

Mansfield Memories - Blaze leaves Mansfield town hall in ruins

Andrew Todesco and Kevin McNatt

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MANSFIELD – This month marks the 50th anniversary of the fire which destroyed the Mansfield Town Hall. This is the first of a two-part series on the tragic blaze.

The fire of Dec. 20, 1970 left Mansfield's historic town hall utterly destroyed. The blaze was believed to have begun in a newly renovated area on the first floor. It spread quickly when it reached the second floor, which was mostly an open hall. The attic was entirely open which contributed to the collapse of the roof.



The belfry and clock that stood high above town for 87 years came crashing down into the ruins. To make matters worse at some point the beautiful Victorian structure was covered with aluminum siding which made the fire more fierce and difficult to fight. By the time the flames were extinguished the second and third floors had crashed down onto the first.

An oddity of the fire was discovered in the town manager's office. There a bookshelf remained standing with no fire or water damage despite that fact that the office was so destroyed that one could look up and see the sky.

Nearly all of the town clerk's historic records were safe in a fireproof vault. The records of the Light Department were found in a fireproof box. Many others were soaked by water but salvaged. Some records were lost upstairs but had been microfilmed. This dispels a long-standing myth that persists to this day: that all the town's records were "lost in the fire."

That didn't mean all records were in good shape.



“When we got in we found water up to the second drawer of our filing cabinets,” Veterans Agent Gladys Cross later recalled. “I remember we had to take every single piece of paper and lay it down somewhere separately so they wouldn’t all stick together permanently.”



Town Manager Rolfe Camp immediately made plans for temporary town offices in the Wheeler Building at 129 North Main St., then owned by pharmacist Christy Vose. On the first floor would be the offices of the Treasurer-Collector, the Town Clerk, the Electric Department, the Water and Sewer Department, the Board of Assessors and the Veterans’ Agent. On the second floor would be the Town Manager, the Board of Selectmen and the Planning Board.

Selectmen Chairman Peter Saunders later remembered Christy Vose as “the person who accommodated us the most.” He also said that Town Manager Camp, “worked around the clock to get the offices established [in the Wheeler Building].”

The police department found temporary quarters at Mansfield High School. All departments would remain at their temporary locations until a new town hall/police station opened at 50 West Street in 1974.

In the aftermath of the fire salvage attempts were made. A clock face from the belfry was restored for display in the new town hall. In 2004 it was moved atop Mansfield’s train station. The bell was saved and displayed in front of 50 West St. and is now directly in front of the current town hall on Park Row.

There was a call to save the black slate dedication tablet from the first floor. It dated to 1883 and had the names of those who oversaw the building the town hall. The fate of this tablet remains unknown. Two painted town seals from the front of the building were also saved but their whereabouts are unclear.

In May 1971 the town hall wreckage was removed. Thereafter it was decided that the lot was too small to rebuild a modern town hall. In 1978 the Keach Monument was dedicated on the site to honor the service of Mansfield’s war veterans.