



NEW HAMPSHIRE DIVISION OF HISTORICAL RESOURCES

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23 January 1999

Dr. Marion James  
President  
Durham Historic Association  
P.O. Box 305  
Durham, New Hampshire, 03824

Dear Marion:

I am happy to give you our assessment of the significance of the old Durham Town Hall.

The old Durham Town Hall is an important representative of a small and unusual group of brick commercial structures that appear in the Piscataqua Region of New Hampshire and nowhere else in the state. These buildings are characterized by their three-story height, their curved corner bays, and their fine masonry. In addition to the Durham Town Hall, representatives of this small group of buildings include the Sawyer Building in Dover and the corner buildings of several commercial blocks in Portsmouth.

Only the Dover and Durham buildings, both built around 1825, are free-standing blocks. Both of these structures were built near their respective town landings. Both were constructed as stores, serving business interests at their landings in an age when most commerce was water-borne and when town landings were the commercial and mercantile hubs of any tidewater community.

The old Durham Town Hall is significant in three major areas. Architecturally, the structure is an impressive example of local masonry construction. The design of the structure is dramatic, commanding vistas along both Main Street and Newmarket Road. The structure is built of locally-made bricks and hammered granite, recalling the fact that Durham was one of the major brick manufacturing towns of New Hampshire in the early nineteenth century and that its granite was the first in the region to be cut and shaped into architectural elements. The masonry of the structure is exceptionally fine, displaying unusual skill in the laying of the bricks in two separate bonds to conform to the geometry of the structure.

Second, the building is a rare survivor of an early-nineteenth-century commercial block. It was built as a store by local merchant and shipbuilder Joseph Coe. Whereas other stores that once stood near Durham Landing were wooden, Coe's massive and urbane structure proclaimed the commercial importance of Durham as a trading center and as the connecting link between water-borne traffic and overland traffic on the New Hampshire Turnpike. The significance of the structure as the functional heart of old Durham is strengthened by the fact that the town's post office was located in the building for many years.

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Third, the building is significant as the seat of Durham's government from 1840 until recent times. The building's long civic history is symbolized by the enlarged windows that express the presence of the old town hall, created in 1852 by removal of the original third floor of the building.

In recognition of its importance, the Durham Town Hall was recorded by the Historic American Buildings Survey in 1936 and was entered in the National Register of Historic Places as part of the Durham Historic District in 1980.

I understand that the Durham Historic Association wishes to propose taking custody of the entire Town Hall building, making the former district court room available as a meeting place for other groups as well as for the Association.

Such an arrangement would be beneficial to the building, to the town, and to the Association. By its diligent and knowledgeable work over the years, the Association has created one of the most interesting historical collections in the seacoast area. By opening its collections to the public for more than thirty-five years, the Association has cultivated widespread interest in Durham's complex and fascinating history. By providing a repository for Durham's material legacy, the Association has given the town a symbol of its own identity, conferring a benefit similar to that provided by the Portsmouth Athenaeum or the Woodman Institute in Dover.

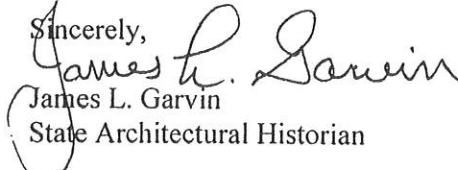
The Association's proposal to occupy the entire building would allow your organization to expand its collections, exhibits and programs, making them more accessible to a wider public and strengthening the Association's contribution to the town.

The town's provision of the building to the Association would represent an act of civic generosity, but not an act of one-sided altruism on the town's part. Such an arrangement would bring Durham into conformity with other communities across the state.

New Hampshire towns are increasingly conscious of the need to incorporate history into civic life. Many towns now list a historical officer among their municipal officials. As our communities incorporate more historical awareness into their planning and their sense of civic identity, they find it essential to nurture a close relationship between town government and the local historical organization. Many New Hampshire towns, for example, have given their historical societies custody of former public library buildings when the libraries have moved to larger quarters.

I earnestly hope that the old Durham Town Hall will become a means of strengthening a long-standing relationship between the town and the Association. Such a renewed bond will benefit both entities, and at the same time will ensure the continuing welfare and usefulness of one of Durham's most significant buildings.

Sincerely,

  
James L. Garvin  
State Architectural Historian