

The Old Town Hall

by Doris Sherrow, June 2000

Dean Jacques, editor, producer, director, chief cook, and bottlewasher for this newsletter (Portland, on the Move), suggested to me, "Why don't you do a piece on the 'old Town Hall?'"

Well, Dean, I thought, there was the 1790 Episcopal Church at the corner of High and Bartlett Streets, an old 2-story wooden building sold to the town in 1845 and used until 1895 for a "Town House."

Before that there was another frame "Town House" built in 1790 and used until Portland split from East Hampton in 1841. That one was out on the corner of Pepperidge and Penfield Hill roads, in order to be fair to folks in both the west and east sides of Chatham, later to become Portland and East Hampton.

There was also an attempt in 1841 by three local bigwigs to have a town house built on the lot just north of our present post office. They didn't succeed.

And before that, there was the Meeting House - Congregational of course, wasn't everybody? -- at the corner of Bartlett and Prospect from 1750 to 1790.

And before THAT, the Meeting House at the intersection of High and William streets, from 1721 to 1750. Town meetings happened in these places, though the land and vital records were kept at the Clerk's house (a miracle they survived!).

And I have late word that the smaller tract of the Wangunk Reservation, flanking Indian Hill Avenue, was the Wangunk's ceremonial area - Penny Corner Road was the residential area. So perhaps Portland's EARLIEST "Town Hall" actually stood there!

So, which one do you want, Dean?

He went on to say, "I heard that the old Town Hall was actually someone's house."

Oh. THAT one.

The Town Hall at 261-265 Main Street was an elegant brownstone house, built in 1852 for **Jonathan Fuller** (1796-1876). Fuller was born in East Haddam, and married Lucinda Cook of Wallingford. He moved to Connecticut in the 1830s, where he became manager and part-owner in the **Shaler and Hall Quarry**, and active in the Episcopal Church. At the time he built his house, the area was a beautiful tree-shaded residential neighborhood, the homes of well-to-do quarry owners standing two or three to a block.

Fuller and his wife had a daughter, **Jane**, born in 1831. Jane married, but apparently the marriage fell through. She resumed her maiden name and returned to her parents' house. When her father died in 1876, she inherited the stone house, and lived out her life here. She died in 1894.

Portland had used the old Episcopal Church building on Bartlett Street as a town hall since 1845. However, by the early 1890s, town officials were worried about the danger of fire, since the land and vital records were stored in this wood-frame, wood-stove-heated building. Some town halls in this period did suffer fires and lose part or all of their records. A special town meeting called on January 21, 1891 empowered the selectmen to "erect a fireproof building for town purposes." When no resolution had been achieved for the town hall problem and Jane Fuller died in 1894, the solution seemed obvious: buy the stone house and modify it for a town hall!

The **Penny Press** from May 30, 1894 opined, "Anyone disposed to bid on the Fuller house, as a matter of speculation, should bear in mind that the town of Portland wants the property bad, and that they ought to have it." Two days later, the Press pondered whether **Col. William H. Bartlett** should "take this occasion" to resign as town clerk. Bartlett lived on Bartlett Street, practically opposite the old town hall. It isn't clear whether they would be sad to see him leave, or felt he had overstayed his welcome! Ironically, Bartlett, born in 1815, died two months after the paper's remark, thereby avoiding an ousting.

The Penny Press of October 13, 1894 continued the tale of the creation of a town hall from a prosperous man's house: "The work of alteration on the Fuller property is going along well. A good portion of the front of the building, in the center, has been torn out to make the arched-doorway provided for in the plans. The opening on the south side of the building will be built up with stones removed from the front."

All through October the Press chatted about the progress on the Fuller house. An addition was

made on the rear, and "cells intended for the keeping of prisoners" built into the southeast corner. **Dennis O'Brien**, who ran the Union House tavern at 5 Indian Hill Avenue, fetched the ironwork for the vaults from East Berlin.

All during this time, the selectmen held their regular meetings in the Hose House of Fire Company No. 1, which stood directly across the street on the site of 252 Main until 1923.

On October 31, 1894, the town's Republican caucus, some 263 strong, met in the old Town Hall, the former 1790 Episcopal Church on Bartlett Street. Directly after everyone had voted (some of them twice, according to witnesses), the floor caved in!

Some men were trapped upstairs in the old church's gallery. One of them, William Welch, jumped out a second story window and broke his leg, later to sue over the town's alleged negligence. Old Col. Bartlett had warned them before his death that there was a 16-foot-deep hole under the building, probably an ancient well, and they felt fortunate that no one had gone down that hole. Truly the town needed its new town house!

Now, readers, here's your part: I have not discovered from the town meeting minutes exactly when the Town Hall officially opened. The Selectmen continued to meet in the Hose House, and suddenly in March of 1895, meetings were happening in the "Town Hall" with no "Old" attached to it, so the move must have been made by then. I thought the Penny Press might shed some light, but I read the microfilm till I was seasick, and found no mention!

Then I consulted **Alain Munkittrick**, who did the historical talk on Central School for the opening of the newest Town Hall, and he hadn't seen any announcement of opening celebrations, either!

So, here is what we need: do any of you have stories from your parents or grandparents about the opening of the Main Street Town Hall? Did anyone's historically-conscious great aunt save the freshly-cut opening ribbon, or a program of the speakers for the day? Let me know - I'm in the book! Thanks!