



History of the Town Hall



A gaping wound in the heart and soul of Greencastle is, for the moment, a daily reminder of the events on the bitter cold morning of Thursday, January 26, 2006. At approximately 5 a.m., the alarms sounded for a fire at 5 South Washington Street. Eight adults and five children, residents of the recently renovated apartments, and a number of nearby neighbors escaped without injury. The electrical fire, which started in the attic area, was fanned by the high winds of the morning. With flames

shooting 20 feet into the air, about 70 firefighters from the Rescue Hose Company and numerous neighboring fire companies worked on knocking down the fire and remained on the scene into the morning hours, returning a couple times later that day to extinguish flare-ups.



Greencastle's venerable Town Hall building would have celebrated its 135th anniversary this year. Three investors, whose identities are yet to be discovered through further research, founded the Town Hall Company in 1870 and completed construction of the building in 1871 when it was then occupied. In the History of Franklin County 1887, are listed the following officers and directors of the company at that time: Addison Imbrie, president; Jacob Pensinger, secretary and treasurer; and the following directors, along with the afore mentioned – John Wilhelm, Jacob Deardorff, J. C. McLanahan, James S. Crunkleton, and Dr. J. K. Davidson.

Addison Imbrie moved from Mercersburg to Greencastle in 1861. He was a merchant and warehouseman and was a partner in the Schafhirt and Imbrie Company with A. F. Schafhirt. In 1868, they owned 70 acres of land just west of town, near where they also owned and operated the grist mill along what is now Grant Shook Road. In 1875, Imbrie purchased the 75-acre property, on which sits a stately

house, at 327 East Baltimore Street, just east of the library.



Jacob Pensinger was a prominent member of the Greencastle community. He was one of the incorporators in 1849 of the Greencastle and Maryland Turnpike (now known as the Williamsport Pike) and served as the treasurer and one of the managers on the Cedar Hill Cemetery board. In 1874 – 1881 and 1887 – 1900, Pensinger was a director of the First National Bank.

I am going to make a supposition that considering Imbrie and Pensinger held the executive board positions that they were likely two of the three investors who built the Town Hall. A deed search at the County Courthouse may produce some answers.

The First National Bank building was constructed by the Crowell and Davison Co., which was then occupied by the bank in 1870. It would be two years later until the money was raised in the community to purchase the clock works and build the tower of the Town Clock. In 1872, Judge D. Watson Rowe built his home on South Allison Street, which he called Rosemont. When the Town Hall was built, the building into which Jacob Hostetter would eventually move his store was only a two-story building at the southwest corner of the square at Baltimore Street. In 1871, the Antrim House was still the 1859 weatherboard structure, which J. Thomas Pawling had built, and would remain so for another 32 years until Harry W. McLaughlin replaced the wooden structure with a three-story brick building called the McLaughlin Hotel.



The late William P. Conrad wrote about the Town Hall in his book Conococheague as well as penning an Echo-Pilot article on September 12, 1985. One of his sources for Town Hall information was an article, written by Lillian C. Ruthrauff, which was published in the September 7, 1939 90th anniversary edition of the Echo Pilot and the centennial edition on September 22, 1949.

The first floor of the Town Hall provided space for storefronts and businesses, the original architectural design of which can be seen in the accompanying photograph. One of the early businesses was W.H. Davison & Co. William H. Davison was born in Antrim Township on November 2, 1836. He was a veteran of the Civil War and was a member of Company B of the 126th Pennsylvania Volunteers. Davison was commissioned to the rank of colonel in 1870 by Pennsylvania Gov. John Geary.

In 1860, William H. Davison, Gen. David Detrich, and the Rev. Dr. Edwin Emerson began a steam saw mill and sash, door, and blind factory. Davison's partners were bought out over the next two years until 1862, when J. B. Crowell became his partner. Crowell and Davison continued the partnership until it was dissolved in 1870. After the dissolution of the partnership with Crowell, Davison became a merchant (likely with a partner because the sign says "& Co.") with his business located in the front left storefront of the "new" Town Hall building.



With a magnifying glass, one can see that Davison dealt in a variety of goods, which included the very popular Queensware (glassware), brooms, baskets, hats, boots, gaiters, tobacco, cigars, oil cloth, and grain bags (from which horses ate grain), and many other items. In today's market, a nylon grain bag can be bought for \$19.95.

Davison was in ill health at the end of the Civil War and died on September 8, 1875 at the age of 39. This fact, I believe, dates the photograph between 1871 and 1875, because according to family genealogy, there was only one William H. Davison.

In 1871 there was no electricity, radio, television, movies, CDs, or DVDs. The Town Hall was Greencastle-Antrim's first cultural and special events center. The second floor was devoted to a huge auditorium, which was filled to capacity for most of the presentations, whether they were theatrical, musical, class plays, concerts, graduation ceremonies, reunions, dinners, dances, lectures, or Old Home Week events. The headquarters for Old Home Week were located in the Town Hall from 1902 to 1911, as seen in the photograph with traditional red, white, and blue banners decorating the front of the building.



According to Lillian Ruthrauff, the auditorium also had dressing rooms, very small dressing rooms. She recounted in her article that traveling theatrical groups stopped frequently in Greencastle to perform to enthusiastic crowds. The audience was evidently also privy to the "back stage" preparations, because the actors could be heard through the thin walls of the dressing rooms, complaining about no room "to make up." One theatrical troupe returned year after year for almost two decades and filled the hall two nights in a row. The only thing they performed for all those years was "Uncle Tom's Cabin."



Local talent was abundant whether in writing, acting, or singing. Phillip E. Baer, one of the vocalists, likely became the most well-known musical performer from the Greencastle-Antrim area. Besides singing solo, he was also a member of the Baer quartet with his father and two brothers. Baer went on to become an opera singer and was the founder of Greencastle-Antrim's beloved Old Home triennial celebration. In 1902 a chicken dinner was served to the Old Boys in the auditorium of the Town Hall and by the fourth Old Home Week, the auditorium hosted a reception, a smoker, a fireman's reunion, and dramatic presentations.

In Mr. Conrad's book Glory Land, he tells about Greencastle's African American community and their rich talents, which were most often shared

with the community-at-large in the Town Hall auditorium or in Lininger's garage on West Franklin Street. They performed concerts, had dances, and what sounds like the most fun of all – cake walks. In 1983, when Glory Land was written, older members of the African American community remembered that Charlie Wagner of Hagerstown was the leader of the cake walks. Mr. Conrad wrote, "His costume included a high silk hat, a ruffled shirt with an

unusually high collar supporting a profusely colored cravat and sparkling tie pin. He wore a black coat with a shining velvet collar and lapels wide enough to support at least a ten-inch boutonniere. This regalia was completed with brightly striped trousers and white spats over yellow or highly polished tan shoes. Most importantly his baton or wand was always a glistening white cane.

Around the room the couples would follow the leader in formation and steps that he called – directed by his cane and demonstrated with high stepping struts, glides, bows, and other fancy gyrations. This combination walk and dance was accompanied by a band of three or four string musicians. As the promenade continued winding in and out on the dance floor, the dancers were gradually eliminated, until the winning couple would then be decided and a cake presented to them. The couples would dress in their “Sunday best” according to the season.” What a wonderful mental picture Mr. Conrad created.

The third floor provided a meeting place for the Grand Army of the Republic and fraternal organizations of the community. There was also an area on the third floor where bands could practice. The bands that entertained the community with concerts in the Town Hall at that time were a brass band, the Silver Cornet Band, a band sponsored by the Junior Order of United American Mechanics, and the Willow Spring Band from the African American community.

About 1911 or 1912, Harry McLaughlin built an annex, which included a movie theater, onto the hotel. The new, modern facility immediately started to attract special events and audiences away from the Town Hall. In 1913, the Town Hall building was sold. Within one year of the sale, the building was renovated – creating apartments on the second and third floors, with businesses on the first floor.

There are still questions to be answered. One is the verification of who the three investors were who formed the Town Hall Company in 1870. Who made all the food for the dinners that were served in the second floor auditorium, and where were the dinners prepared? Who purchased the Town Hall in 1913 and renovated it?

In the remaining decades of the 20th century, the building at 5 South Washington Street was known as the Funk building, the Strite building, and the Ausherman building, those names being those of the owners. Since the latter part of 2005, the current owner of the building was in the process of restoring the Town Hall building to its original glory by painting the outside wooden architectural features and renovating the 1913-era apartments. The Town Hall was in the good and caring hands of someone who respected and honored its past.



In Mr. Conrad's September 12, 1985 article about the Town Hall, he opened in the following way. "A recent news story appearing in the *New York Times*, August 18, (1985) tells of Salisbury, Conn. losing its Town Hall in a fire. – The town is still in a state of shock over losing such a cherished part of its heritage." Greencastle-Antrim is still in a state of shock and grief over losing the Town Hall building. We, who live in the Greencastle-Antrim community 21 years later, now know Salisbury's feeling of sadness, grief and loss, not only for the loss of the building, but for the losses incurred by the families, businesses, and owner.

In the same article, Mr. Conrad closed with this, "All that is left of Town Hall (circa 1985) are recorded memories covering nearly 50 years of simple pleasures and an altered building..." But, oh what wonderful recorded memories of its early years were left by our forefathers. Memories cherished even more so since the fire. I can almost hear the

concerts and taste the chicken dinners and hear the gaiety of the cake walks. Yet, in spite of the fire, there will be new memories created in the future at 5 South Washington Street, which will also be recorded in the history book of Greencastle-Antrim.

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February 2006

