

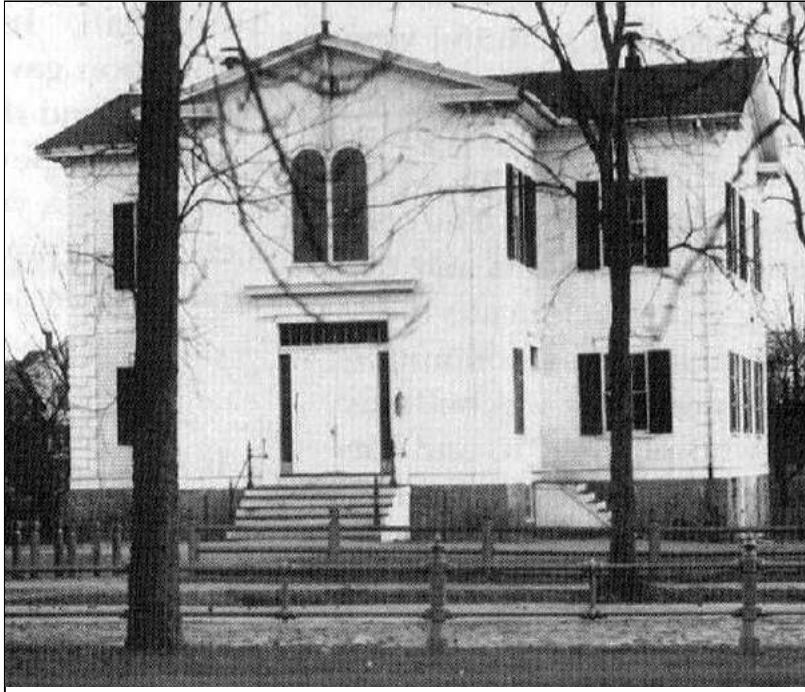
A History of
Town Halls
From 1643 to 2009

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Jack E. Hauck



Town hall, 1890, had an iron fence the same as that around the Civil Memorial Monument Park. Photo courtesy of Wenham Museum.

WENHAM'S TOWN HALL

Technically, Wenham did not have a town hall until 1854. Before then, the town had a meeting house at which both civic and church meetings were held. As constructed, the meeting houses, five in all, primarily were designed for church services, each had a pulpit and pews.

For the first 200 years of Wenham's history, town government and church were considered as one entity.

In 1833, the General Court of Massachusetts mandated that town meetings should not be held in a church meeting house.²³

Also in 1833, the Town made no appropriation for the support of the minister or care of the meeting house.

The church started a new record book which began, "The first annual meeting of the parish."²² This would seem to indicate that separation of "church and state" had come.

There were many discussions, over the years, about the need for a combination grammar school and town meeting hall, but the warrant was always voted down.

Then, in 1853, Jonathan Porter (*a farmer and ship builder, who built a schooner he named "Wenham"*) said the time had come to build a town hall.²

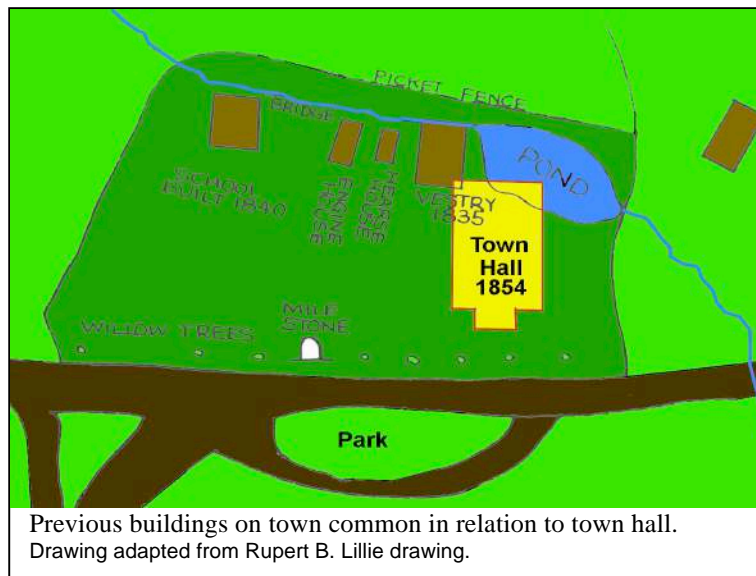
The following year, 1854, a small percentage of town residents voted (79 to 61) to build a combination town hall and school *building (the town population was just over a thousand)*. The Selectmen appointed a building committee, consisting of: John Porter, Charles. A. Kilham, Abraham Dodge (*Selectman*), Frederick Hadley, Joseph Cook (*Selectman*), Benjamin Putnam and Moses Mildram. The cost for the building was not to exceed \$5,000.³

On June 12, 1854 representatives for the building committee signed a contract (see *Appendix A*) for building the town hall, with Franklin A. Merrill, the builder. The new structure was to be built by Nov. 1, 1854.³

The site selected was about where the church vestry stood, on the town common. A nearby pond was filled to make room for the building. (*In years to come, this action caused many flooding problems in the town hall basement.*) The vestry was moved a short distance northeast of the town hall. Two years later, 1856, the vestry was moved to Arbor Street, just behind the meeting house.²⁴

The 2-story town hall was 38-feet wide, 54-feet long, and it had a 16 foot deep by 25-foot wide front section, with a cupola, and a “convenient” basement. On the first floor, the private “Select Grammar School” had a large classroom, recitation room, and dressing room. The high-ceiling second floor was used for town meetings. There was a stage on the south end. Emmerton and Foster of Salem were the architects.²³ In 1842, they were the architects for the Capt. John Bertram mansion in Salem.

The town hall’s final cost was \$5,908.77. The overrun – 908.77 - caused considerable upset among townspeople. To help defray the added cost, many fundraisers were held, in the next few years.²⁵



The Select Grammar School, on the first floor, offered a broader curriculum, than the public school. Initially, C. L. Edwards served as instructor. He only stayed for a year. Francis Macomber Dodge replaced Edwards. He was the instructor for 2 years. Next, the classroom, recitation room, and dressing room were occupied by the 3rd school district, for a grammar school.²³

Originally, in the “convenient” basement, there was a lodging place, for as many as eight travelers. In the late 1800s, the basement lodging became a lockup for tramps. In 1875, Wenham housed 250 tramps, who had to cut wood, before leaving. In 1905, the lodging place became a temporary jail. In 1919, the jail cell became the police station, for Chief James L. Cole. In 1977, as part of library renovation, the jail was made into a study room.²⁶

In 1858, the Wenham Library Association was allowed, by the Selectmen, to keep their books and hold meetings, on the first floor, rear left side.²⁷ In 1884, the Wenham Free Public Library got the association’s books (700). The school recitation room became the library.⁵

Six years after its construction, 1860, Dr. Myron O. Allen wrote a glowing description of the town hall.

“The entire building is surmounted by a cupola, which affords an extensive and beautiful view of the surrounding country. The hall is furnished with settees, and will seat three hundred and fifty to four hundred persons. This building is an ornament to the town. The convenience of its interior arrangements and the neatness and even elegance, which marks every part, are highly creditable to the committee, under whose superintendence it was built, as well as the architect, who planned it, and the mechanics, by whom the work was performed. On the whole, it is one of the finest and most convenient buildings for town purposes, in this part of the State.”²³



Town hall grammar school, 1894. Photo courtesy Wenham Museum

Many town departments would operate out of the town hall, for a long time, including the Sealer of Weights and Measures. Jeremiah Watts, was the first to be appointed, on Jan 1, 1655, to this position.²⁸ Three hundred years later, 1965, the position was abolished by a State law. Towns with populations less than 5,000 were to use the State office of weights and measures.³⁰ The last Sealer of Weights and Measures was George Dixon, who served both Hamilton and Wenham.²⁹ Today, all the tools of this function are stored in a display case at the town hall, on the second floor.⁴²

On the evening of Jul. 20, 1877, there was a fire in the town hall. It happened when the janitor, while standing at the top of a ladder was adjusting the chandelier lights. The lighted chandelier fell to the floor and kerosene oil was ignited. Fortunately, nearby there were some young men who quickly brought buckets of water and, along with firemen who brought Enon 1, put the fire out. A section of the floor was charred, a settee destroyed and others damaged, wall plastering damaged, and the ceiling and walls on the floor below damaged by seeping water and oil. Insurance covered all repair expenses except for the furniture and fixtures.^{43, 45}

Perhaps as a result of the fire and all the departments making use of the town hall, it did not take long for the building to begin wearing down. In 1878, major repairs were made to the town hall, at a cost of about \$450.⁴

The town hall also was often used for social functions. On May 26, 1886, town officials hosted a reception at the town hall, to mark the start of streetcar service in Wenham.⁶ The event was held in the hall on the second floor. Seeing the possibility for more social events at the town hall, in March 1888, the town voted to build a temporary structure for a stage on second floor.

Nearing its 50th "birthday," the town hall needed more repairs. In 1898, the roof was replaced, at a cost of just over \$125. The following year, 1899, another \$125 went toward improving the water supply. In 1900, various im-

provements to the building cost \$115.⁷ Town records for the building of the town hall in 1854 do not mention where a well was located. The comment "for improving water supply" might indicate that a new well was dug.

In the book, "The Clafin-Richards House," the follow-



Town hall library, 1908. Photo courtesy Wenham Museum

ing comment is made of the well that was at the nearby Clafin house (*now the Clafin-Richards House*): “In the springtime the water was yellow and no one could give any reason except the roots of the elm must be the cause. . . the old Richards elm with the brook at its foot.”³⁸ (*The town hall gained town water supply in 1947, when a water line was installed along Main Street.*)

On Mar. 10, 1902, the town voted to construct toilet conveniences – a single toilet - in the east end of the cloak room in the town hall. The cost was less than \$75.³³ It would not be until Mar. 2, 1925, that there were separate toilets for men and women. The cost was just under \$3,000.³⁴

Over the 150 years of its existence, many alterations and improvements have been made to the town hall. (In late 2006, *when the building’s interior walls were removed, in preparation for rebuilding the structure, many signs of how floors, stairways and walls had been changed, were very evident.*)

In 1907, electricity was brought into the town hall building.⁸ Gas lamps were replaced by electric light bulbs.

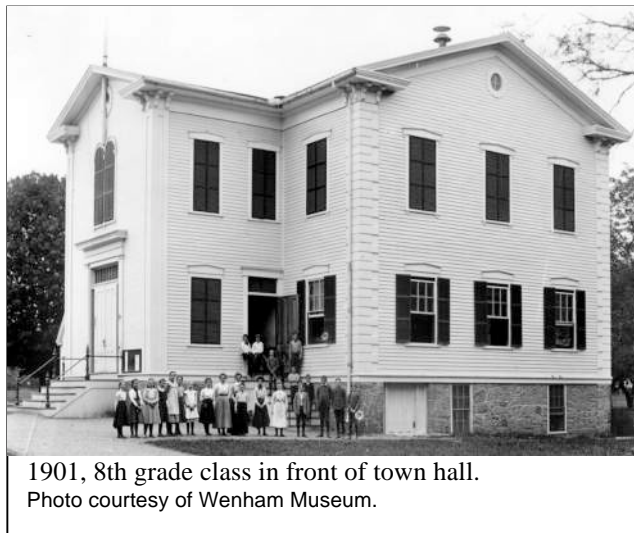
That same year, 1907, when a new center schoolhouse was completed, the large room, on the first floor of the town hall (*occupied by the grammar school*) became vacant. At the March town meeting, a remodeling of the first floor included a library. The cost was not to exceed \$2,500. Alterations began in October. All that winter, a group of volunteer workers help prepare the library.⁸ The new town library opened, in the spring of 1908.

In 1916, first mention was made of telephone service being available to the town hall: the bill for that year was \$75.⁹

In 1917, the town voted to spend \$800 to construct a permanent sidewalk in front of the town hall.⁴⁴



WW1 plaque.
Photo J. Hauck



1901, 8th grade class in front of town hall.
Photo courtesy of Wenham Museum.

In 1920, there was a general desire to build some suitable memorial to the men, who had served during the war. A committee reported that "a memorial town hall was the most fitting memorial, which could be suggested, as the town would soon be compelled to have a town hall of adequate size and convenience, on account of the growth of its activities." However, the committee believed that the work should not be undertaken, until "the country was in a more stable condition."²⁵ Eight decades later, and the "inadequate" Town Hall finally would be updated.

Apparently, the town hall was being used for more than just government meetings, for on Mar. 3, 1920 the town purchased a piano for the town hall.³⁵

Two years later, on Mar. 3, 1922 the townspeople voted to officially make town hall free for the use of various town organizations and functions, including entertainment and dances.

There was, at the back of the town hall property, for many years, a dump. In 1924, the area was graded and a parking space created to accommodate a couple dozen 25 cars.

The late 1930s and early 40s saw the town hall used for Saturday night dances. The second floor was opened for dances, attended by young people from Wenham and surrounding towns. The building shook with a whole lot jitterbugging, to the extent that some people became concerned about the building's structural integrity. The dances were halted.³¹

In 1932, it seems that the townspeople finally got around to creating some suitable memorial to the men, who had served during the last great war. A bronze plaque, listing the names of all the Wenham Veterans of WWI, was mounted on the wall of the front entrance to the town hall.¹⁰

In 1943, as part of the commemorative efforts for the tercentennial, Adeline Cole wrote, in her Notes on Wenham History, that the "town hall is the only building for large assemblies and for town meetings. With the granting of suffrage to women, the expanding library, the expanding work of the selectmen and town employees, the town hall, which has served the town for almost a century, is becoming inadequate for the population today."¹¹

With little money being available during WW2, no action was taken with regard to Cole's request. The war ended in the middle of 1945.

Some relief to crowded annual meetings at the town hall came in 1953, when the Perkins gymnasium/auditorium was built at Bessie Buker School.³⁷ Since then, town meetings have been held at the Perkins Auditorium.

In 1945, "The glad tidings of the war's end were received, in Wenham as throughout the nation, at 7 o'clock in the evening, on Aug. 14, and only seconds after the voice of President Truman had made the announcement, the bell on the First Church began to ring out the good news. Firemen opened the sirens on the fire trucks, and youngsters for

minutes afterwards fulfilled their life's ambition of sounding those shrieking whistles and ringing the bells." ³⁶

As a final symbol of the end of WW2, Christmas lights once again glowed on the town hall trees, thus ending four years of blackouts. ¹²

In 1946, many people began picking-up on Cole's 1943 call. They, too, called for the town hall to be replaced or remodeled. But, just as had happened after WW1, it was concluded that, with the war just being over, making changes should be put off for a while. ¹³ "For a while" turned out to be nearly 20 years.

In 1963, the Planning Board prepared a Master Plan for Wenham, which included a new library, fire and police station, and town hall improvements. A Building Needs Committee drew up plans for the structures.

At a Special Town Meeting, Feb. 14, 1963, the people voted \$170,000 to build the fire/police station, on the Trowt lot, and refurbish the town hall, and build a library extension, at the back of the town hall. ¹⁵

Later that year, on Jul. 17, a second Special Town Meeting was held, at which more money, \$145,000, was approved, bringing the total amount to \$315,000.

The buildings were completed in early 1964, and the town hall interior was remodeled. All departments, except accountant, clerk and registrar, were on second floor. On the first floor, a brick-walled safe was built. ²⁸

An entrance was built on the Friend Court side to the building. It provided access to the second floor and to the library. In 2007, during the reconstruction of the building, it was removed.

The adult library was on the first floor of the addition at the back of the town hall and the children's library was on the south side of the first floor of the town hall.

In early 1975, the Library Trustees developed a detailed plan to renovate the town hall basement, for use as a children's library, and to make certain related improvements on the main floor. The May town meeting approved the plan. Renovations began in December, the work being done in large part by the students of the North Shore Regional Vocational School, under the supervision of Michael Anthony, Superintendent, and licensed tradesmen. The work was completed in June 1977, with an official opening on Oct. 2, 1977. ¹⁶

In the winter of 1976, the town hall no longer was closed during lunch hour. Employees began taking staggered lunch times. ⁴⁶

As part of the renovation of the basement, an entrance was added to the museum side of the town hall. It provided access to the children's section of the library. The entrance was removed during the renovation of the town hall 2007.

On Nov. 10, 2001, with the opening of the new joint Hamilton-Wenham Library, in Hamilton, the library in the town hall was closed. ¹⁷



Library annex, 2001, removed in 2007.
Photo Wenham Library files



Side entrance removed in 2007.
Photo J. Hauck, 2007

In May 2002, the Selectmen appointed a committee to determine how the town hall could be rebuilt or a new structure erected. Initial Building Committee members were: Win Dodge (*chair*), Jeff Chelgren (*Town Administrator*), John Darling, Doug Hall, Peter Hersee (*Selectman*), Tom Tanous, William MacKenzie (*Police Chief*), John Purdy, and Richard Quinn.¹⁸

2002 turned out to be a Rubicon year for the town hall's future.

Early that year, Wenham residents, at the March Town Meeting, voted by a very wide margin (300 to 79) to spend \$3.7 million to renovate the town hall and construct a new police station.¹⁸ On May 16, 2002, a budget override for the project was passed (534 to 443).¹⁸

However, at a subsequent review of contractor bids, it was learned that the amount approved was not enough. Another \$1.37 million would be needed. On Aug 20, 2003, voters rejected the request for more money.

There was no question that something had to be done about the town hall. In the fall of 2002, the structure was deemed unusable, for many reasons.

Wenham's Selectmen stopped meeting at the town hall. Offices for the selectmen and the various town departments were moved to the second floor of the Center School building, on School Street. Town meetings were held at Buker School, next to the school.

Many staff and committee meetings were held at the Recreation Building, on School Street. This structure, from the late 1800s to the early 1900s, was the Mapleville Association Chapel, before being moved, in 1947, to the School Street location. It was formally dedicated Jan. 9, 1949.³²

Beginning in 2004 and lasting to 2007, the future of the 1854 town hall swung from destruction to reconstruction.

It began on Oct. 19, 2004, when at a Special Town Meeting it was voted to replace the town hall and police station with a 2-story building.¹⁹



Former jail cell became a study room, left. Basement entrance, above, led to children's library.
Photo left, Wenham Library files. Photo above, J. Hauck

The following month, November 2004, Wenham residents, in a very close vote (470 to 418) at a town meeting decided to demolish the town hall and build a new structure, for housing both the town hall (2nd floor) and Police Department (1st floor). The project added \$1 million to the \$3.7 million original estimate.¹⁹

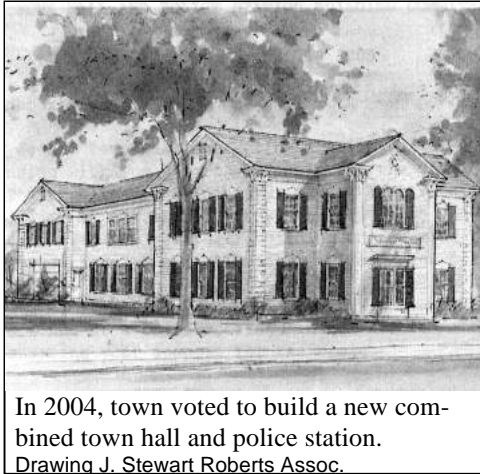
The fight to save the old town hall was not over. Almost immediately, opposition to the demolition of 150-year old building arose, principally led by the town's Historic District Committee.

The following year, on Oct. 5, 2005, Wenham residents, at a Special Town Meeting, by an over-whelming vote (224 to 76), changed their minds and said they wanted to rebuild the town hall. Using the money (\$4.7 million) previously approved (Nov. 2004), they opted to rebuild the town hall and build a new and separate police station.²⁰

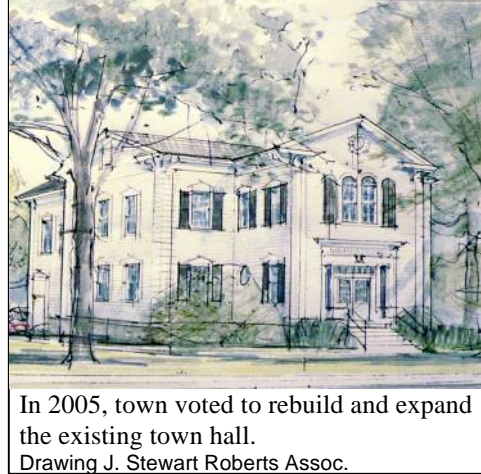
Reconstruction of the town hall began 2006, with the complete removal of the interior of the building, and also the removal of the cinder-block library addition. The bared interior walls revealed many of the changes that had been made, over many years, to the town hall. Also, as part of the preparation for construction, the old jail cell and later library study room was removed.

Later that year, on Nov. 14, 2006, the Wenham Selectmen unanimously approved the recommendation of the Town Hall/Police Station Building Committee to award the construction and renovation contract to Barr, Inc. of Putnam, CT. The total award for the project was approximately \$5,066,000.²¹ J. Stewart Roberts Associates, Somerville, MA, was selected as the architect.

The cost for building a new police station was included as part of renovating and expanding the town hall, which included utilities shared by both buildings and landscaping the town hall property.



In 2004, town voted to build a new combined town hall and police station.
Drawing J. Stewart Roberts Assoc.



In 2005, town voted to rebuild and expand the existing town hall.
Drawing J. Stewart Roberts Assoc.

The following year, on Jan. 6, 2007, an official groundbreaking ceremony was held at the front of the old town hall.

When reconstruction was completed, 2007, the front entrance remained on the Main Street side of the building and looked very similar to the original appearance of the building (see p. 13). However, the primary entrance was switched to the back of the town hall, on the ground-level of a new, 2-story ell added to the building. The ell is where the library extension had been.

At the ground level of the ell at the back, there is a vestibule that has an elevator and a flight of stairs leading to the first floor. On the first-floor of the ell, there are a storage room and toilets. On the second floor of the ell, there are two more toilets and a break room for town employees.

In 2005, voters approved a new police station, of about 4,000 sq ft, to be built on Arbor Street, behind the Post Office. Construction was completed in 2007.

The 2-story center section was unchanged at 38-feet wide and 54-feet long. On the first floor, there is a Selectmen Meeting Room; Town Clerk's office and safe; and offices for the Accountant, Tax Collector and Finance Director. There also is a copy room. A center hallway runs from the ell at the back to the Main Street entrance.

The Selectmen Meeting Room occupies half of the first floor, on the west side of the building. It is equipped with various audio and visual equipment, including ceiling-mounted, miniature-TV cameras for providing coverage of selectmen meetings.

On the second floor, there are offices for the Building Department, Conservation Commission, Town Assessor, and Town Administrator and one for the administrator's assistant. There also is a small meeting room and a center hall.



Groundbreaking Jan. 6, 2007. *Front Row with shovels, left to right:* Peter Hersee, Board of Selectmen ; John Darling, Chairman of the Building Committee; Thomas Tanous, Board of Selectmen; J. Stewart Roberts, Architect (J. Stewart Roberts Associates, Inc.); Philip O'Brien, Project Manager for the Architect; John Clemenzi, Board of Selectmen and Building Committee Member. *Back Row, left to right:* David Mehlin, Building Committee Member; Harriet Davis, Building Committee Member; E. Stanley Dodge, Building Committee Member; Donald Bannon, Building Committee Member; Kenneth Whittaker, Building Committee Member; James Purdy, Building Committee Member; Chief Kenneth Walsh, Building Committee Member; and Judith LeBlanc, Building Committee Member. Photo J. Hauck



The interior of the town hall was completely removed.
Photo J. Hauck



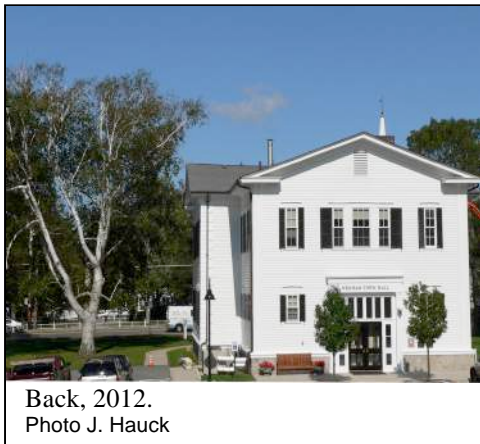
Reconstruction of the town hall began in May 2006.
Photo J. Hauck



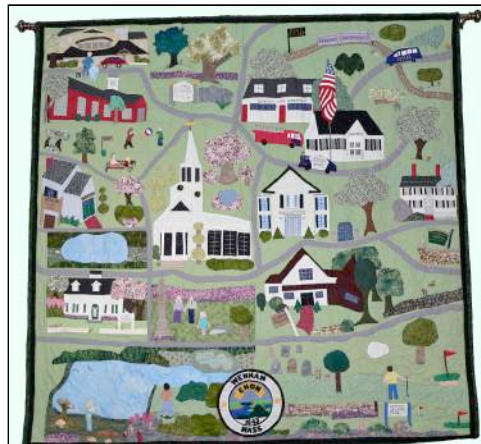
Friend Court side, 2011.
Photo J. Hauck



Museum side, 2011.
Photo J. Hauck



Back, 2012.
Photo J. Hauck



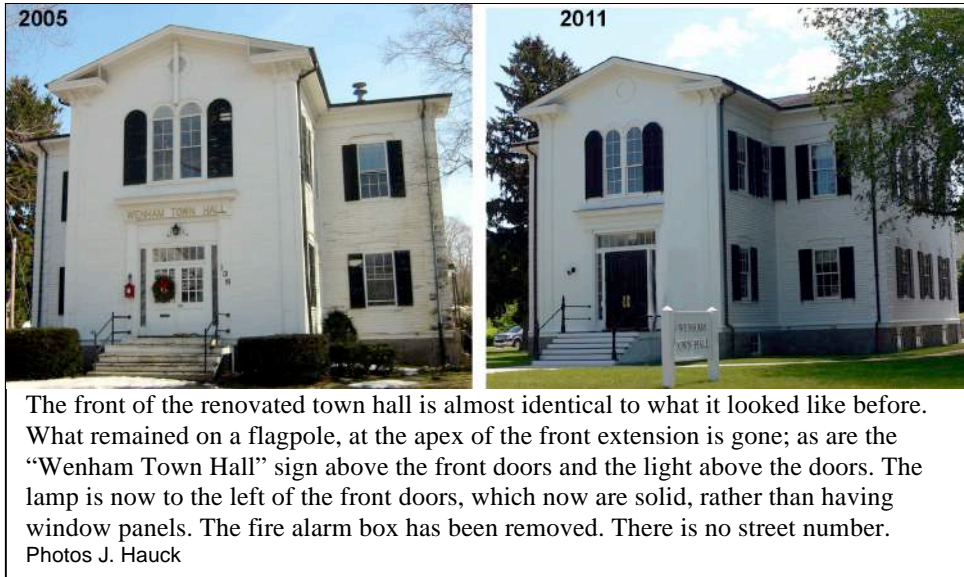
Quilt provided in 2010 by the Wenham Council on Aging. Photo J. Hauck



Property prior to landscaping. .
Photo Bing Maps



Parking lot expanded in 2007.
Photo J. Hauck



The basement, unfinished, has a vault, storage areas, and utilities rooms. Special care was taken, during construction, to protect the basement against flooding.

A significant updating of the town hall was the installation of central air conditioning,

Looking from Main Street, the renovated town hall is almost identical to what it looked like before. The front extension is still 16-feet deep and 25-feet wide. What remained on a flagpole, at the apex of the front extension is gone; as are the “Wenham Town Hall” sign above the front doors and the light above the doors. The lamp is now to the left of the front doors, which now are solid, rather than having window panels. The fire alarm box has been removed. There is no street number alongside the front doors.

While there are many rooms inside the renovated town hall, there is not a library room. Historic books and documents are kept in various places, including the selectmen room, clerk’s office and safe, second floor meeting room and the basement vault.

At the May 2010 Town Meeting, The Friends of the Wenham Council on Aging presented to the town a 7 ft wide and 6 ft. long’ quilt depicting many historic sites and buildings in Wenham. The quilt was placed on the wall opposite the Tax Collector’s office, on Aug. 14, 2010.

Just below the quilt is the 1900 desk of the library director.

Updated 06-22-2014

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- 07 - 1898 Wenham Annual Town Records
- 08 - 1907 Wenham Annual Town Records
- 09 - 1916 Wenham Annual Town Records
- 10 - 1932 Wenham Annual Town Records
- 11 - 1943 Wenham Annual Town Records
- 12 - 1945 Wenham Annual Town Records
- 13 - 1946 Wenham Annual Town Records
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**Contract for Building the Town Hall
Wenham, Mass., June 12, 1854**

An Agreement in two parts made this twelfth day of June in the year of our Lord Eighteen hundred and fifty-four, 1854, by and between the Committee of the Wenham Town House, of the first part, and F. A. Merrill, Carpenter, of the second part.

The said second party, in consideration of a sum of money to be paid him by the party of the first part, both for himself, his executors, administrators assigns covenant, promise and agree to and with the first party, that he will in a good manner and workmanlike manner, and to the best of his ability perform the following work and provide the materials for the same.

That is, to do all the work about the building (except the cellar) to be erected by the Town of Wenham, the said building in conformity with drawings and specifications prepared by Emmerton & Foster, Architects.

And it is further agreed between the parties that any of the alterations, additions or omissions are made, the full value of the same is to be added or deducted, as the case may be.

The work is to be commenced as soon as practicable and completed on or before the first of November, 1854.

The contract price for the work is four thousand dollars, \$4,000.00. And the payment for the work is to be made within 30 days from the completion of the work, to the acceptance of the Committee.

In witness whereof the parties have herewith set their hands and seals (this day and year above written) to this and another instrument of like tenor and date.

Executed and delivered
in presence of:
Joseph C. Foster

Franklin A. Merrill (seal)
John Porter (seal)
for the Committee