

## Town House at Mill Hill Historic Park Part IV - 1835-1985



The Townhouse 1835-1985  
by Joan G. Robidoux  
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The Town House standing today on Mill Hill was built between 1835 and 1836. Plans for the repair of the prior Town House or construction of a new building were being considered by the town officers in 1831. The Town House building then standing in 1831 had been constructed ca. 1779 as a replacement for the one burned by the British in July, 1779. At the annual meeting held on 5 December 1831 it was voted to appoint a committee to put the Town House in good repair at the expense of the town. Named to this committee were David Roberts, Samuel B. Warren, Benjamin Isaacs, William J. Street and John D. Lounsbury.[1](#)

There was disagreement among the townsmen about whether the Town House should be repaired or replaced and so in March 1832 the inhabitants were notified to meet in April to make a decision. The vote, however, was deferred; decision was to be withheld until after the meeting of the General Assembly. The General Assembly had an item on the agenda regarding the location of public buildings.[2](#) Meeting again in December of 1833 another committee was appointed to get costs of repair as well as of new construction. Named to this were Thaddeus Betts, Clark Bissell, Timothy T. Merwin and Charles Thomas.[3](#) In 1834 the town officers agreed to lay a tax, if necessary, to repair the old or erect a new Town House.[4](#)

It wasn't until May 11 of 1835 that the vote was decisive: voted that the Town will appropriate from the Town Treasury \$2000 for erecting a new town house where the Old Town House now stands and that said old Town House be sold for the benefit of the town. The selectmen were given full power to carry out this matter.[5](#)

A notice appeared in the Norwalk Gazette on 9 June 1835: Proposal to build Town House 1 and 1/2 stories high 55 feet by 40 feet. Benjamin Isaacs, A.E. Beard, Samuel Stevens [committee].

The new Town House was probably completed in 1836, for then the selectmen were authorized at the Town meeting to remove the wooden building and other encumbrances on the Town House Hill.[6](#)

Norwalk historians have confused the *meeting house*, for religious purposes, and *town house*, for government of the town. The various structures which were built for this purpose up to 1726 were for

both church and town since the town inhabitants up to that time were all of one church: the Congregational. But now there were also people in Norwalk who were members of the Church of England. With the building of the meeting house in 1726, townsmen clearly stipulated that this new building was to be used only for the purpose of worship, that no town business would be conducted there.<sup>7</sup>

It was in 1773 that the townsmen by major vote granted these persons [of the Church of England] one rood of land to build a church and a burying ground .<sup>8</sup>

After the new Meeting House was finished in 1726 and town meetings were excluded from it, the town officials gathered in the Upper School House to carry on their business. Now they had to decide whether to continue to use the school house for town meetings, or to build a separate Town House. Disagreement was strong between the two factions, but the vote resulted in the continued use of the school house, with the decision to build an addition of equal size of the said house and have a chimney built at the east end of the addition. James Lockwood and Samuel Keeler were the building committee members responsible for the addition to the school house.<sup>9</sup>

The town house was used for the annual meetings of the town officers, as recorded in the Town Proceedings.<sup>10</sup> After 1835, when the Borough of Norwalk was established, the Court of Burgesses (the town officials) met there as well, although their working meetings were held in the personal offices of the elected officials or in contemporary hotels. The town house was the gathering point of all the townsmen, where issues were put to the vote. Early borough records<sup>11</sup> shown their main concern to be the constant danger of fire to all the wooden buildings in Norwalk, the containing of animals in the pound and the construction and repair of the roads.<sup>12</sup> The town house was also used for meetings of the School Society, the then Board of Education. <sup>13</sup> Town and School Society members were notified of meetings in the Norwalk Gazette. In Norwalk history books allusions are made to the use over the years of the present Town House by religious and civic groups in addition to its intended function for town meetings.

There are records of instances of such use. While the town officials in 1726 established a separation of church and state in the use of the Meeting House, the later Town Houses were used for both purposes, although not without objection. After the Town House and the meeting house of the Congregational Church were burned by the British in 1779, the church was rebuilt between 1788 and 1794. The Town House was rebuilt almost immediately and there is evidence in the Congregational Church records that they used the Town House for services until their new structure was completed.<sup>14</sup>

Some religious groups used the building for their services.<sup>15</sup> As early as 1837 this building was used by the Baptist Church. The first Baptist in Norwalk, in the early 1800 s, was Mrs. Abbie Fitch, who had been a Congregationalist. Others soon joined this group. This movement precipitated a treatise called An Exposition of the Law of Baptism <sup>16</sup> written by Rev. Edwin Hall, then the minister at the Congregational Church on the Green. At first the Baptists met in homes and then later in a school. As their numbers grew they met in the Town House, however there was prejudice against them and this prompted them to build their own church which was completed in 1840.<sup>17</sup>

In the early 1800 s the Catholics in Norwalk were meeting in homes with an itinerant priest saying Mass for them. In 1848 this group sent a committee to the diocesan Bishop Tyler to request a resident priest. Representing their fellow Catholics were Paul Bresnan, John Hanlon, John Foley, Terrance Reynolds and Ferrell Gilhooley. The Bishop came to Norwalk and said Mass in the Town House.<sup>18</sup> After his visit he appointed Rev. John C. Brady as the first resident priest in this town. In 1851 St. Mary's Chapel was

built on Chapel Street, the town's first Catholic church.<sup>19</sup>

The Town House was also used for political meetings. The Norwalk Gazette reported political activities in its columns and notices also appeared of meetings to be held. An announcement in the 20 February 1839 issue reported that so many people came to attend the Whig Convention that the Town House was inadequate and the meeting was moved to the First Congregational Church.

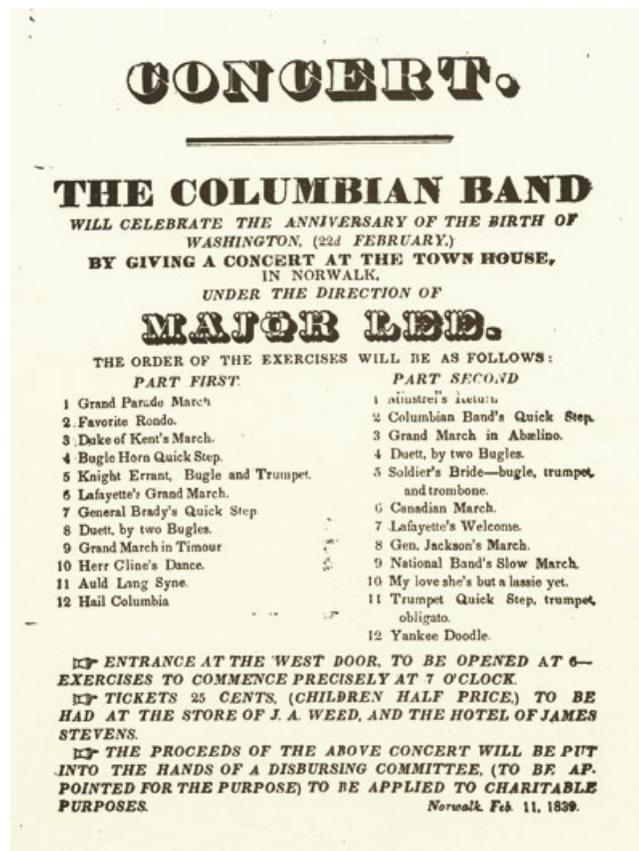


*Free Soil Democracy Handbill*

Poster, courtesy, Norwalk Historical Reference Library,  
Lockwood House, Lockwood Family Papers.

On 25 October, 1848 a political meeting was held in the Town House which was billed as an anti-slavery rally.<sup>20</sup> A poster publicized the event (above). The speakers were the Hon. John M. Niles and William Burleigh who were campaigning for the presidential election between Zachary Taylor and Martin Van Buren. William Burleigh was editor of the Charter Oak a bitter, ultra abolition paper according to the Gazette editor, he was trying to get Whig votes for Van Buren, alleging that Taylor favored slavery.<sup>21</sup>

The Town House was used as well by civic groups. A handbill (below) advertised an event which took place on 22 February 1839.<sup>22</sup> The Gazette reported on the event in its issue of 27 February, 1839: We regret that the weather on the evening of the 22nd prevented a more general attendance at the concert given by the Columbian Band for the benefit of the poor. We believe that all who were present were highly gratified and we hope those who were deterred by the rain from attending will each hand over to the committee the price of a ticket so that the laudable object of the Band may be accomplished.



*Band Hand Bill 1839*

Handbill, courtesy, Norwalk Historical Reference Library,  
Lockwood House, Lockwood Family Papers.

Another concert was reported in the 18 November 1846 issue of the Gazette: The Bakers, a band of four singers, whose performances are spoken of by those who have listened to them in terms of high commendation, will give a concert at the Town Hall this evening. Some of the parts, the bass particularly, is said to be unequaled.

The Lyceum Movement came to Connecticut about 1830. For this self-improvement concept, groups were formed in the towns and Norwalk had such a group as early as 1830 when their meetings were announced in the Norwalk Gazette. Those meetings held in the Town House featured such speakers as the Rev. Edwin Hall, in 1839, whose address was Do Parents Benefit Children by Laying by Property for Them? In June 1840 there was a debate on the topic Would Reason Without Revelation Teach Man the Immortality of the Soul? Also in 1840 Mr. D.C. Jones gave A Lecture on Music.

Other organizations using the Town House included the Washington Benevolent Society which met there in 1842 to make plans for a New Year's Day celebration and the Sons of Temperance, whose meeting in May, 1845 was to plan a parade.

In January of 1846, Francis Gillette gave an address on slavery at the Fairfield County Liberty Convention, held at the Town House.



*Town House DAR*

Mrs. George E. Mathews, Regent, D.A.R., greeted visitors to the Town House in 1924.

Courtesy, Norwalk Historical Reference Library, Lockwood House.

Photographer: Alexander J. Rummler

After 1913 and the consolidation of the City, use of the Town House by the City declined. In 1924, the City leased the building to the D.A.R. for \$1.00 per year for 50 years. In October of 1923 the D.A.R. members held a bazaar to raise money to pay for remodelling of interior [of Town House]. Some of the committee members at that time were Harriet Sherman, Mrs. Christian Swartz, Mrs. Leroy Montgomery and Mrs. Harry Shufelt.<sup>23</sup> With their funds they added a kitchen wing to the building. Mrs. Robert F. Way quoted in an article in the Norwalk Hour at a D.A.R. meeting held in the Royal James Hotel, spoke of plans she foresaw in the use of the Town House by this organization: as a museum for their collections, for teas and meetings.<sup>24</sup>

In 1954, the building was in need of major repairs, but there was controversy between the D.A.R. and the City as to which was responsible for financing the work. In 1962 Mayor Cooke appointed a committee, chaired by John R. Cuneo, to study the need for restoration of the building. Recommendations were made and plans for the work were drawn by Felicia D. Kingsbury, architectural historian. The work was then undertaken; \$50,000 was spent for the restoration and repair of the building. The City continues to support capital improvements and supplies funds for some operating expenses of the Town House.

The D.A.R. relinquished their lease and a new one was entered into between the City, the Norwalk Historical Society and the D.A.R. These two groups agreed to maintain a museum opened to the public. In 1983 this lease was renewed for three years.



*Town House 2*

The Fitch Law Office, the Downtown District School House and the restored Smith Street jail were added to form the Mill Hill Historical Complex.

There are seven buildings at present, including the [Mill Hill Historic Park](#), which come under the jurisdiction of the Norwalk Historical Commission.

The 1835 Town House architectural design is of the Federal/Greek Revival style. The building is of brick, with a large hall measuring 40' by 65'. The kitchen wing, added about 1926 is 18' by 22'. The building has two front entrance doors and a cupola. It was not always an attractive place; a report of a town meeting held during the administration of Mayor Arthur C. Wheeler (1896, 1897), in the South Norwalk Sentinel, stated: Considerably less than one hundred electors gathered in the dimly-lighted and dungeon-like town house, last evening, to transact the business called for by the adjourned annual city meeting.

The 1965 restoration work was contracted by Anthony F. Conte of Norwalk who took care to use or replace as closely possible details of the original construction. Wooden pegs which were used in 1835, were retained or replaced, those replaced were cut by hand. The wooden molding holding the window glass was carefully copied and handcarved by carpenters. The hand hewn beams of the 1835 building had to be replaced by factory cut beams. The interior of the building was modernized with heat, light, plumbing and fireproofing. Random oak plank flooring, like the original, was replaced. White cedar roof shingles which were used in the 1835 structure were again used in the 1965 restoration. Brick walls were sandblasted and the wooden four-spired cupola was rebuilt. The bell in the cupola was cast in Troy, N.Y. in 1871. Final restoration of the cupola by Gidley Brothers and Ryan, Inc. of Darien, was completed in 1985.

Mr. Conte commented that in 1835 it probably took a dozen men two years to build the Town House. Working with Mr. Conte were Nicholas Pepe, Michael Restuccia, Andrew Papp and Michael Santella.<sup>25</sup>

Within its walls, in 150 years, many Norwalkers have gathered for various purposes. This building will continue to serve as museum and meeting place; its use being a part of the history of Norwalk.

Joan G. Robidoux

November, 1985

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Town Proceedings, Vol. 3 page 74
2. Town Proceedings, Vol. 3 page 75
3. Town Proceedings, Vol. 3 page 77
4. Town Proceedings, Vol. 3 page 80
5. Town Proceedings, Vol. 3 page 85
6. Town Proceedings, Vol. 3 page 92
7. Town Proceedings, Vol. 2 page 83
8. Town Proceedings, Vol. 2 page 20
9. Town Proceedings, Vol. 2 page 97
10. At City Hall, Town Clerk's Office
11. At Norwalk Historical Reference Library, Lockwood House
12. Records, Court of Burgesses, Borough of Norwalk (later First Taxing District)
13. School Society Records, 1799-1844 at Lockwood House
14. Martin, Rev. Harold Edgar, Historical Papers Concerning the First Congregational Church on the Green. Norwalk, Conn.
15. It has been stated by some Norwalk historians that the Blacks in Norwalk held church services in this Town House. No evidence has been found to document this statement.
16. Hall, Edwin An Exposition of the Law of Baptism, Norwalk, Conn. Published by John A. Weed, N.Y. Gould, Newman and Saxton. 1840.
17. History of the Baptist Church in Norwalk, Manuscript Coil. Lockwood House
18. O'Donnell, Rev. James H. The Diocese of Hartford Boston, D.H. Hurd Co. 1900.
19. Duggan, Rt. Rev. Thomas S. The Catholic Church in Connecticut N.Y. States History Co. 1930. p. 445
20. Original owned by Kevin Callahan of Norwalk
21. Norwalk Gazette editorial, 1 November 1848
22. Original handbill, Collection at Lockwood House
23. Norwalk Hour 17, 18 October 1923
24. Norwalk Hour
25. Norwalk Hour 27 March 1965