

Town House at Mill Hill Historic Park Part III - Changes with the Times

The present Town House was built in 1835 and was the fourth brick building in Norwalk. The other three being as follows: first, a building at the corner of Isaac and Wall Streets; second and third were residences on Keeler and Richards Avenues. They were all built by Captain Lewis Raymond who had brought brick to Norwalk as ship ballast which some claimed it may have been Dutch brick from Holland. The first three places were built but a few years before the Town House. It was rather late in date for the use of brick in Norwalk, for all restoration work after the burning of Norwalk had been of wood, whereas brick had been used for years in other towns. While Norwalk is famous for its pottery industry it did not manufacture bricks.

After the British burned Norwalk in the Revolutionary War on July 11, 1779 which included the Town House, Colonel Thomas Fitch Jr. who had acquired the title “Yankee Doodle” while in service through the French and Indian War of 1755-62, was appointed with two other citizens as a committee two weeks later for the arrangement of a new Town House. Due to the extreme hardship caused by the burning, it was fifteen years before it was managed to erect the Town House in the year 1794, this being due to the shortage of materials and labor and also with the necessity of homes and mills having the greater priority. It was built on the present site as was the previous one that the British destroyed. It lasted for forty years but in time fell into a sad condition of disrepair. Finally, it was torn down in 1834 by a group of young men who concealed their identity by calling themselves the “Andrew Ensigns” after considerable town controversy. It was the next year in 1835 that the present lovely building, a proud tribute to Norwalk’s Heritage was built.

The Town House held the distinction of being the seat of government for Norwalk for many years, until the 30th of June 1913, when consolidation with the City of South Norwalk took place, this being the outcome of fourteen years of controversy between the two communities. Thus South Norwalk then became the center of the City of Norwalk’s government at its city hall – leaving little reason why the Railroad Station is called Norwalk-South Norwalk.

Though in some disrepair in the earlier part of the nineteenth century, a complete restoration of the Town House took place through the efforts of some of Norwalk’s citizens.

Many organizations were founded and used the Town House for meetings. Some of them were the Baptist Church, a Negro Church, a Mormon Church, numerous clubs and lodges, fire department headquarters using the belfry’s huge bell for sounding alarms as well as did our forefathers who were at one time either a burgess, selectman or councilman, working for a better Norwalk.

The social aspect of the use of the Town House has carried on down through the years and is found to be equally active at present. It is the headquarters for the Norwalk Historical Society as well as the meeting place of the Village Green Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution. These two organizations maintain the museum of Norwalk memorabilia which graces the hall. The museum is of much interest to the visiting public and of much value toward the heritage of Norwalk which is presented to the many school classes that attend the [3rd Grade-Little Red School House program](#) at Mill Hill Historic Park. Also, as in the past, numerous organizations make use of the hall upon occasion.

The rear appendix with facilities was added to the building through the auspices of the D.A.R. The belfry houses a huge five foot bell, having its toll rope hanging down to the main floor. Present industry

and vehicle noises compete with the fine tone of the bell's ring which at one time could be heard throughout Norwalk. As a brief resume, it is interesting to trace the history of the Town House to the present circumstance.

For many years the earliest communities that were formed in America by the Pilgrims and Puritans were governed principally by the Congregational Meeting House (church) with the Pastor being at its head. In some cases a constable helped to preserve order. In Norwalk the Reverend Thomas Hanford governed the settlement. From 1652 until very close to the time of his death In 1694 he administered both the spiritual and civic duties as well as schoolmaster for the children. As leader of the settlement no doubt he found his constable, Christopher Comstock, and any elective committee of his a big help.

Shortly after the death of Rev. Hanford, Reverend Stephen Buckingham became the town pastor. It was now, at the beginning of the eighteenth century that a vast change was being accomplished. The town was now growing considerably larger and very much more democratic. No longer was the wayside visitor who might be other than a Congregationalist invited to leave town fast or else receive the help of a stone or two or some gun powder. These early stiff beliefs were being fast replaced with broader viewpoints. The town was expanding in area and population, causing the establishment of daughter parishes that included Wilton, New Canaan, Weston, and parts of Westport and Darien. These changes together with the fact that by now many Episcopalians were received in the town and Rev. Buckingham resigned, a very new situation was created. The Congregational Church formed what was known as the "Ancient Prime Society", separating the Church from the State, following the spiritual side.

Here, therefore, is the start of Norwalk's town government in 1726 with all land-owners eligible to take a part in the vote.

This great change in affairs meant the election of officers to the chair and the burgessy to rule the settlement, which was now a township.

It is at this period of time and state of affairs that a meeting place other than the Congregational Meeting House (church) was required – thus the introduction of the Town Hall.

At first for several years – until about 1736 when the Uptown School House was built – meetings may have been held in private homes. However, the school house was used for a period of time. Then a change took place to what was known as the first Town Hall, which was located on Wall Street. Later the site was used for the Old Trolley Car Barn corner of Knight Street. Little is known of this building and it may not have been built for this use. The length of time that this place was used is not known. However, the next move was the building of a Town House upon the present site and it was this Town House that the British burned in their Norwalk raid.

This brings the Town House history back and up to the second paragraph of this account.

It may be of interest to know that the Upper School House so mentioned was on the north side of the Norwalk Green and received its name to distinguish it from Norwalk's first school house, known as the Down Town School (East Norwalk) which was the forerunner of our present Little Red School House at Mill Hill Historic Park.

After many years of service the (Uptown) Upper School House was moved to its present location at the end of Lewis Street and with some renovation became a private dwelling.