

STODDARD TOWN HALL HISTORICAL ASSESSMENT



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17 Elm Street
Keene, New Hampshire

SYNOPSIS OF BUILDING'S HISTORY AND ARCHITECTURAL CONTEXT

The building is located on a site that previously had a 2 story church/meeting house structure on it. A brick structure was built as a congregational church in 1836. In 1838 the denomination was re-aligned to Universalism. In 1841 the Town purchased the lower floor for use as a town hall. This progression was a result of the proliferation of denominations and the adoption of separate town hall buildings or spaces, which occurred in rural New Hampshire in the 18th and 19th centuries.

In the 1850's the rear wall of this building began to collapse due to soil subsidence. Despite attempts to repair the building and correct the condition, the wall collapsed and the building was demolished. Local people report that the lot and parts of the adjoining lots have large quantities of buried bricks.

The town purchased the lot in 1866 for the site of a new town hall. The town voted to build a town hall in March of 1867, and construction was completed in 1868.

Since then the building has been used for town meetings and other civic purposes such as plays, pageants and probably for movies (in the 1920's and 30's many smaller towns that did not have commercial movie houses used town halls for the purpose), lectures and as a venue for the small traveling theater companies. It has also been the repository of town records. At some time a separate office was created for the selectman by dividing up the hall space.

ARCHITECTURAL STYLE

The building is in the simple common vernacular that is the remnant of the Greek Revival style that developed in the 1830's after the Federal style of the post-colonial era and early Republic. This style is characterized by simple pure rectangular massing of classical (or near classical) proportions, having little or no ornament, and the moving away from the earlier system for placing windows that is characteristic of the Georgian and Federal styles. Gable and eave roof edges are expressed and developed with classical moldings and given some visual weight. The eave and gable roof edges have the same moldings and overhangs, which is common to the style. The only elements that are anything more than the most basic afforded by the vernacular Greek Revival is the window head trim, which are shallow pediments and the upper level windows on the front (south) elevation are strictly for architectural composition. There is not (and never was) any usable space for them to provide illumination for. The building has an integrated square steeple on the front (south) gable end. This was common with public and institutional building of the region. It is also typical of the mid to later 19th c. steeples that were a little larger than their predecessors of the 1820's to 40's, but are simpler and less elaborate – a “filtered” version. They didn't have the large roof edge overhangs, multiple “spike” spires or multifaceted lanterns. (The Sturtevant Chapel in Keene is a similar example done about the same time.)

At the time the building was built, the Greek Revival style was being displaced by newer styles in more urban and affluent areas. Italianate and Gothic Revival were predominate in Keene and Claremont at the time. Stick Style and Queen Anne were on the horizon in Boston. But this building is not a revival, and it is not a throwback; it is a continuation of what was considered the

proper form for a civic building in rural New Hampshire, continuing the common vocabulary of the other buildings on the main street – civic architecture.

The style is also reflective of materials entirely of local origin and proven local building technology.

STRUCTURE

The building is of heavy timber frame construction, with diagonal bracing at the corners and at the steeple. Posts and sills are hand hewn 8" x 8". Infill studs between the framing bents are approximately 3" x 6" sawn in vertical water powered saw mills. (They have the vertical marks that are caused by vertical sawing, which are distinct from rotary sawn marks or hand hewn marks.) This is typical of late frame buildings. The interior walls are furred out to cover the size of the frame, again typical of other town halls of this period. The structure of the roof is not visible, but is assumed to be some sort of timber frame that acts as a truss. The portion of the original ceiling visible in the south end of the building has not been disturbed, which indicates that the roof structure has not been reinforced as is often seen in similar buildings. There are no cross-tie rods visible, either original or added later. There is always the possibility that there are some above the later ceiling of the main hall. But the straight wall tops and roof line indicate that the frame is of sufficient design and construction to withstand the loads it has been subjected to.

The long frame members are hand hewn, the shorter are vertical mill sawn. This is consistent with the technology of the mid 19th c. Sawn lumber length was limited by the length of the carriage of local water powered saw mills. Joints are made with hand tools and held with wooden dowel pins (probably oak). The floor is framed by 5 lines of 10" x 10" beams supported at quarter points on stone rubble piers. The floor joists are 4" x 8" at approximately 2'-4" o.c.



The visible portion of the frame at the south end of the building indicates the frame including the steeple was all built at the same time and has not been altered. This is consistent with historical documentation and early photographs of the building.

STRUCTURAL CONDITION

Overall the structure of the building is in sound condition. There is no apparent evidence of sagging, splaying, misalignment or racking. The parts of the floor and steeple framing that are visible are intact and do not show signs of deterioration or over-stress. So long as the exterior of the building remains weather tight the framing will stay intact. However, the floor framing and crawl space are an issue that should be addressed (see below).

The one spot where deterioration is visible is the wall sill on the west wall south of the addition. A section several feet long of the clapboard, sheathing and sill are deteriorated right through, due to snow being held against the building above the foundation.

INTERIOR FINISHES

The original interior plaster finish is a 3 coat plaster system (scratch, brown and finish), presumably lime plaster (gypsum plaster came in later) on sawn lath. The Main Hall was covered with some a homasote board probably in the 1930's or '40's. This is a pressed wood fiber board, and seems to have a tongue and groove edge. Why this was installed is not readily known. It may have been installed to cover damage to the original plaster walls and ceiling, or it may have been done to make the room acoustically deader (hard plaster finishes on parallel walls can make a room acoustically harsh). No documentation is known that indicates when or why it was done. It has been painted at least once. The wood pediment trim over the windows is probably not original, but probably dates from the installation of the new wall board. The wood appears to be modern high-speed sawn, and does not have the same amount of paint build-up that the window jamb and sill trims have. Also it is installed over the new wall board. Whether it replaced an original pedimented head trim is not known.

The Main Hall has wainscoting of vertical tongue and groove v-match boards. This may or may not be original to the building. The chair rail at the top of the wainscoting becomes the window sills at the windows. This was a traditional treatment of interior trim for the previous 100 years at the time. But the wainscoting was wide horizontal pine boards or stile and rail panels. The vertical T+G became common by the 1880's. So it may have been added soon after the building was built, or if it is original, it represents an early transition.

Whether the interior partitions are original is uncertain and would need more extensive investigation to determine more definitively. But what is visible above the ceiling in the kitchen indicates that the partitions are not original to the building, that it was all one space. Based on the physical evidence and the single historic photograph of the interior dating from the 1910's or 20's, it is most likely that the stage was original, but did not have a proscenium wall as it does now (the stage was free standing).

The narrow hardwood strip flooring is almost certainly not original to the building. Most likely it was added in the early to mid 20th c. as part of the partitions and wall paneling.

INSULATION

The spaces above ceilings in the south end of the building have been insulated with fiberglass batt insulation. The exterior walls do not seem to be insulated, and the floor is not. Whether the ceiling above the Main Hall is insulated is not known. The building does not have a vapor barrier at the interior.

WINDOWS

The windows are single glazed wood double hung with 6/6 sashes. The windows appear to have their original sashes. Visual inspection shows them to be of a profile and construction that

would have been used at that time, and they match historic photographs of the exterior. They retain about 50 to 60% of their original glazing, mostly in the upper sashes. One has been removed for the HC door. All the remaining windows have modern double hung aluminum storm windows.

DOORS

The doors have not fared well and only one original door has survived; the exterior door to the left of the main doors that leads into the kitchen. This door is therefore significant in that it is the only door of the original type and having original hardware. For this reason it should be preserved and restored if necessary rather than replaced or altered.

The location of hinge leafs on the front door jambs indicate that the original doors were the full height of the opening, and that the transom there now was created to accommodate shorter replacement doors.

ADDITIONS AND ALTERATIONS

- The first addition is a shed at the northwest corner. The date and purpose of the addition this is unknown, but construction materials and methods indicate late 19th or early 20th c. Common legend in the town is that it was built as a privy. This may have been, but there is no visible evidence now that this is the case.
- A brick chimney was added on the east side for stoves in the main hall and Selectmans Office. It cannot readily be determined if the interior partitions were built before or after the chimney. The brick sizes and lime mortar used indicate late 19th C. construction.
- A wood frame oil tank shed at the north end of the east wall in the mid to late 20th C.
- Toilet rooms and an oil fired hydronic heating system were install in the mid to late 20th C.

HISTORICAL ASPECTS THAT SHOULD BE PRESERVED

The most important thing to be preserved on this building are not single details or a unique important historical aspect, but its general character. It is a good example of a rural mid 19th c. town hall, which is largely intact. The main elements of the building have not been removed or altered. The largest threat to this building is the loss of “Historic Character” – that is the elements that make this building what it is aesthetically and culturally. These include the most basic of elements, such as the clapboard, the windows, the entrance and the doors. There is a great temptation to “modernize” such buildings governed by budgets, a public indifference to architecture that was not the case when the building was created by the town, and a practice of addressing problems in short term solutions. As simple as it is, it still is a strong architectural statement that reflects the priorities and values of its builders. The future of these buildings lies in their having a useful life. It is understood that turning such buildings into museums is not possible or practical. In that vein, this town hall can continue to serve the town without being stripped of its character. People will care more about it if it is not blurred and altered until its original state is unrecognizable. Once that has happened there will be no will or cause to keep it.

Respect the integrity of the building in future work. The National Parks Service Historic Preservation Briefs address the loss of historic character in buildings. One of the ways this occurs is “Death by a Thousand Cuts”; the incremental loss of detail and elements, no one of

which seems that significant, but collectively they result in the loss of the original composition of the building. This is what should be avoided in this case. For example, future wiring should be done with regard for the integrity of the wood work in the hall that is an important part of the design and architectural character of the building, which until recently was intact. The walls of the hall are furred-out 8" to bury the framing timbers. This leaves lots of space for wiring. Wiring could also be run under the floor or in the attic. If restoration (or any work) is to be done, the National Parks Service Historic Preservation Briefs should be consulted and followed (they are all available online). These guidelines will help with making sure that appropriate work is done, and with selecting appropriately trained and experienced tradesmen are used for the work. They are not hard to find, they are in the area, and they don't necessarily cost more.

Probably the most important actions in being stewards of the building is what not to do. For example, installing vinyl siding would result in a loss of historic architectural character. Covering the 6/6 wood sash windows with single pane storm windows dilutes the historic character of its appearance. Fortunately the original windows have not been replaced. The addition of the HC entrance that has no relationship in form or materials to the building, while permanently removing a window in the middle of the row is a loss of character. Dividing up the hall into rooms would be a significant loss of historic character.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations are roughly organized into 3 levels of priority: first is to do no harm to the building, and do things that need to be done for the immediate integrity of the building. The second are things that are necessary for long term stability of the structure; and third are things that are significant but are not time critical.

SHORT TERM

The following is a list of repairs and changes that should be made to the building as soon as possible as they pose immediate threats to the stability of the building.

1.A Sill

There is a section of framing sill on the west side that is seriously deteriorated. This should be repaired and stabilized immediately. If the sill, sheathing and clapboards are not repaired it will continue to be a route for moisture into the surrounding fabric of the building. If the sill settles in this area, the floor and wall framing will subside, causing distortion in the wall and a low point in the roof. This will cause more water to concentrate and run-off at that point, causing more deterioration at the sill. This condition is the result of the grade being too close to the sill and the accumulation of snow in the corner.



1.B Oil Tank Shed

This shed is build with its roof against a window of the building. The small space left between the roof and the window is a perfect pocket for holding snow and ice, that is always being melted by the heat of building, thereby ensuring a perpetually wet condition. When not full of snow and ice, it funnels run-off from the roofs into the wall. This shed must be removed, there is no way to make this arrangement work. It is expected that the wall of the building and the window will require restoration when this is done.



1.C Grades and Vegetation

Over time grades usually rise around buildings. The grade around the north side and north west corner has become too close to the sills of the building, especially on the north side. It must be lowered to at least 8" below the sills, preferably a foot, and kept clear of leaves and debris.

Also the trees and other vegetation around the north and west sides of the building should be significantly thinned and cut back. This overgrowth keeps the building in more shade than ever before, which increases the ground snow build-up amounts and duration (note cover photograph). This increases frost action and promotes dampness by retarding drying. Roots also permeate the soil more than they did historically.



LONG TERM

2.A Foundation

Buildings in New England deteriorate when they are not kept weather tight. Keeping the roof and walls intact is most important. Given that, probably the largest long term issue of the stability of the building is that of the foundation and vapor retarder under the building. While the existing foundation and floor framing are generally in good condition, it is an arrangement that is not going to serve the building well, especially once it is heated. The soil under the building is uncovered. Raw soil anywhere discharges large amounts of water vapor. During the heating season, the air inside the building is drier and warmer than outside air. There is no vapor barrier between the soil and the conditioned space of the building. This creates a condition where water vapor is constantly being pulled through the floor into the conditioned space. Since the crawl space is not heated, and is more or less at outdoor temperature, there is always a dew point

somewhere in the floor structure, where the water will condense. Right now there is so much air moving through the building and the crawl space that the accumulation of moisture has not been an apparent problem. However, if the building were to be made more weather tight and insulated, to make it more energy efficient, the accumulation of moisture would rapidly cause deterioration of the floor structure.

This raises the question: Why didn't this happen in the past? The answer is: it did. But before buildings were insulated and constantly heated, they had enough air movement to mitigate much of this. Also, as town histories show, buildings were renewed or let go, abandoned and demolished.

Consider placing the building on a concrete foundation, either with a crawl space or a full basement. The existing dimension granite stones can be used to face the new foundation. Whether it is a crawl space or a full basement should be determined with a view toward the future use of the building.

3.A Chimney

The unused chimney on the east side should be removed and the roof edge restored. This chimney spoils the original clean lines of the building and where it penetrates the roof edge will always be vulnerable to water infiltration.

3.B HC Ramp

The handicap ramp, stairs and shed roof are not original to the building, and are a detriment to the original design. They should be removed if possible, and a new accessible route created elsewhere. Since the grade is much closer the floor of the building at the rear and west sides of the building, that may suggest creating a more appropriate route, especially if the abutting property is acquired by the town. The window should be restored.

3.C Paint build-up

There is an excessive accumulation of paint on the building. Up to a point, layers of paint create a better barrier to the weather. However, at some point, the paint adheres to itself better than the wood clapboard and starts to pull off. Also the build-up of paint causes a "blurring" of the wood work, including the clapboards edges. Eventually it should be removed, as it is not possible to add infinite layers of paint to a building. If the building is heated and is pulling moisture from the crawl space, it will tend to move out of the building through the walls. This can cause paint to fail to adhere to the clapboard.

3.D Safes

The two safes in the northeast corner of the Hall should be separated. While the floor is capable of taking the load, having both safes in one spot is creating a significant point load. Wood framing experiences a phenomenon called "creep". When it is loaded it deflects a certain amount based on its load carrying capacity and the load. But over time, if left loaded, the deflection will double. This can, and will, create a low spot in the floor there. The safes should be kept to outside edges of the room, as deflection is greatest at the center of a beam.

3.E Front Steps

The brick front steps are not original to the building. The steps were granite, which is the typical and traditional material for proper steps in the region. It is assumed that the current steps were created when the current parking and grading was created, which is lower than it was historically. Consider replacing the front steps in granite, to restore this lost piece of the buildings character. If the adjoining lot is acquired, consider raising the grade at the front and east of the building. The main entrance of the building should be maintained at the front of the building, that is the original intent of the town and the common sense understanding of civic architecture. All too many libraries, courthouses and town halls have had their functional entrances moved to the side or back of the building, thereby confounding the obvious architectural and cultural expectations.

3.F Windows

The existing aluminum storm windows should be removed and the wood windows restored with what original glass they have. Removable interior thermal panels should be used if needed. This will restore the original scale and texture that the window lights provided to the exterior of the building.

3.G Roof Shingles

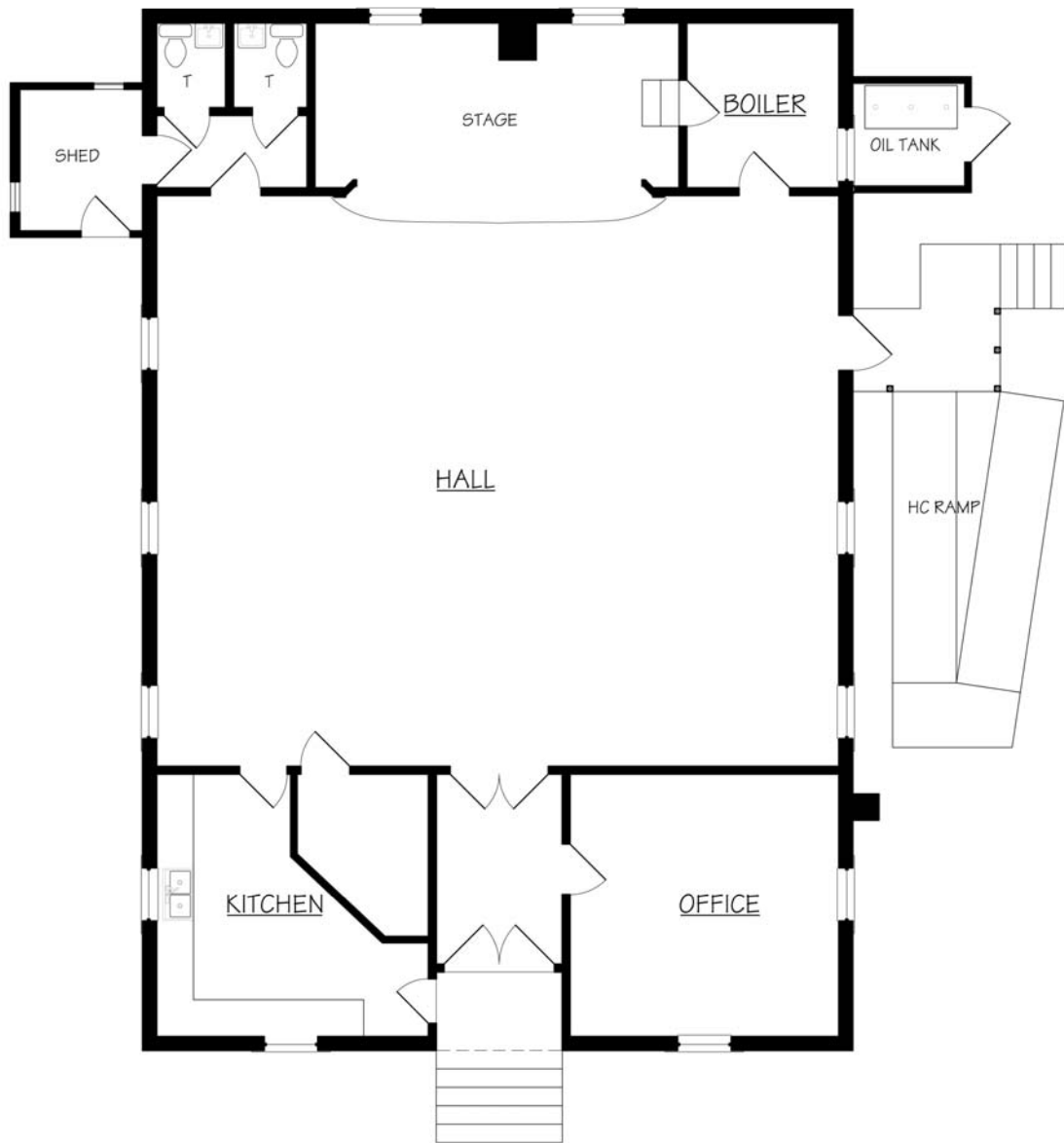
The building originally had a wood shingle roof. As is most commonly done, it was replaced with asphalt shingle. This has resulted in a loss of texture and change of color, again eroding its historic architectural character. When the existing asphalt shingle roof needs to be replaced, consider installing wood shingles. An asphalt shingle roof lasts 15 to 25 years, a properly installed cedar shingle roof can well last twice that.

Lead Paint

Because of its age, it is must be assumed that the building has lead paint, both on the exterior, and probably the interior. Care must be taken when conducting work in future to address this issue.

CONCLUSION

The Stoddard Town Hall is in overall sound condition, but in need of some repairs and corrections. Under the stewardship of the town it can be protected, conserved and used as an asset for years to come, while valuing its historic character.



STODDARD TOWN HALL FIRST FLOOR PLAN