

## A "NEW" HOME FOR OUR SECOND CENTURY

In 1926, a group of community-minded citizens formed a new organization, which they called *The Historical Society of Windham County*, in order to try to preserve and document their local history. It was an innovative leap of faith, since it may well have been the first such society ever created in Vermont apart from the Vermont Historical Society.

By the mid-1930s, as they accumulated an increasing trove of artifacts and documents, it became clear that this new Society needed some adequate place in which it could safeguard and display all of those holdings. That led to raising funds and constructing the rather stately brick museum building in Newfane which has been our home ever since 1937. At the time, it must have seemed that our brand new building was more than adequate to serve us forever.

Then, eight years ago, the Society went on to achieve multiple goals with its ambitious acquisition and restoration of the West River Railroad Station. Most importantly, of course, it saved that historic building from continuing to deteriorate when it was rapidly approaching a point where it simply could not have been saved. We also learned that we had acquired the last surviving water tank house in the state, so we went about saving that as well.

In all, after raising about \$200,000 – mostly from community and our other supporters' generosity – we were able to open a meticulously restored West River Railroad Museum. It now tells the story of that little line and how it served our county over the years. As a side benefit we also were able to move a large number of artifacts and documents out of our crowded main museum, where too many of them simply languished in storage for years never to be seen by anyone.

That was helpful, but it made just a tiny dent in a problem which had been troubling the Society's Board for decades. Our current museum building simply was completely inadequate by now for the tasks we were asking it to do. Even of just three main exhibits on the first floor, two did not have enough space to tell their stories properly.

Other topics were covered with a scattered item dropped in here and there with little connection or, in most cases, not at all. If you were interested in art or photography, blacksmithing or musical instruments, we could devote a few feet of space to showing you just a small fraction of the important items we have in those areas.

But if your interest was quilts or clothing, carpentry or agriculture, recreation or education, then everything you might like to see unfortunately resides in permanent storage, never to emerge. And space for our books, for our archival and genealogical resources, and for their use had become, if anything, even more inadequate.

Successive Boards raised this issue and devoted energy to trying to resolve it – even drafting plans for an addition at one point – but for a variety of reasons none of their ideas ever could be brought to fruition. As it turns out, that may not have been a bad thing in the end, for in hindsight even the best of those ideas was too constrained to fully resolve the broader problem.

The current Board took its own turn at looking for a solution by proposing a two story addition which would have been connected to the current building for a potential cost of around \$750,000. That amount obviously was beyond anything we could expect to raise locally or through any grants for which we might realistically qualify. The only way we could think of to fix that gap was to try for a significant portion of the needed funds through a discretionary federal earmark. We applied for one through the offices of Vermont's two Senators, but unfortunately our applications did not survive in the sea of other worthwhile projects. Stymied again!

However, at the same time we tried for that earmark we were pursuing another – and in many ways far more appealing option for resolving our space problems. Last March a local newspaper had a story on its front page announcing that the Windham County Sheriff's Department was going to relocate its offices from the old Jail Building on the Common in Newfane to the former Vermont Yankee building in Brattleboro.

Knowing that the Assistant Judges are responsible for county property, we immediately contacted one of them to see what their intentions were for the future of the soon-to-be vacated Jail Building. We were told that nothing firm had been decided, but that they thought occupation by some governmental or other nonprofit entity was likely.

Before deciding to pursue the matter we first did a bit of research and found that the building's history was more complicated than we knew. The building itself dated to 1825. It and the Courthouse across the Common had been newly built when both the Village of Newfane and its role as county seat departed Newfane Hill for their current location down in the valley.

Those two county buildings, which still stand today, were set on a newly created Windham County Common. Title to the Common was given to the county by Jonathan Park and one of his sons, Ephraim. Jonathan had been one of two enterprising young men who walked from Connecticut to the top of Newfane Hill in 1768 to start carving out their homesteads. They were to be Newfane's first European settlers.

The Park deeds to Windham County provided that the only uses that could be made of the land were as sites for a Courthouse and for a Jail, as a Public Common, and for a garden (presumably to feed the jailer and any prisoners). If any other use whatsoever was made of the Common, title to the land would revert to Jonathan and Ephraim or to their descendants.

Those terms posed a real problem in the 1970s when jail operations were moved to a new building in Brattleboro. The then-sitting Assistant Judges petitioned the court for sweeping changes to the requirements, including, getting rid of the reversion provision. Narrower changes ultimately were approved after several Park descendants intervened in the litigation.

The court ruled that the old Jail now could be used for governmental units and by "regional organizations". It also required that a representative part of the old jail portions of the building must be preserved for posterity. And finally, the court ruled that the reversion clause in favor of the Park descendants was to remain in full effect.

Knowing all that, and that we could qualify for use of the Jail as a regional organization serving all of Windham County, we prepared a detailed written proposal explaining our hope to use the building as our main museum.

Preservation of its old jail cells certainly was not a problem for us. In fact, we thought that it provided an opportunity to make them and the related history of the building one of our most interesting exhibits. In late August, after a number of Park descendants voiced their strong support for our plans, we received word that our Jail proposal was acceptable to the county.

Because of the original 1825 deed restrictions, Windham County will continue to hold title to the building and be responsible for its exterior. We will be responsible for the interior, for utilities, and for insuring any contents. Interestingly, this arrangement is very similar to the one under which the Vermont Historical Society has its Museum in the state-owned Pavilion Building next to the Capital in Montpelier.

Obviously nothing could seem more appropriate for any historical society than to become one of the centerpieces of a National Historic District while occupying and conserving a stately 200 year-old building. That it also is on one of the most beautiful and frequently photographed commons in Vermont simply adds to our pride in that.

We now are in the process of developing detailed plans for our use of the Jail Building. They will involve letting us quadruple our major exhibits from the current three to 12. Topics including photography, art, carpentry, blacksmithing, agriculture, quilts and education all will be given meaningful space for the first time. Even our current exhibits now will be able to be significantly expanded. And, we will have space at last to tell visitors why Windham County has such a strong claim to being the true birthplace of today's Vermont.

Doing all this and preparing the Jail Building for its new role obviously will entail considerable work, time, and money on our part, all of which still is at the earliest stage. We do know, though, that one of our early goals will be installing an elevator providing full public access to our exhibits on all three floors of the building. You will hear much more about all of this in future issues and we know that with your help it all is attainable.

The first question we already hear about this move is what is to become of the current museum building which has served us so well and for so long. We plan to keep it an integral part of our mission by turning its focus to better carrying out several of its current important roles.

For the first time in memory, our archives will be conveniently located in adequate space and fully accessible for users. A substantial dedicated area also will be created for our genealogy work and resources. We will create several work stations, so that volunteers can create transcripts for us from our many diaries, correspondence collections, and other documents. We also finally will be able to have exhibits dedicated to archival items such as broadsides, photographs and postcards, bringing many of them out of storage boxes and into public view.

With all of this, we are entering a challenging and exciting few years for your Society as we prepare to begin our second century of serving Windham County just a few years from now.

As an example of just one of the new opportunities this can create, we received an unexpected call soon after we learned that we were going to gain use of the Jail Building. Hearing that we at last will have proper space in which to display it, a major collector offered us most of his large regional art collection for our planned gallery, as well as financial help for creating and sustaining it. Without our move into the Jail Building there would have been no reason or incentive for him ever to do any of that.

We suspect other pleasant surprises like that may lie in our future and we will keep you up to date on our progress over the next several years!