

MANSFIELD MEMORIES: “The March of Public Improvement:” The Town Hall of 1882

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MANSFIELD – This is the second in a four-part series on the town halls of Mansfield.

By the early 1880s, the nation was standing on the brink of the modern age. Mansfield was also at a crossroads. And while some aspects of local life remained antiquated, the town was ready to take a step forward.



The second town hall was painted Venetian red with trim of bronze green. A four-sided clock graced the cupola. The first floor featured a room for the selectmen, one for the school committee, one for a public library, and another for Mansfield High School.

The meetinghouse now stood on Union Street and remained a church, but seemed unsuitable for conducting town business. There was no place for the newly formed Mansfield High School to call home. There was great interest in forming a public library but nowhere to locate it. Farming was giving way to

industrialization, which meant more workers coming to town. It was clear that Mansfield was growing rapidly. But there was no building from which to conduct town affairs. That would change at the annual Town Meeting of March 1882.

At that meeting voters heard a report by a committee appointed “to see about a location and plans for a building for a town hall and for a high school.” The Rev. Jacob Ide of the Orthodox Congregational Church read a letter from William O. Grover, a Mansfield native living in Boston. Grover had grown wealthy and was now a philanthropist. He wanted to donate \$5,000 toward the construction of a new town hall. The meeting voted to accept the offer and appropriate another \$10,000 toward the project.

A small lot at the corner of West and Union streets was chosen for the new town hall. Current residents would know it as the location of the Keach Monument, a war memorial to honor Mansfield residents who served. Architect John Lyman Faxon of Boston was chosen for the design, a Colonial style made of wood upon a brick foundation. S.M. & H.A. Chesley of Boston were the building contractors.

The outside was painted Venetian red with trim of bronze green. A four-sided clock graced the cupola. The clock was funded by Thomas H. Wood of New York, whose wife Elizabeth (Day) Wood was a native of East Mansfield. The first floor featured a room for the selectmen, one for the school committee, one for a public library, and another for Mansfield High School. The second floor included a hall that measured 60 by 50 feet.



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The town gathered for a gala grand opening on Tuesday, May 1, 1883. A series of speakers lauded the beautiful new building. Among them was the Rev. Ide, who proclaimed, "The march of public improvement has actually begun, with no hesitating step, but with the 'double quick' of an inspiring progress." A gala followed with dinner and dancing well into the night.

The town hall would remain at the heart of town affairs for nearly nine decades. From local elections and town meetings to high school dances, basketball games



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and graduations, if it happened in Mansfield, it often happened at the town hall. That is not to say the hall never changed. The high school and public library both moved out when they were provided with new locations. The Mansfield Police Department moved in after its creation in 1909.

In 1970, the portion of the town hall that served as the police station was undergoing a renovation. At about 11:45 pm on the night of December 20, 1970, flames were seen pouring from the back of the town hall, where the renovation was taking place. The fire department arrived immediately. Despite their efforts and the aid of six area departments, Mansfield's stately old town hall was a total loss. The state fire marshal's office determined the fire began with a "probable electrical malfunction." Now 87 years after the building opened, Mansfield once again needed a new town hall.

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