



WESTMINSTER HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

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Winter 2022

THE OLD TOWN HALL

The Selectboard issued a Request for Proposals to dispose of the old town hall on Bacon Street last fall, and proposals for its use were due March 1. The Westminster Historical Society partnered with the new Historic Meetinghouse Coalition to propose the building stay in the hands of our citizens as a multi-use facility including a Center for the Arts and a café/bakery. This seems an appropriate time to record the history of our meetinghouses and especially the old town hall.

Westminster's first settlers arrived in 1737 and, by law, were required to build a meetinghouse to hold church services and conduct public business. Three consecutive meetinghouses were constructed on top of Academy Hill and served until the law separating church and state in Massachusetts was passed in 1820.



When the Congregational Church decided to move "downtown" and build its new home in its present location on Main Street, the secular functions soon followed, with the Town building its public meetinghouse nearby on Bacon Street in 1839.

There are no photos of the original building since it was built before cameras were invented. However, we know it was two stories high and had an auditorium with seats anchored into the floor with a speaker's plat-

form on the first floor and a large meeting hall on the second. By 1890, the building was already too small, and it was voted to raise the building and add another floor underneath.

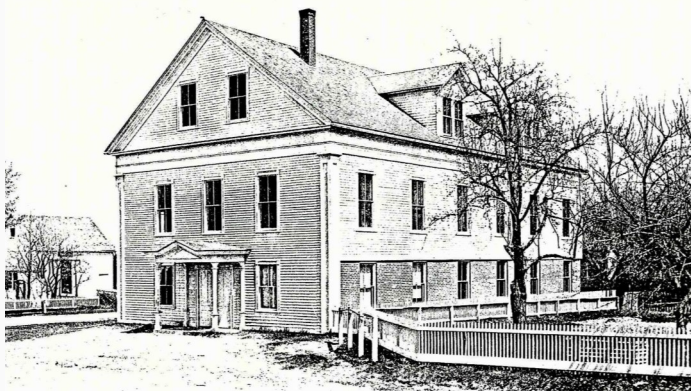
What happened in this early town hall? Surprisingly, town offices were *not* there. Town officials all lived in houses near by and all business with them was done in their homes—until the 1960s! Yes, that's right, you went to the Town Treasurer's home to pay your taxes, to the Town Clerk's home to get important papers signed, etc.

So what *did* happen at the old town hall? William Heywood, author of the 1893 History of Westminster states, "A somewhat generous and comprehensive policy in regard to opening the Town Hall building for other than strictly town uses has prevailed from almost the beginning."

At the March 1842 town meeting, residents voted "to have the Town House opened for all meetings of a Moral, Scientific, and Literary nature, when any of the citizens of Westminster may request the same," and the Selectmen were instructed to furnish suitable means of lighting the main hall for evening gatherings."

Thus, from the beginning, hundreds of speakers came regularly to this town all. We know that famous speakers, such as Frederick Douglas and William Lloyd Garrison, drew large crowds before the Civil War here, alongside temperance advocates and women's rights activists.

After the Civil War, many organizations held their meetings on the third floor—the Grand Army of the Republic, the Westminster Farmers And Mechanics Association, and the Westminster Grange. The 20th



The earliest view of the new town hall in 1893.



The Westminster Grange held their installation ceremony

**2021-2022
OFFICERS & BOARD MEMBERS**

<i>President</i>	Alison Manion
<i>Secretary</i>	Betsy Hannula
<i>Treasurer</i>	Judd Olshan
<i>At Large</i>	Sammi Dawley
<i>At Large</i>	Bob Feeley
<i>At Large</i>	Candi Hitchcock
<i>At Large</i>	Phil Marysz

STAFF

<i>Administrative Assistant</i>	Nadine Leger
<i>Building & Grounds Manager</i> .	Judd Olshan
<i>Curator</i>	Betsy Hannula
<i>Newsletter</i>	Betsy Hannula
<i>Registrar</i>	Open

MEETINGS

Meetings are normally held November through June on the 2nd Tuesday at 7 pm and are free and open to the public.

Please get onto our website WestminsterHistoricalSociety.org to see what is happening and how you can join us!

HOUSE & GIFT SHOP HOURS

The Historical Society House is open Fridays 9-Noon and by appointment.

MISSION

The Westminster Historical Society's mission is to save and share Westminster's past.



LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT
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March 12, 2022

Dear Members,

I am writing to introduce myself. My name is Alison Manion and I am relatively new to the community. I am happy to be the newly elected President of the Westminster Historical Society.

My family (husband, two college aged children and I) moved to Westminster two and ½ years ago during the summer prior to the pandemic. Before that, we lived in Belmont MA for over ten years.. Having grown up in Upstate NY, moving to this beautiful central MA mountain and lakes area is a perfect fit for our family lifestyle. We appreciate living in a small community which has access to many outdoor amenities and has a quieter pace of life than the suburbs of Boston.



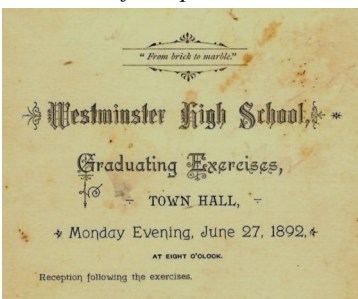
Currently, I teach voice at Concord Academy in Concord MA. I previously taught music in the public schools of Brookline. My interests in the historical aspects of the town of Westminster are many. I enjoy learning about past peoples and cultures, along with their art and lifestyles. It is with a curiosity and eagerness to meet people in our community that I found WHS. The mission of WHS to preserve and maintain the past for the people of Westminster, resonates with my own beliefs. I am looking forward to social and educational opportunities for all ages starting up again at WHS this summer.

I am wondering, could you please consider renewing your membership in the next few months? It will really help WHS to get summer and fall community programs up and running. However you can be involved it is appreciated either with giving of your time and or a monetary donation.

I am hoping to meet you at the house on Main St., to learn your story and how you came to live here in Westminster. Please feel free to reach out to me in any capacity with questions, concerns, or information you have about the town history or the Historical Society.

Best regards,
Alison Manion

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century brought a huge increase in activity at the old town hall. After the Great War and then World War II, activities for young and old kept all three floors busy. Town meetings and elections, caucuses, high school graduations, and

the second floor even served as a gymnasium for the school before the Loughlin school was built.



A girl Scout program in 1953.

Public suppers were served on the first floor while Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts held their meetings.



Because it was the largest gathering place in Town, families held wedding receptions, anniversary celebrations, funeral collations, and parties of all kinds. Theater productions and ceremonies of all kinds were



The Women's Club put on many plays on the stage.

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CURATORS CORNER

The Historical Society was delighted to receive three very special donations this winter. One was from Len Haug, who researched the history of artist Gamaliel Beaman, who was born, raised and buried in Westminster.

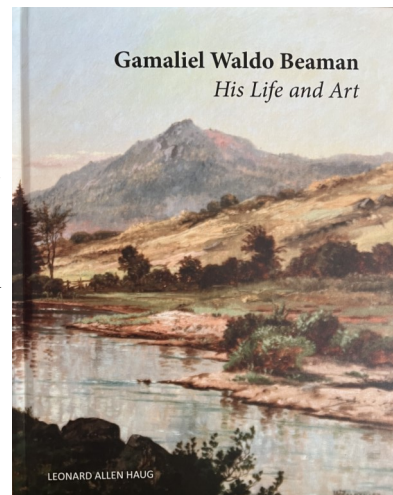
After spending several years hunting down dozens of his paintings and making connections with several family members and collectors all over the country, he wrote and published a beautiful book. He has now donated all his research materials, several copies of his book, and another Beaman painting for our collections. We are grateful indeed!

Another donation was from Bill Miller, whose ancestors settled in Westminster in the 1700s, and lived here for generations. For decades the Miller family has held family reunions in Westminster to commemorate their family's history here. As a matter of fact, the Society purchased its house at 110 Main Street from members of the Miller family.

An assortment of several items were sent to us including an 1819 book of psalms, a glass ink well, a silver engraved cup, and two lovely bracelets. The most significant item for the town's history was a beautiful chair. It's important because of our town's chair making industry. During the 19th century there were more than two dozen companies manufacturing seating of all kinds—church pews, rushed and caned chairs, and plank seat chairs such as this. It's a wonderful addition!

In addition, we were pleased to receive an Oscar Walkonen painting from Lola Leger and a poster advertising a Variety Show sponsored by the William S. Miller American Legion Post.

We will always be able to more easily relate to future generations with items they can get really close to and visualize in use with their ancestors in this town. Thank you to all!



UPTON SCHOOL UPDATE

It's been a long winter, while we have been waiting for the Town to decide if any commission or committee wants to use the Upton School for any other purpose. The Town has the right of first refusal for the property, so the sale has to wait for that decision.

Meanwhile, the building has been shown to three brokers and an auctioneer who have been enthusiastic that the building would be a good property to sell, especially in this real estate market. It has "good bones" and is a beautiful property in a beautiful setting.

The Board formed a committee of President Ali Manion, Treasurer Judd Olshan, and Secretary Betsy Hannula, to be in charge of the sale.

NEXT STEPS

Our Board of Directors has taken another step to move forward with the Society's need for additional space for safe storage and exhibit of its collections and for public programs. We decided to respond to the Request for Proposals that the Selectboard issued for the disposal of the old town hall.

Betsy Hannula represented the Society on a committee to figure out ways to use the old town hall to benefit our needs AND incorporate other groups in town, since fundraising is such a big project. This new group is called the Historic Meetinghouse Coalition. The Society's interest is to create a way for the Society to be able to fulfill its mission into the future that is sustainable, and we believe it can be done if we partner with other groups whose purposes align with ours.

The proposal is for the first floor to have a Visitors Center and Gift Shop, a commercial kitchen with a café/bakery open daily, and a small meeting room. On the second floor would be a Center for the Arts, using the stage for concerts and large area for dances, large meetings, wedding receptions, as well as a workshop room for classes. The third floor would be for the Historical Society collections and exhibits, volunteer workroom, and offices.

The Town Selectboard will make a decision next month. If our proposal is accepted, a lot of work will ensue. We will inform the Society membership of all the details, and a vote will be required of the membership to acquire the property.

If the proposal is not accepted by the Selectboard, the Historical Society Board will begin discussing other options to acquire additional space for our organization.

You can read the proposal by the "Historic Meetinghouse Coalition" on our website: WestminsterHistoricalSociety.org. Please take time to read it and let us know what you think. And let the Selectmen know about your interest! This is a very important decision for the town and its future!

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Performances of all kids took place in the auditorium,



Youth Center dances on Friday nights and the Finn Hops on Saturday nights kept the building hopping!

here in addition to dance recitals and musical programs.

Many organizations hosted public dances well into the 1960s: the Tophet Fish and Gun Club, the Farmers Cooperative Finn Hops and the Youth Center dances on Friday nights were hugely popular and drew people from all the neighboring towns.

Until the Fenno wing was added onto the school in 1959, town meetings held at the old town hall held hundreds of people connected on both floors with an intercom system.

By the 1970s the Town's population had expanded dramatically, and the need for Town services with additional employees also increased. To accommodate them, it was decided to carve out many small offices on the first floor. Later, in the 1990s, two more offices were created in the dance hall on the second floor.

By 2000 more commissions and committees needing offices, and residents voted to build a new town hall on South Street. Some of the structural beams on the third floor that had failed were repaired.



The town formed three successive committees to determine what should be done with the building. All three committees recommended that it not be demolished, and that the best use was for the citizens of Westminster as a community center, particularly serving the youth of the Town. The Selectmen proposed at a town meeting to demolish the building, and it was overwhelmingly defeated by the voters.

There is a misconception among some townspeople that the old town hall is past its useful life. This is not true. The Town paid \$29,000 for the McGinley Hart structural engineers to examine the building. Their report determined that the building "...is in generally good condition... The first floor brick masonry is in relatively good condition and requires only minor repair and re-pointing....The vacant portion of the site is level and can accommodate a building addition and/or off-street parking to serve the Town Hall.... Westminster has an opportunity to renovate and expand its historic Town Hall for the next century...the plans would achieve a completely modern, efficient and code compliant building that retains its historic and architectural character..."

In addition, a Cost-out Study of the Old Town Hall prepared for the Town by Packard, AIA, of the Red Hawk Studio, in 2016, stated in their report summary, "Despite almost a decade of minimal maintenance, the building is remarkably sound and is a good candidate for adaptive reuse..."



These are excerpts from the Westminster Historical Commission's letter to the Selectmen in 2021:

"Every town in New England is special for its own reasons. Westminster is no different. We are so fortunate to have our old town hall; not every town does." "You, (Selectmen) as the leaders of our town, have a responsibility to protect our town's resources, so that our residents in the future have a heritage they can be proud of...We urge the Selectmen to be attentive to the future needs of the residents in this town, and not destroy the opportunities we have to retain the special features of our town that we all enjoy and treasure – including the old Town Hall."

VALENTINES TEA

Ali Manion, our new president, wanted to plan an event to invite more people to the Historical Society and decided to host a tea party during Valentines Day week. It turned out to be great fun, with activities plus delicious tea and cookies.

It was so successful, we hope to have more events like this.

We would like you to feel free to come in and see what's happening and find out a thing or



two about our town. Refreshments will be part of the fun of course! We hope you'll try to make it here and see what kinds of activities are here for you and your family. We're also looking forward to learning what interests you!

WESTMINSTER-OPOLY GAME

We are anxiously awaiting the delivery of the Westminster-opoly game! We're grateful to the 29 businesses in Westminster which signed up to be on this game board. Each business will have a traditional deed card and spot on the board, as well as a reference on a chance card. It should prove fun for all ages!

As soon as they arrive, we'll announce it. Look for a celebration at the Historical Society!



MEMBERSHIP

If you're not yet a member, please consider joining today. It's easy. Just fill out the form below and send it along with your check to the Historical Society. Or, you can now become a member by getting onto our website! Your membership support is essential to us.

Thank you if you have already renewed their membership this past year. If you are unsure of your status, just call Nadine at the office (978-874-5569). You will want to be a member in order to take advantage of the ten percent discount on all items in the Gift Shop. If you are 75 years of age, your membership is free!

WESTMINSTER HISTORICAL SOCIETY MEMBERSHIP FORM

Name _____
 Address _____
 Phone _____ Fax _____
 E-mail _____

Individual	\$30
Family	45
Senior (over 65)	20
Contributing	60
Friend	100
Honorary (over 75)	0

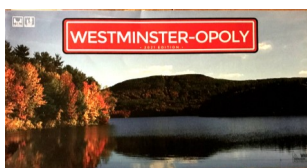
All members receive a 10% discount in the Gift Shop.

Please contact me about volunteering. These are some of my interests:

- Sorting, cleaning, and cataloging items for the collections.
- Putting data about items into our computer database.
- Helping with newsletters and brochures.

WESTMINSTER HISTORICAL SOCIETY GIFT SHOP

When looking for a unique gift for birthdays, anniversaries, and other holidays or special occasions, be sure to browse the WHS Gift Shop. Whether shopping for yourself or someone on your gift list, you may find the perfect gift for the person who loves Westminster. Members receive a 10% discount on all purchases. **You can now order items from the Gift Shop ONLINE** at WestminsterHistoricalSociety.org. Sales tax and shipping costs will apply. The Gift Shop is open Fridays 9-Noon, during programs, and other times by appointment.



New!
Westminster-opoly
featuring 29 businesses
in Westminster.
Fun for all ages!

We have only a few puzzles
of Westminster Historical
Sites left for sale! We now
have posters of the puzzle
also available.



Books

<u>Cemetery Inscriptions</u>	\$45.00
<u>History of Westminster, 1832</u> by Hudson	5.00
<u>History of Westminster, 1893</u> by Heywood.96.00
<u>History of Westminster 2008</u> by WHS75.00
<u>History of Westminster, 1961</u> , Ed. by Tolman	20.00
<u>Homestead Heritage of Westminster</u> , by WHS50.00
<u>Images of America</u> , by WHS.	20.00
<u>Olin Warner, Sculptor</u> , by Hyson4.00
<u>200th Anniversary of Westminster</u> ,	5.00
<u>Vintage Views of a New England Village—A</u> <u>Postcard Tour of Westminster, Massachusetts</u>	25.00
<u>Wajusett Gatherings</u> , by Sinclair (hardcover).	30.00
<u>Westminster Reflections</u> booklet.4.00

Other

Wachusett Mountain charcoal print	60.00
Calligraphy sampler	12.00
Cracker Factory print by Dana Vickery, signed	45.00
Map of Westminster 1855.	6.00
Downtown Westminster 1831 by Peckham	30.00
Postcards50
Photo of Wachusett Mountain by M. Lyons	10.00
Westminster Tapestry wall hanging	35.00
Soup Mug with Spoon	10.00
Historic Sites Puzzle (18"x24"), 500 pieces)49.00
Historic Sites Poster, incl. frame (14"x17")20.00
NEW Westminster-opoly game	\$.40.00

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CHRISTMAS FLEA MARKET

After two years of closed doors, it was a great feeling to be able to open up the Historical Society house for the annual Christmas Flea Market this year! People have always appreciated being able to get bargains on their holiday decorations and special gifts for people on their Christmas lists.



A lovely vintage sleigh was donated to us by Jill Normandin and became a lovely addition to the front lawn during the holidays.



Every room was decorated with holiday trimmings, and the tables were filled with treasures that were donated the past three years.

We were grateful to our helpers during the Christmas Flea Market and Afer Christmas Sale: Jeanne Keena, Kelley Keena, Patty Schmid, Ann Williams, Mary Ella Leiter, and Betsy Hannula.



GEOCACHING STILL ALIVE!

A few years ago Bob and Pat Feeley presented a program on geocaching, an outdoor game where people find hidden caches using geographical clues.

They hid a cache on the Historical Society property and every year several people come to the house to find the cache and add it to their count of finds,

Often, we'll encounter people who are excited to find the cache and enjoy sitting on the steps to view the center of our town. It's interesting to see how far people have traveled to participate in this game.



This family came from Cape Cod on a beautiful winter day and found the hidden cache!

WESTMINSTER FARMERS COOPERATIVE

The Westminster Farmers Cooperative Association was formed at the turn of the last century to assist the new immigrant population from Finland. Many came to Westminster to farm, and found farms could be purchased with loans and mortgages and a lot of hard work.

The cooperative was a new concept in America, but had been used in Finland. Members of the cooperative bought seed in bulk and large machinery such as harrows, plows, and ice cutting equipment, which were then used by all the farmers in turn during each season. The building they constructed about 1929 was used as a produce center, where farmers brought blueberries, raspberries and other products to Haymarket Square in Boston to be sold. Doing business this way saved them all a lot of money.

In 1976 the Farmers Cooperative gave the building to the Town, and the meeting in June is usually held at the Farmers Camp on Leominster Street to celebrate Juhannus, the longest day of the year.



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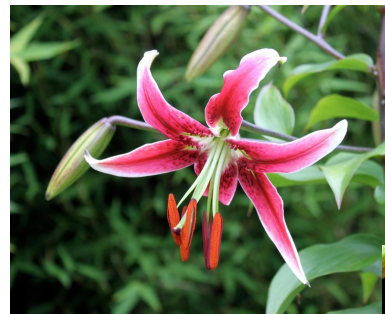
March 20, 1-3 pm. Maple Sugaring
at Bean's Sugar Shack
May 7, 9-12. Plant Swap & Sale
June 14, 7pm: Finnish Farmers
Camp program on Leominster St.
June 18, 8-2. Town Wide Yard Sale.

MAPLE SUGARING

Join us at Adam and Sherry Bean's farm at 68 Harrington Road on Sunday, March 20 from 1-3 pm to watch maple syrup being made at their sugar shack. (This is Maple Sugaring weekend in Massachusetts, and a great time to see how this old time activity is done!) The Historical Society will be there giving out free ice cream with maple syrup on top. Yum!



PLANT SWAP & SALE MAY 7



If you're tired of winter, start planning your garden! The annual Plant Swap & Sale on May 7, 9-12, is a great place to begin collecting new plants!

As you divide up your plant beds, bring your extras to swap, or if you're just starting new, you can give a donation. You will also find shrubs and bushes for sale (lilacs, raspberries, currants, etc.) There will be something for everyone!

