

# **An Economic History of the Stockbridge Town Hall 1904-1999**

*[Note: The building at 6 Main St., currently known as the Old Town Hall, is called simply the “Town Hall” in this study. The building at 34 Main St., now Yankee Candle, is called the “Town Offices”. These are the names by which these buildings were known during the years covered by this paper.]*

“Again we have the problem of the Town Hall. ...The townspeople must decide what is to be done with this building.” - Selectmen’s Report (1960)

## **Introduction**

This paper examines the economic history of the Town Hall as recorded in the annual Town Reports of Stockbridge from 1903 through 1999. Information relating to the Town Hall is largely to be found in three sections of the Town Reports:

The Finance Section records rental income, expenses, and the status of appropriations.

The numbered Warrant Articles give details of special requests for funding. They are of great interest as they usually deal with exceptional outlays for major repairs to the building.

The Reports of the Board of Selectmen contain invaluable discussions of the current condition, needs, and problems of the Town Hall at several important junctures in its history.

The changing value of money from year to year can distort our understanding of costs over the course of a century. To provide a basis for comparison, all historical costs are followed by a dollar amount in parentheses showing what that cost would be today with reference to the Consumer Price Index.

All emphasis in quoted texts has been added.

### **Large Investment, Gradual Decline and Crisis: The Economic Cycle of the Town Hall**

The Town Hall as we know it opened its doors in 1904. At a Special Meeting the Town expressed its satisfaction by asserting, “they can rightly claim for Stockbridge the most convenient and attractive public hall in this part of the country.” But by 1921, we find the Selectmen urging the townspeople to take action so that the Hall “may be a credit *rather than a disgrace* to the Town.”

In all of the existing histories of this building there is a large gap between the construction of the 1904 building and the Procter Gift in 1961. However, the story of these missing years shines an important light on our present deliberations concerning the Town Hall. From a study of the Town Reports a pattern emerges of large investment followed by heavy use, but inadequate year-to-year maintenance. Eventually, a crisis is reached as the condition of the structure slips from shabby to deplorable. This is what I’ve called the Economic Cycle of the Town Hall - Large Investment, Gradual Decline, and Crisis. Currently, we are at the end of the fourth iteration of this cycle - at the crisis phase. An account of these succeeding cycles is given below, but a few general observations apply to all of them.

First, the cycles are easy to spot. During the period of large investment, there are frequent Articles in the annual Warrants relating to the Town Hall, together with messages on the necessity for extensive repairs in the Reports of the Selectmen. During the years of neglect, a decade passes without any Articles relating to this building, and the Reports of the Selectmen fall silent on the subject.

Second, the deferred costs, again and again, are the roof, the painting of the interior and exterior, and the heating plant. To a greater or lesser degree, all of these problems stem from the oversize design of the structure.

Third, the cycles are roughly twenty years in length. The first crisis comes in 1921 and the large investment phase continues to 1925. The next crisis comes in 1942, the building being virtually “warehoused” until 1945. The effort made to restore the building from 1945 to 1947 is inadequate, and this sets the stage for the major crisis of 1958. After the conversion of the building to Town Offices, it continues to suffer from neglect, but of a different kind.

## **1904 - 1920**

### **The First Cycle: Large Investment**

The construction of the Town Hall in 1904 finished with a final cost of \$20,000.00 (\$425,000.00). Another \$2,550.00 (\$54,200.00) was spent on lighting, furnishing and a heating system.

### **The First Cycle: Gradual Decline**

Between 1905 and 1920 there are five Articles relating to the Town Hall. In 1907 and 1909, there were proposals to wire the building for electric lights. These Articles appear to have failed, but a third Article in 1910 passed and the building was wired and lighted in 1911.

The other two Articles, both approved, related to the purchase of a piano for the Town Hall. Apparently, the 1905 piano was worn out by 1920.

Other than the wiring of the building, there was only one major repair. In 1909 it was found the roof needed work and this was paid for by an emergency appropriation of \$301.30 (\$5,800.00). It's interesting to note that this chronic problem of the roof makes its first appearance only five years after the building's completion.

There are no other large appropriations for maintenance throughout these years. Yearly expenses for repairs ranged between a low of \$7.00 (\$131.00) in 1910 to a high of \$295.00 (\$3,070.00) in

1919. In these sixteen years, expenses for repairs exceed \$100.00 (\$1,040.00) only four times.

Rental income for the building covered between one third and one half of the total general expenses. The most costly items among the general expenses included janitorial services, fuel, insurance and (after 1911) lights. Occasional expenses included “carting ashes” and “piano tuning.”

A list of payments to George W. Searing gives some insight into the uses of the building at this time. George was paid to open the building for: Caucus and Town Meeting; Decoration Day; Labor Day; Lectures and Shows; and the High School Graduation. The expenses for 1906 include \$5.00 (\$102.00) for a desk for the use of the Occidental Lodge, indicating that the Masons were among the regular patrons of the building.

### **The First Cycle: The Crisis**

“The sum of \$500.00 was inadequate to cover the cost of repairs necessary *to make the building safe for public use and protect it from more serious damage.* It was necessary to repair and rebuild the steps and approaches to put them in a safe condition and it was found impossible to repair the roof in even a temporary manner... Further repairs should be made this year and provision made for repainting the interior of the hall *that it may be a credit rather than a disgrace to the Town.*” Selectmen’s Report 1921

“...a sum obviously inadequate for the interior painting and decorations *so sadly needed.*” - Selectmen’s Report 1922

## **1921 - 1943**

### **The Second Cycle: Large Investment**

Between 1921 and 1925, a new “slag roof” replaced the original roof, the exterior was painted, and the interior was plastered, painted and redecorated. The chimneys were rebuilt and the flues

in the ventilator shafts replaced. A new furnace was installed and there were numerous expenditures and special appropriations for minor repairs and improvements. These appropriations covered the costs of work through 1926, which included replacing the toilet, adding a second toilet, and overhauling one of the furnaces.

At the close of 1925, the heavy spending on the Town Hall and the enormous costs of converting roads and bridges to handle motor traffic left the Town financially overextended. The final straw was the discovery of financial misdoings on the part of the Collector of Taxes. A shortage of \$32,034.17 (\$352,000.00) was discovered in the Town's accounts and it was resolved that all spending on improvements be suspended for "a period of several years."

### **The Second Cycle: Gradual Decline**

The years between 1925 and 1930 are the golden years of the Town Hall. With the country enjoying Coolidge Prosperity, the newly refurbished building saw a steady climb in rental income, reaching its peak in 1928.

1925: \$785.00 (\$8,620.00)

1926: \$790.00 (\$8,640.00)

1927: \$851.00 (\$9,530.00)

1928: \$866.00 (\$9,630.00)

1929: \$791.00 (\$8,770.00)

1930: \$718.00 (\$8,260.00)

1931: \$417.00 (5,350.00)

1932: \$255.00 (\$3,710.00)

1933: \$199.00 (\$2,970.00)

Though rental income rose throughout the twenties, general expenses rose proportionately in order to meet the increased janitor

wages, fuel consumption, and other expenses incurred by heavy use. Just as in the previous decade, expenses ran at two to three times the amount of income. More important, spending on repairs returned to, and often fell below, the 1905 to 1920 level.

During the depression years, the Town had little to spend on the Town Hall. An Article for an appropriation of \$100.00 (\$1,420.00) to buy chairs for the upper hall failed to pass. This was the only Article put forward to provide for the Town Hall between 1924 and 1944. The Selectmen drew heavily on the Reserve Fund to replace a furnace and paint the exterior of the building in 1931. Total repairs for that year amounted to \$2,049.66 (\$26,300.00). Three years later the roof was repaired and the front steps rebuilt out of general maintenance funds of \$264.73 (\$3,750.00). These sums represent the only significant investment in the building between 1926 and 1944. In 1938 rental income reached a low point of \$9.00 (\$118.00) for the year.

The Cottage Estate era was coming to an end in these years, with a consequent drop in tax revenue. Unemployment grew ominously and as late as 1940, 15.7% of the town's budget was being devoted to "charity." New obligations in the form of contributions to Federal programs such as the ERA and WPA appear among the expenses in the Town Reports. The costs of supporting the Town Hall, Town Offices, The Cemetery House, The Vacation House, Citizen's Hall and the American Legion Post forced choices on the town. For the first time the budget of the Town Offices exceeded that of the Town Hall. After 1940 this change became permanent. In 1941 "as a result of war with the Axis Powers" all spending on improvements was halted.

## **The Second Cycle: The Crisis**

“The Town has a lot of so-called dead property on hand at this time such as the Town Hall, Vacation House, Cemetery House and Citizen’s Hall.” – Selectmen’s Report 1942.

The Selectmen went on to recommend that the Town consider selling or demolishing these properties, and in the course of the next few decades all of them, except the Town Hall, would pass into private hands. This marks the first, but not the last time that the desirability of razing the building or of selling the property emerges in the history of the Town Hall. From this point on, the building’s continued existence will be debated at each crisis. In 1942 this debate was resolved by virtually shuttering the building. There is no spending on fuel for 1942, 1943, or 1944 and janitorial services are stopped in 1944. Presumably the building was used in the warmer months; rentals averaging \$28.66 (\$321.99) are recorded for these three years.

## 1944 - 1958

### The Third Cycle: Large Investment

That the building was important to the townspeople of Stockbridge is evident from the steps they took to revive it as soon as they were able. In 1944 an Article was approved allocating \$2,700.00 (\$29,600.00) to “repair and paint the interior and exterior of the Town Hall”, and the following year \$1,400.97 (\$14,900.00) of this appropriation was spent “for repairs.” Another Article from 1944 concerns the fire escape that can be seen today on the East side of the building. This was added at a cost of \$590.02 (\$6,460.00).

The work continued in 1946 and 1947. “The interior of the Town Hall is being redecorated and as it is being used more than in previous years it naturally makes our Town Hall and Office Accounts higher,” the Selectmen explained in 1946. Rental income for this year was up, to \$208.00 (\$1,970.00). The heating system was updated in this period as well: a new oil burner was installed in

1946 and an Article to purchase a new furnace was approved in 1947.

### **Third Cycle: Gradual Decline**

Between 1947 and 1958, when the building was condemned, only two Articles appeared pertaining to major work on the Town Hall. The first, in 1955, was for repairs to the roof and the second, in the following year, “to install a new ceiling in the upper hall and kitchen.” It is probably safe to assume that the problem with the roof brought on the need for the new ceiling. The roof repair itself can only have been a patch job, costing as it did \$380.23 (\$2,680.00). It is interesting to note that during the periods of neglect major investment is generally limited to roof repairs and addressing serious failures of the heating system.

The deterioration of the Town Hall during this span of years is succinctly summed up in the Selectmen’s Reports for 1958.

“For years this building has been in need of drastic repair. The Selectmen and Finance Committee have hesitated to put the money into the building where there was so little revenue received in return for the outlay.” – Selectmen’s Report 1958

And from the same Report: “This will mean a considerable outlay for a new roof, new heating system, as well as the interior of the building repaired.”

The neglect that has brought about the closure of the building is justified in the Selectmen’s Report of 1959:

“It is only used thirty or forty times a year bringing in a revenue of not more than two hundred dollars (\$1,270.00) while the expenses to keep it in good condition, insurance and operating costs, approximate \$1,000.00 (\$6,370.00) or more every year.”



## The Third Cycle: The Crisis

Throughout the 1950s and beyond, the State retained the responsibility for the inspection of all churches, theaters and public halls. In 1958 "...the State Building Inspector, on his last report, condemned this building stating that it could not be used until repaired."

In this emergency, the Selectmen took steps to repair the building, but also sought authority to dispose of it:

"Article 32: To see if the Town will raise and appropriate a sum of money to put the Town Hall in condition for Town use, or *authorize the Selectmen to dispose of the building to the highest bidder.*"

As a result of this Article, a new roof was added at a cost of \$2,302.25 (\$14,900.00), but the new roof alone was not enough to persuade the State to reopen the Hall.

The Selectmen also appointed a Town Hall Committee with a dual purpose; to consider the best course of action with regard to the Town Hall and to suggest possible venues for new Town Offices. The coincidence of these two problems - the lack of space at the Town Offices where twelve departments shared three rooms, and the ruinous state of the Town Hall - presented the Town with two expensive projects simultaneously. The Town Hall Committee recognized both the opportunity and difficulty involved in devising one solution that would address both these problems. The following extracts from this committee's first report in 1959 are worth studying in view of our present task:

"At a Special Town Meeting last year, the sum of \$2,500.00 (\$16,100.00) was appropriated to replace the roof on the town hall and to repair the plaster and the outside steps. The roof repairs were somewhat more expensive than anticipated, thus the other repairs were not made... Despite the fact that the roof was repaired,

the building remains condemned because of the condition of the plaster.”

The report continues:

“The voters chose to preserve this building last summer. The question remains - *do they wish to put the building to use or do they prefer to leave it idle, a hollow monument to the past?*”

Because operating and maintenance costs are high, this committee feels very strongly that the building should be put to full-time use to house the town offices, welfare department, American Legion, Scouts, Grange and other organizations now housed in various other town buildings. These other buildings should then be disposed of. *We are in favor, if this building is not to be used, that it be torn down and a new one erected to house the above offices and organizations.*”

“The alternative recommendation, *and one favored by this committee*, would be to leave the building as it now stands [in other words, not to go any further with repairs] and appoint a committee *to investigate the possibility of tearing down the present building and replacing it by a new office building.*” - Town Hall Committee Report 1959

In the following year, the Town Hall Committee investigated various sites for a new Town Office including land owned by the Riggs Center and the “Corner House”. The latter was rejected due to a lack of parking.

In 1961 the offer of the Procter gift settled the matter.

“The possibility of renovating the Town Hall had been eliminated previously because of the high cost. With a substantial gift from Mrs. Procter, this alternative became a very attractive one.” - Town Hall Committee 1961

**1961 - 2016**

## **The Fourth Cycle: Large Investment**

Buoyed by the Procter Gift of \$44,000.00 (\$273,000.00), the town gathered its forces for the great effort of rescuing the Town Hall from its derelict status. At the same time, it would solve the long-standing problem of inadequate office space for administrative functions. The townspeople augmented the Procter Gift with a special tax levy; an \$8,000.00 (\$49,700.00) appropriation from existing funds; a hefty transfer, \$32,279.59 (\$201,000.00) from the Post-War Rehabilitation Fund and \$25,000.00 (\$155,000.00) in borrowed money.

This war chest sufficed to carry out the reconstruction and remodeling of the Town Hall. The deductions from this fund can be followed in the Appropriations Table of the Finance Report. Large sums for general repairs, new furniture, painting of the exterior and interior, yet *another* new roof with flashing and gutters, a porch-roof over the back entrance, and numerous smaller purchases exhausted the fund by the end of the sixties. In 1971 the balance of the fund stood at \$11.80 (\$54.10).

## **The Fourth Cycle: Failure to Modernize**

The consolidation of the Town Offices and the Town Hall, together with the sale of the many minor properties the Town had supported in the past, made it possible for the Town Hall to be maintained properly on a long-term basis. With the change in use, repairs were carried out when needed and not in the familiar feast or famine cycle. There seems to have been a determination not to let the building deteriorate as it had in the fifties. This new commitment to timely repairs makes clear the true requirements of this structure in terms of continuing maintenance.

**The Roof:** The roof was repaired or replaced four times between 1969 and 1991:

1969: New roof - \$1,200.00 (\$6,090.00)

1976: Roof repair - \$995.00 (\$3,300.00)

1980: New roof - \$6,350.00 (\$15,700.00)

1991: Reconstruction and repair - \$12,000.00 (\$19,100.00)  
appropriated.

Painting (Interior and Exterior): No fewer than ten large appropriations were made for painting between 1969 and 1998 averaging \$2,532.40 (\$4,860.00) each.

Flooring: There were three large expenditures for the replacement of flooring in the nineties:

1991: \$16,220.60 (\$25,800.00)

1993: \$3,130.00 (\$4,760.00)

1995: \$9,344.00 (\$13,600.00)

The building's new function made possible the constant upkeep it requires, but other costs had to be deferred to accomplish this. In time, these deferred costs brought about a new crisis for the building. The Selectmen's Report for 1999 lists these in detail.

“The space for meetings, storage of records, and departmental functions is inadequate. Mechanical systems and meeting code requirements need updating. The building is not ADA compliant. We all know about the need of better climate control at the Town Meetings.”

### **The Fourth Cycle: The Crisis**

In 1963, the Selectmen happily announced, “The alterations and repairs on the Town Hall were completed this year and we now have the most beautiful Town Hall in Berkshire County.” But by 1999 the Selectmen gave a different appraisal of the building: “The

problem is that the Town Hall is getting tired. No work, other than maintenance, has been done on the Hall since the 1960s.”

The idea of returning the Town Hall to its pre-1958 functions will not work, for the simple reason that it never did work. For at least thirty years of its fifty-seven year existence as a venue for town meetings and activities, the Town Hall was in disrepair. It should be remembered too that for thirty-six of these years its annual budget was, on average, double and sometimes triple, that of the diminutive Town Offices. Today the town administrative offices are housed in a 44,000 square foot building requiring huge sums for its upkeep.

In considering the future of this building we should bear in mind that the problem is *not* the large investment required to make it usable again. The problem is finding a use that will support it so that in twenty years or less another Town Hall Committee isn't convened to answer the recurring question, what is to be done with the Old Town Hall?

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