

Westport Town Hall

The Meeting House

Commonly referred to as Westport's "Historic Town Hall," with its construction dating back to about 1790, the Hall was originally built as a house of worship, not as a place for the conduct of town business. The building only became used for Town Meetings, Selectman's meetings, and other public affairs, as well as dances, sewing circles, dinners, and other community events, in 1885 when the town acquired it from the proprietors of the Union Meeting House, as it was then known. How the building came to be built and its early history are illustrative of the challenges many communities faced in colonial and early US history.

The Building of the Meeting House

In colonial Massachusetts communities which aspired to self-governance had to be chartered as a town. And to be a town a community was expected to establish a Meeting House for worship and pay for the support of a Christian minister. Religion was considered an essential and central part of community life. Throughout the 1750s to 1770s, as groups of settlers in the Sheepscot area petitioned for a town charter that would have included Jeremy Squam island, as Westport was known then, they often referred to how they were trying to build a meetinghouse, and felt that they needed to be a town in order to obtain the services of a minister of God.

In 1774 the community of Freetown, on the east side of the Sheepscot River, was successful in petitioning for a town charter. Jeremy Squam was included in the new town. Freetown was renamed Edgecomb, and the two communities continued as one town until 1828.

Even after getting chartered, with the power of local taxation, building the Meeting House was not easily done. The frame of a Meeting House had been erected on the mainland prior to the petition in 1774, but subsequent meetings of the new town failed to accept the frame. By a third meeting on July 18, 1774 it became apparent that the residents of Jeremy Squam island were opposed to paying taxes for the Meeting House on the mainland. More discussion at town meetings in 1775 failed to resolve the issue. After that external events intruded, in the form of the Revolution, and the town focus became organizing a militia and raising funds to support hostilities against the British.

In early 1787 Edgecomb voted to raise 150 pounds for two meeting houses, one on the mainland and the other on Jeremy Squam. Each meeting house was to be 35 by 40 feet in size and erected by the first of May, as cheaply as possible. But little progress was made with either. Moses Davis, a house-wright and Selectman for many years, did complete the Meeting House on the mainland in 1791, though the town failed to pay him as promised and he had to sue the town in 1794 to get the remainder owed him.

We date the Westport Town Hall to 1790, when a committee of Jeremy Squam residents was authorized “to have full power to build their Meeting House as they pleased.” A spot for it was chosen by October, 1790. However, it wasn’t until April 17, 1793 that the town received a deed for the 2-acre lot for the Meeting House, and the building on it lacked doors, windows, and pews, all of which needed to be built by a joiner. We’re not sure exactly when the building was completed and actually put into use for religious services, but it was probably 1794 or 1795.

Religion and the early Meeting House

The colony of Massachusetts was dominated by the descendants of the Puritans and the Congregational Doctrine for religious practice. But by the 1780s there were challenges to the established religion coming from new Baptist and Methodist preachers. Josiah Parsons, one of the leading citizens of Jeremy Squam island, quit the committee for the Meeting House in 1790 when it became apparent that the majority of the island wanted the Meeting House to be for use of the Free Will Baptists. Edgecomb was not successful finding a regular preacher until 1800, when Mr. Chapman, a Presbyterian Minister, was hired to preach on the mainland as well as the island for the Congregationalists. But by then the Baptists had established a strong presence and things would change.

The Rev. Benjamin Randall, an itinerant Baptist preacher from southern New Hampshire, visited nearby Bath, Maine in 1780 where he was very well received. The word of his arrival spread very rapidly. He was asked to speak at Woolwich where 300 had gathered. From this initial gathering, small groups were formed in Woolwich, Georgetown and Jeremy Squam. A small group of about twenty met on Jeremy Squam October 9, 1780 and became the first on the island to meet for worship.

In a 1781 visit Randall brought with him Daniel Hibbard, a Baptist Elder, who settled in the area and by 1786 moved permanently to Jeremy Squam Island. He served as the Presiding Elder for the four groups in Georgetown, Woolwich, Jeremy Squam and Edgecomb, when they met at quarterly meetings. Elder Hibbard was also instrumental in the effort to gain financial support for the Baptist Elders. Under the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, families were taxed to support the minister hired by the town. One of Hibbard’s first actions in 1781 was to apply to the town of Woolwich to set aside the tax of the Baptists toward the town’s Minister, which was refused. Each year thereafter he made same petition and it was finally accepted in 1801.

On November 5, 1804 the town of Edgecomb voted to accept Daniel Hibbard as a Minister for the town. They voted to divide the use Meeting House on the mainland between the Congregational Society and the Baptist Society, with Elder Timothy Cunningham serving as the Baptist minister on the mainland. Daniel Hibbard was given a house to use nearby, likely part of what has become the Squire Tarbox Inn, and in 1806 a new house was built for his use on what is now the West Shore Road, where he lived until he died in 1823.

The Baptist Society started to decline in membership after the 1820s. After Elder Hibbard died David Webber became the new Elder, but he moved to Georgetown in 1832 to establish a new congregation there. Others moved to Boothbay where another congregation had been established. And by the 1830s a new religious group was now meeting on Westport, the Methodist Episcopal.

The Methodist Episcopal denomination came into the Sheepscot area around 1800, but its advance was slow, and it wasn't until 1834, when a meeting of 23 people was held with James Heal as the leader, that the denomination clearly took hold. The Methodist Episcopal congregation continued to grow, with congregations also in Georgetown and Woolwich, and by 1852 they numbered 136 members in Woolwich and Westport. But after that they too started to decline in numbers, and so in 1856 the Baptists and Methodist Episcopal congregations agreed to share the Meeting House, renaming it the Union Meeting House. The congregations continued to have separate services, one on Sunday morning and the other in the afternoon. But the decline in membership continued. By 1863 Westport's Methodist congregation was down to 24 members and they decided to abandon the use of the Union Meeting House. They obtained a smaller building and moved it in 1864 just north of the Meeting House and called it the Center Church, now the present Westport Community Church. The larger building, the Union Meeting House, was abandoned.



The Meeting House becomes the Town Hall

As early as 1865 the voters had discussed “what measures the town could take to procure a building for the use of the town.”ⁱ Town meetings were held at people’s homes, or buildings like McCarty’s Music Hall or Valentine Tarbox’s hall, and sometimes in one of the school houses.

The Union Meeting House was bought for the town in 1885. An act of the Legislature had been approved March 3, 1885, authorizing the sale, and a town meeting that month approved paying \$1 for it. The town also voted to raise \$250 to repair the building, and the interior was changed to the layout of today, with a stage on the west side of the hall suitable for a small orchestra. “The young people are to have use of the hall without charge once a week and the ladies sewing circle may have the hall whenever they wish.” A Grand Dedication Ball was held December 1, with 22 dances listed, most a variation of “quadrille”. Outhouses were added to the west end of the building in 1888. The building was now the Westport Town Hall.

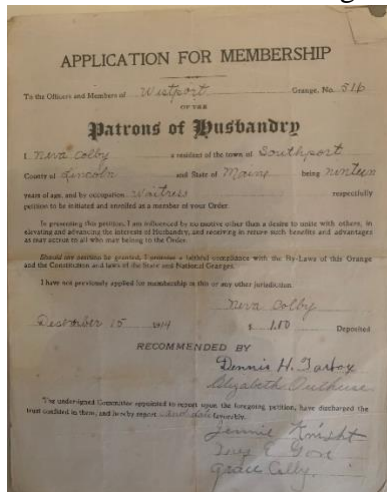


The Grange

The National Grange of the Order of Patrons of Husbandry, better known simply as The Grange, was a fraternal organization in the United States that promoted the economic and political well-being of the community and agriculture. At one time Maine had 228 Grange chapters. Westport was not a strong farming community, because of the rocky granite soil and only a thin layer of topsoil. But Henry A. Swanton, an MIT-educated engineer, came to Westport in 1911 to get back to the land and farm, and was instrumental in organizing Westport Grange #516.



The first meeting of was held Oct 10, 1911, at the Town Hall, with 31 residents attending. Henry Swanton was elected Master,



with 12 other officers. At their height in 1912 they had 63 members. But with the World War, a disastrous fire in 1918 that destroyed many homes, and many residents moving away, membership declined to 27 members on paper in 1922, and the Westport chapter ceased to operate, formally closing in 1926.



Though they were only active for about 12 years, the Grange had a lasting impact on the Town Hall. The selectmen leased the Town Hall to the Grange for their meetings, and for 10 years the Grange actively managed the building. In 1915 they added the flagpole which continues to grace the front of the building, and in 1917 they added the kitchen to the right of the entrance, “for the use of the ladies,” to support their social activities.

The Town Hall becomes a center of Westport community life

Westport Islanders love a good time. James McCarty build a “Music Hall” on his property in the 1830s, and the fishermen of the time were known to enjoy music and a little dancing after a long week or when a full catch had been obtained. In the 1890s and early 1900s a dance hall called “Camp Molly Hall,” was operated by Everett Sylvester (“Uncle Ves”) and Melvin Cromwell at the very north end of the island, frequented by folks from neighboring towns as well as the summer visitor guests that were becoming a major part of the local economy. After Camp Molly closed he Town Hall became the venue for these community events, helped with the improvements the Grange made to the building.



Town Hall Dance

The Westport Community Association

In 1955 the Westport Community Association (WCA) was formed by a group of older Westport residents concerned by the deteriorating condition of the Center Church just north of the Town Hall. Their efforts raised the funds and labor needed to restore the church building in 1955-6. But the WCA's founding purposes were broader than just the preservation of an historic building. They intended to:

"To promote any project of idea of value in furthering the best interests of the Town of Westport of its residents, and to preserve property, buildings, monuments, records, and any other places or things of interest and historical value to the Town of Westport, and to acquire by gift or purchase all real and personal property necessary for the carrying out of these purposes."

From the beginning, the WCA made use of the Town Hall in their activities, using it as the base for their fundraising work and social activity. Quoting from the Association's first report of activities, August 12, 1957:

"Several hot suppers and a cookout were held in this first summer [1956] as money-making ventures. These netted more than \$200. In conjunction with the Westport Volunteer Fire Department, the Association sponsored the weekly Saturday night dances and earned about \$115."

By 1958 the WCA had outfitted the Town Hall kitchen with a sink, running water, an electric range, and an inventory of silverware, plates, bowls, serving dishes and the like for the suppers and community events now regularly held in the Hall.

Each year the WCA has organized a wide range of social events, starting in the Spring and continuing



until a Christmas service in their Westport Community Church. The events have helped all Islanders get to know one another, those born and raised on the island, those whose families spent summers in their island homes, and the many newcomers since 1980.

The big event each year on Westport Island is the BBQ, usually held in July, and until 2019 co-sponsored by the WCA and the Westport Volunteer Fire Department, who has been the beneficiary as well. Events have included

a dunk tank for the Fire Chief, games for the kids, music, and in the mid-1980s a tug-of-war between the North and South end residents. But as the event has gotten larger, and the Fire Department membership smaller, In 2019 the organization of the BBQ was taken over by a group of local citizens.





For Town business, voting and the annual Town Meeting are held in the Town Hall. Until the Town Office, located next to the Fire Station about 3 miles north, was built, the meetings of the Selectmen, with an office for their use, was also located in the Town Hall. But the Town Office is now the usual location for committee meetings and town business. The Town Hall is used when space is needed for a larger public gathering.

In Westport Island's spirit of voluntarism, the management of the Town Hall for some years has been in the charge of a Town Committee of seven residents, who see that the Hall is cleaned, help the Selectmen with the leasing, perform regular maintenance tasks, and oversee the major capital projects that keep the Hall in great shape.





Timeline:

1774

The residents of Freetown, with 2 residents of Jeremy Squam island, now Westport, successfully petition for the establishment of a town that is called Edgcomb, including both the island and the mainland on the east side of the Sheepscot River.

1780

Rev. Benjamin Randall, an itinerant Baptist preacher from southern New Hampshire “embodied a church of twenty members on Squam Island”.



Benjⁿ Randall

1784

In September Westport hosted a “Quarterly Meeting” of the Baptists in the area. Rev. Daniel Hibbard moved to Woolwich “and assumed pastoral care of the Westport church, which then numbered eighty-nine members.”

1786

Rev. Hibbard accepted an offer from the church at Jeremy Squam Island to settle there; he stayed until his death in 1823

1790

A committee of Jeremy Squam residents was authorized by the Edgcomb town meeting “to have full power to build their Meeting House as they pleased.” A spot for it was chosen by October, 1790.

1793

Gabriel Stone deeds a 2-acre lot in the “Center” of Westport to the Selectmen of Edgecomb, to serve as the site for a Meeting House

1794

A Yearly Meeting of the Baptists was held in Westport in September. The Edgecomb Quarterly Meeting was authorized at this meeting and included 11 churches from Lincolnville to Durham. Rev. Hibbard was the only ordained minister.

1802

Rev. Benjamin Randall attended the “Yearly Meeting” at Westport with nineteen new members added.

1804

The town of Edgecomb voted to accept Daniel Hibbard as a Minister for the town, providing financial support for the Baptist Elder and a place for him to live. They had the use of the Jeremy Squam Meeting House.

1826

Edgecomb voted to set off Jeremy Squam Island as a separate religious parish from the mainland – each with their own meeting houses and authority to govern their own parochial affairs.

1828

The residents of Jeremy Squam Island petition the Maine legislature to be separated from Edgecomb, and in an act of the legislature in March the town of Westport is born, with the first town meeting that month.

1830

Renovations done to the Meeting House, new sale of pews

1856

Declining memberships led to the Baptists and Methodists forming a “Union Church”, with the Meeting House now known as the Union Meeting House.

1864

Methodist Episcopal congregation move their services to the building adjacent, the former Music Hall renovated to serve as a house of worship. The Union Meeting House is abandoned.

1885

On April 8 the Union Meeting House is deeded to “the inhabitants of the town of Westport” by the proprietors, represented by James McCarty, Treasurer. Building is renovated, with the addition of a stage on the west end of the hall. Westport now has a Town Hall.

1888

Outhouses are added to the rear, west side, of the building.

1911

The first meeting of Westport Grange, chapter #516, was held Oct 10, 1911, at the Town Hall, with 31 residents attending. Henry Swanton was elected Master, with 12 other officers. The Grange takes over management of the building.

1917

The Grange asks the Selectmen for permission to remove the stairs and closet to the right of the entrance and put in a kitchen “for the use of the ladies. Expense to be paid by the Grange.”

1922

The Westport Grange ceases operating, and 4 years later is formally closed.

1955

Westport Community Association (WCA) is formed, with the initial objective of preserving the Community Church. It starts holding many events at the Town Hall each year, from clambakes to lectures, and these continue to the present.

1955-1958

With leadership and funding from the WCA the kitchen was updated, with an electric range, an enameled iron sink, and running water installed.

1993

The outhouse area on the west side is renovated into 2 restrooms and a utility area

2002

The Town Hall and Westport Community Church are accepted on the National Register of Historic Places.



