

City Hall History

(With Excerpts from the 2008 Historic District Study Committee Report)

When first settled by the French in 1780 Marine City was known as La Belle Riviere and was one of the earliest settlements in Michigan. Later the name changed to Yankee Point.

In 1818 Captain Samuel Ward arrived from Vermont and recognized the trading potential of the village. He founded the Village of Newport in 1821 and under his leadership, the ship building industry thrived and grew to be one of the most important on the Great Lakes. A huge variety of ships were launched from the many ship builder docks along the Belle River. There were side-wheeler steamers, schooners, barges and tugs. Two thirds of village residents were sailors, officers and ship owners.

Robert Lester owned a large ship yard south of the village and built 150 ocean-worthy wooden tugs for use during World War I. Later the yards were purchased by Sidney C. McClouth and the area is known up to this day as McClouth Yards.

While ship building was Newport's most important industry, other businesses also flourished. These included barrel making, logging, sugar and salt production.

The village became very prosperous with a growing population and considerable wealth. It was 1883 when the village decided to build a new Village Hall worthy of the area's reputation as a resort town with beautiful hotels and spas.

A young architect called George Dewitt Mason, who had designed the salt refinery in the village, now designed our beautiful City Hall. Mason became known as the "Dean of Detroit Architects". He was partnered by Zachariah Rice and one of his apprentices was the noted Albert Kahn. George Mason designed many important buildings over a long lifespan of 92 years. The Grand Mackinac Hotel, Detroit's Gem Theater and the grand Masonic Temple are a few fine examples of his work. In 1887 the Village of Newport reincorporated as the City of Marine City and the Village Hall became known as City Hall from then on.

The building Mason designed for Newport was grand in scale, with a large upper level auditorium, known as the Opera House, for public events. The lower level was where the day-to-day town's business was conducted. It also served as the courthouse where were three jail cells in the basement used for the law-breaking citizens! These jail cells are still there today, as well as the lovely auditorium which has suffered from neglect but whose architectural features remain intact. The fire department and later the police department were also housed in the building. The caretaker and fireman, Walker Furtaw, raised his family in an apartment within the building, and his son William Furtaw and granddaughter, Kim Turner, still reside in Marine City.

The City Hall functioned on all levels for many years, but in the 1970's the new OSHA requirements were applied to all public buildings. The cost of upgrading the auditorium level became prohibitive and that area was no longer used.

The land on which City Hall stands was originally known as The Park and in 1974 the original bandstand was replaced and the park was then dedicated as Heritage Square Park.

In August of 1976 the City Hall was listed on the State of Michigan register, and in January of 1982 it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

There have been several attempts in past years to restore the exterior of the building, but unfortunately some of the remedies caused increased deterioration. In 1999 the Historical Society of Marine City, which at the time was known as the Marine City Historic District Restoration Committee, asked the City leaders to make urgent repairs to the building. They paid for an engineering study and brought architect Mike Kirk into the project. There was incredible resistance to restoration and in 2005 the City abandoned the building. The Historical Society continued to plead the case for saving the City Hall and initiated a Capital Campaign. In 2007, the City approved an alternative plan known as the "CHAMP" plan.

Now, in 2011, thanks to a new vision by new City leaders of what this lovely building means to Marine City both economically and sentimentally, there is finally a plan in place to restore the building in phases. The first phase is to begin this year and the whole exterior will be brought back to the original appearance with brick, windows and doorways being replaced where needed.

It appears that there will, after all, be a very happy new life for our City Hall and we look forward to seeing the first results by the end of this year.