happened to be a little heavier than the other.*"

"It was a dismal place or it least would be called so at the present day with its high desk-like huge wooden box, where bad boys and girls were hidden from sight for misbehavior.

"During recitation, all were required to stand in a straight line, in front of the desks, with toes carefully set upon a huge crack in the floor; if by accident one failed to keep upon this line, the teacher's ruler was very apt to fall upon the offending toes. A long, wood, stove warmed the room."

In 1909, the Center District School, being vacant, was leased to the Y.M.C.A. In 1911, after it was again vacant, the building was sold and moved to be a garage behind the Trowt grocery, at the corner of Friend Ct. and Main St.

Photo courtesy of Wenham Museum



In 1858, the “dismal” 1840 school, for grades one to six, was moved to the east side of the town hall. Seventh and eighth grades were in a room, on the first floor of the town hall.¹

In 1899, there were two schoolhouses on the east side of the town hall. The one nearest the town hall was for the Center Primary School, where children from five to ten were taught. The other was for the Center Grammar School, where children eleven to fourteen were taught.

At an undetermined date, the town moved the Primary schoolhouse to the west side of the town hall. The schoolhouse became vacant in 1907, when the Center School was opened, on School Street. In 1911, the vacant schoolhouse was leased for a YMCA building. Later, it was sold, moved and used as a garage behind Trowt’s grocery.

Fence

Various references in town records mention fences around the common. It was a common practice in the 1600s and 1700s to erect fences around properties. When cattle were allowed on the common, there likely was a basic wood fence to keep the animals contained.

In 1868, the town built an iron-fence around the entire common site, and out to the street, at both ends.¹⁶ However, in 1871, the fence had to be altered, because it was set beyond the boundaries of the common.¹⁷

The 1890 Benjamin H. Conant photo shows that the fence design, at the front of the town hall, was the same as the iron-rail fence around the Civil War Monument Park, across the street. Based on a study of town hall photos, the fence was removed sometime between 1895 and 1900.

Half-Mile Stone

After 1708, milestones were erected along the Bay Road (now *Main Street*), north of Boston, in Salem, Wenham, Ipswich, and Newbury. Wenham’s two mile stretch on the old Bay Road still has three milestones. One now is in the stone-wall at the front of the Main Street cemetery, and the other is at the front of Pingree Field (*originally, it was across*



There has been a milestone of the common since 1710. Originally, it was further to the east than its current location. Also, when the town hall was built, there was a gas lamp alongside the milestone. Protective stone columns were placed on both sides of the milestone to protect it from being hit by vehicles passing along Main Street.
Photo J. Hauck

the street). At the front of the common, a half-mile stone was erected in 1710. The inscription on it designates Newburyport 17-1/2 miles, Boston 20 1/2 miles, Ipswich 6 1/2 miles and Salem 9 1/2 miles.

Apparently, the milestone, at the front of the common, after 180 years, was not in good condition. In 1891, the townspeople voted to “reset the stone, at the northeasterly corner of the ell of the Town House.” It was also voted that “a lamp-post be erected nearby the old half-mile stone, as a protection, and that the lamp be kept lighted.”

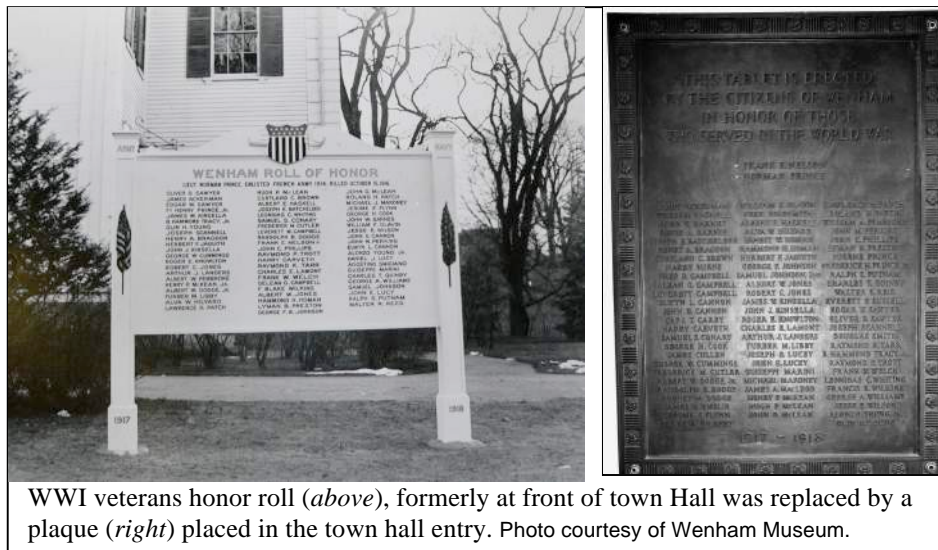
In 2008, the half-mile stone again was temporarily moved, during the updating construction of the town hall. In addition, there now are granite pillars on each side, to protect the marker.

A short way west of the half-mile marker is a town hall sign. When the town hall was closed for rebuilding in 2007, a town hall sign above the front entrance was removed. The sign now is on the back wall of the selectmen’s meeting room in the town hall.

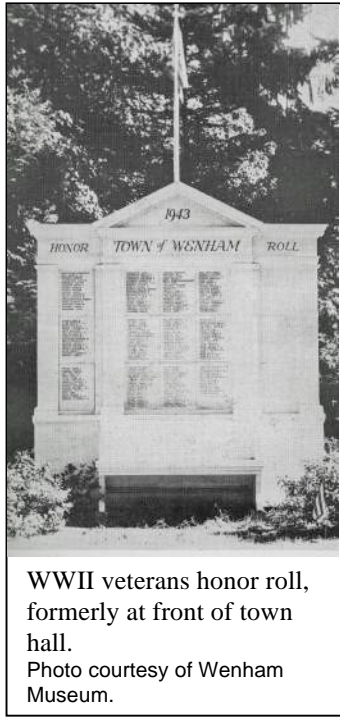
Honor rolls

In 1943, the town erected a World War II veterans’ honor roll at the front, west corner of the town hall. On it were one hundred and eighty-nine names. It replaced the former honor roll for WW I veterans. The names of the sixty-five WW I veterans were put on a bronze plaque, which was placed on a wall inside the town hall, alongside the entrance.

In 1964, the town increased the size of the WW II honor roll in order to add the names of veterans of the Korean conflict. Also, the honor roll was moved to the east side of the common near Friend Court and across from the fire station.



WWI veterans honor roll (above), formerly at front of town Hall was replaced by a plaque (right) placed in the town hall entry. Photo courtesy of Wenham Museum.



WWII veterans honor roll, formerly at front of town hall.
Photo courtesy of Wenham Museum.

When, in 2007, the town hall was remodeled and expanded, the veterans honor roll was removed and stored at the town garage. The original plan was to replace the honor roll when the reconstruction of the town hall was completed.

In 2010, at a town meeting, voters approved the designation of the former car-barn lot, at the corner of Main Street and Arbor Street, to be a veterans' memorial park. A year later, 2011, voters approved the placement of a veterans' memorial monument on the site.

The cost of the monument is covered by a very generous gift of \$145,000, willed to the town by Winthrop Perkins, for use in building the monument and providing for future maintenance.

The proposed war memorial design is a light-colored granite column, topped with a granite globe and a bronze eagle. The monument stands nearly 18 feet tall.

Plaques around the base will list the name of all Wenham residents, who have enlisted and served, since the Civil War. Below the plaques will be five medallions, each bearing a seal of a branch of the military: navy, army, air force, marines and coast guard.

Today on the Common

The common, in 2011, looks much different from the original militia training field of 1680.

Gone are the pond and brook.

There is a rebuilt town hall. The front is very similar to the original 1854 design. At the back, a two-story ell was added in 2007.

However, the entrance to the town hall now is at the back of the building, facing the parking lot. A large parking area now covers much of the common behind the town hall.

The half-mile marker is out front, but it has granite protection stones on each side and the nearby lamp is gone.

The Gerrish house, now the Claflin-Richards house, still stands at the side of the common. However, it is now part of a much larger museum complex. There is also another structure on the site: an old shoe-making shop, called a ten-footer, one of many that once were in operation around Wenham.



The common, in 2009, looks much different and bigger from the original militia training field of 1680. Photo Bing Maps

In 1964, the town built a modern fire, police and civil defense station on the Trowt lot, adjacent to the common.

In 2008, the town built a police station on Friend Court. No longer was the police station part of the fire station, nor in the town hall basement.

In 1976, the town tore down the garage, including the at the old school house, at the back right of the common. The Highway Department relocated to recently acquired Iron Rail Property.

The large garage, at the back-left of the site, is privately owned.

Many structures have been built and removed from the common, at the center of Wenham.

Have we made Samuel Smith's gift to the town of ten acres of land a better place? He said, over 330 years ago, that it was to have been a training place and "*not to be disposed of to any other use.*"

Just what may the common look like in another 300 years?

Updated 12-28-12

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