

A History of the Brookfield Town House

Overview: Our town will celebrate our 189th consecutive town meeting in our town house on March 13, 2012. “The Victorian transformation of our town house gives it an almost unique position among the town halls in the Lakes Region. Among the wooden buildings built to serve as town halls, the Brookfield Town Hall stands alone as the only Victorian or Victorianized building of any architectural importance.” We can be very proud of our building and hope you will take the time to read this paper.

- ◆ The Town voted in 1804 to build a meeting house. Nothing was done until 1807 when a warrant article was approved to buy an acre of land and build a meeting house.
- ◆ 8 years went by during which no building was erected; however the collapse of the floor at Daniel Wiggin’s house during a town meeting, precipitated a meeting in 1815 that was convened to consider building a Town House for meeting and public worship.
It was voted that a one story building 38 x 42 would be built at or near Brookfield Corner. Moneys were to be raised from taxes in 1816. The Town voted to bring in 2 quarts of rum and a “mug of cider” to vendue the Town House. Asa Johnson bid off the construction job for \$ 157.50, with material to be ready in 12 months. The non-performance for Johnson was 2 quarts of rum.
- ◆ In May 1816, the town voted *not* to proceed with construction. Finally in 1822 a committee was appointed and reported that they decided that the Town House should be built near Brookfield Corner, the lot having been deeded to the town by Thomas Wentworth on April 13, 1817, for \$ 55.00. The committee raised \$ 167.61 by subscription toward labor and materials.
- ◆ The first Town Meeting held at the new town house was in 1823. It was voted that the outside be finished and glazed and that the floors be laid. However, the outside was not completed for another 2 years.
- ◆ In 1826, the town “voted that there may be a pulpit and singing seats built by subscription in the Town House”. Nothing was done for many years, primarily because times were economically difficult for the community, and completion of the town building was not a priority. Finally, in 1835 the town voted to build pews with doors, a decent pulpit, and singers’ seats and to lath and plaster the building.
- ◆ For 17 years, meetings had been held in the Town House without heat of any kind except that from foot warmers brought along by the townspeople. The town voted in 1840 that a stove be installed in the town house, but no money was voted for this project, and the stove was paid for by the installer.
- ◆ The Town House had continued to be the site of religious services in the community, but the relationship of town and church was undergoing change and, in 1870, the town voted to abolish all religious tests as qualifications for holding town offices. Not long after the services held by the Methodists in the Town House ceased, although the hymnals used by the Methodists are still in the Town House.
- ◆ A new era began for the Town house between 1875 and 1876 when two small rooms were added to the front corners, and \$325 was spent to make an office of the room on the south side of the building. The two entries were replaced by a single one, and the granite doorstep was moved to the front entrance. The singing seats were removed from the main hall, and the doors to the box pews were removed.
- ◆ In 1883, the selectmen were empowered to “remove the center pews when subscribers have purchased and delivered settees”. The old center pews became the property of the subscribers. The “old desk” or pulpit was torn down in 1894, and a platform was erected “without any expense to the town.” The wainscoting and molded trim were added at approximately the same time and changed the interior of the building to a more secular meeting place.
- ◆ In 1893 the town voted \$ 15.00 to secure the gift of \$100 worth of books from the state, and the school board was to act as trustees of the library. The following year at town meeting \$ 15.00 was voted for

maintenance of a public library. The library was housed in the Town House. The library functioned until 1941, when the town voted to turn the library room into the kitchen.

- ◆ In 1907, Frank Hutchins, a Wolfeboro resident, but a native of Brookfield, offered to give a bell for the Town Hall. The Town voted to spend \$ 300 to build the tower and the work was completed the following June and the bell was dedicated June 29, 1908.
- ◆ Since it's transformation to a primarily Victorian structure in the late 19th and 20th centuries, the Brookfield Town Hall has seen some changes, but they have not seriously altered the appearance of the exterior of the main block and the tower, or of the major spaces.
- ◆ In 1967 the Churchill School, a one-room, early 19th century schoolhouse, was moved from a nearby site to become the rear wing of the Town Hall. The privy that had been attached to the rear of the Town Hall was then removed; it's function was taken over by two restrooms in the new rear wing. At the same time a furnace was installed in the former schoolhouse to heat the entire building.
- ◆ In 1976, as part of the Bicentennial celebration restoration of the Town Hall was begun, the work including some repairs – repainting and renewal of the stenciling.

Since 1823, the Town Hall has been the major public building in Brookfield. It has been used continuously for town meetings, for local, state and federal elections. The Town Hall has been the center of the town government and the town's political life for almost 200 years.

The Town Hall has also served other functions, some of which have faded away. Regular religious services were held in the hall into the 20th century, although none have been held there in recent years. The small room in the north corner housed the Brookfield Public Library from its establishment in 1893, until the library was discontinued in 1941. For a brief period, in 1919 and 1920, the Town Hall served as the village schoolhouse.

As the only public hall in Brookfield, the Town Hall has also been the focus of the community's social life, the obvious site for major social gatherings. Dances as well as community suppers are still held regularly in the hall.

“The Brookfield Town Hall is our most important public building, and given its central role in town affairs, the most historic building in the town. The Town Hall is also important architecturally as one of the best Victorian or victorianized town halls in the area, and arguably, the best wooden Victorian town hall in the Lakes Region.” (Written by David Ruell in the nomination papers to place the Town Hall on the National Register of Historic Places in 1984.)