

TOWN HALL

By Ellen Knight



Earliest known view of the Town Hall

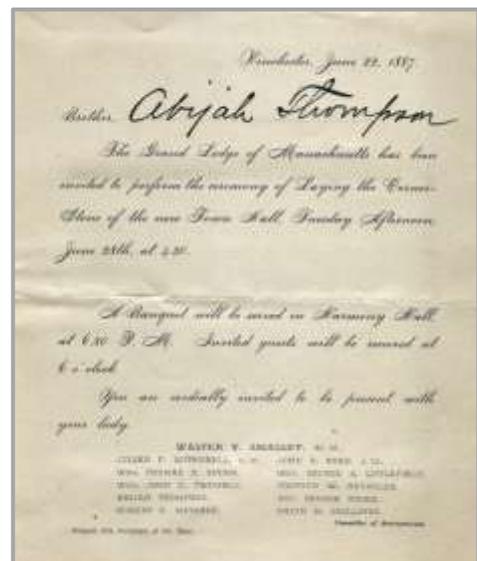
When Winchester was named for Lt. Col. William P. Winchester of Boston, the town founders hoped the honor would be rewarded with a cash gift. And it was. Colonel Winchester gave the new town \$3,000. But the founders' hopes that the Colonel's gift would be enough to build a town hall were dashed. Although he indicated it was "to be appropriated to the erection of a Town Hall or another proper object of municipal expenditure,"¹ it was not enough for a Town Hall whose estimated cost was \$7,000.

After Winchester's incorporation in 1850, Town Meeting voted to build four new schoolhouses and had so many other expenses that it could not afford a Town Hall. The project was postponed until the 1880s. By then, the inconvenience of having the various town offices scattered in different buildings throughout the downtown of Winchester, the rising expense of renting quarters for town boards and officers, and the need for an adequate meeting room all led to the construction of Winchester's Town Hall.

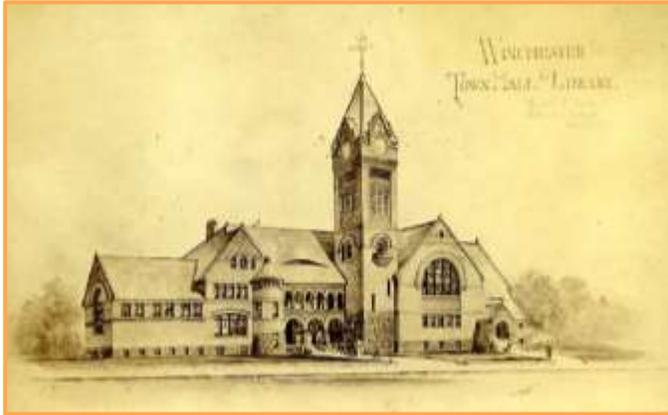
In 1885, Town Meeting appointed a committee to report on the matter. After some reportedly prolonged and acrimonious debate which continued through several Town Meetings, the site was decided on in 1886. Sited next to the Aberjona River, Town Hall was built on Pleasant (now Mount Vernon) Street, two blocks away from the Town Common.

With a \$50,000 appropriation, the Town hired the firm of Rand & Taylor Architects. Construction began in 1887. The cornerstone was laid on June 28, 1887, the ceremonies conducted by the William Parkman Masonic Lodge.

Another \$10,000 was appropriated to add a library wing. In the end, it cost in excess of \$72,000, and the Colonel's gift (returned by the Cemetery Commissioners who had used it to purchase the land for Wildwood Cemetery) came in useful to pay for the tower clock and bell, auditorium clock, and frescoing and decorating. An inscription on the bell reads, "This clock and bell commemorate the gift of William P. Winchester to the town which bears his name."



Invitation to the cornerstone laying



Rand & Taylor rendering

The building rises to three stories above its basement. At one end a large hall, now the Maurer Auditorium, was constructed and has been used for Town Meeting, concerts and shows, auctions, exhibits, classes, lectures, and other large gatherings. At the opposite end was the library wing, also used by the Winchester Historical and Genealogical Society. That wing was converted for additional offices after the Town built a separate library in 1931. During the renovation of 1987, it was turned into a two-story meeting room, called the Winchester Room.

At first, Town offices occupied only the central portion of the building. The police and lockup were originally allotted space in the basement. Since they also were later moved into a separate building, municipal offices have spread through the basement area.

In style the building is Romanesque. It is a massive, asymmetrical structure—sometimes considered sprawling – constructed of red brick trimmed with Longmeadow freestone on a foundation of Rockport granite. Its focal point is its clock tower, topped by a weathervane. Notable architectural features include the repeated use of rounded arches in the windows, the arcade front, and auditorium entrance, the window groupings, two eyebrow windows, and interlocking geometric shapes.



Town Hall decorated for the town's centennial celebration in 1950

In 1940, Town Meeting voted to appoint a Town Hall Improvement Committee to study the feasibility of altering or adding to the building to accommodate offices for departments not then housed in the Town Hall. The committee rejected the option of building a new Town Hall as being too expensive and going against public sentiment for the landmark. Town Meeting defeated the second option, altering the building. In 1943, when the town purchased the Skillings estate across the street, some urged the construction of a new town hall on the lot, but that did not happen. (The land was used instead for a parking lot and the Jenks Senior Center).

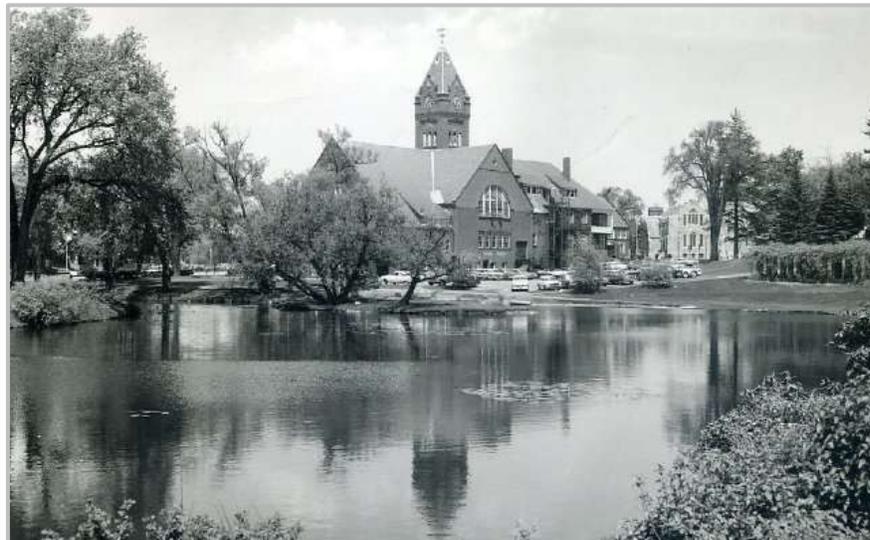
In 1958, the Board of Selectmen sponsored a six-year renovation project, which Town Meeting approved, although the next year it defeated the proposal to partition the auditorium into offices and construct a new auditorium above it.

Town Hall was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1983. Then it underwent another thorough renovation program in the 1980s, a four-year program ending in 1989. This time the tower was rebuilt and reinforced, fifty percent of the bricks being replaced. All the rest of the masonry was cleaned and repointed. Almost all the windows were rebuilt. The auditorium, which had been closed due to structural problems was repaired and brought back to a usable life. The former library end, not so used since 1931, became another meeting hall, the Winchester Room. It was not a strict restoration but adhered to the style of the original.

On April 22, 1989, the building was rededicated. The architect, William Rowe of Arlington, reportedly said the building was “one of the most notable town halls in the United States. It is certainly among the richest in composition.”



In 1963, there was a scare about the possibility of the tower falling, but the tower was stabilized with cables.



The view of Town Hall across Mill Pond has been one of the most iconic scenes of Winchester ever since the building was built.

¹ Quoted in Henry S. Chapman, *History of Winchester*, p. 163.