



SPRING 2016

A NEWSLETTER OF THE OLD TOWN HALL MUSEUM  
624 SOUTH BRITAIN ROAD | SOUTHBURY, CONNECTICUT 06488

**Old Town Hall Museum**  
Wednesdays 10—Noon  
Other hours by appt:  
(203) 405-3124

**Museum Administrator:**  
Leigh Graham

**Archivist:**  
Kimberly Neuenschwander

**South Britain Library**  
Tuesdays 6—8 PM  
(203) 232-9874

**Librarian:** Robin Stiles

**Board of Directors**  
2016—2017

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## THE COLORFUL HISTORY OF SOUTHBURY'S FIRST TOWN HALL, PART II

BY *KIMBERLY NEUENSCHWANDER*

With the old Town Hall now empty, Southbury selectmen proposed to raze the building because of maintenance costs and insurance liabilities. In response, a group of Southbury citizens met and formed the Old Town Hall Museum Association (OTHMA) with the intent of renovating the Old Town Hall and turning it into a museum. In a May 10, 1971 letter to the Southbury Board of Selectmen, OTHMA President, Walter Koons, Jr., and Vice-President, Irving W. Phillips, described the purpose of the newly formed organization as a way “to assure the preservation of the Old Town Hall on Route 172 as a museum for the benefit of all people in Southbury.” The letter included a proposal to the Town of Southbury to sell the Old Town Hall property to OTHMA for \$1 or, if transfer of title was not possible, the association requested an annual \$1 lease for 99-years. The town agreed to the terms, but only when and if OTHMA could prove itself financially stable, and added a reverter clause. The clause stated if the association ceased to exist or the property could not be maintained, property ownership would revert back to the town of Southbury.



Old Town Hall, circa 1974

At its inaugural meeting in the summer of 1971, the OTHMA Board announced it was incorporated with the state of Connecticut to operate as a non-profit organization. To defray operating costs, the newly formed organization initiated a membership fund drive to raise \$1500. A Newtown Bee press release from July 30, 1971 defined the membership as follows, “Membership is open to the public on a student basis for \$1.50 a year; individual basis \$3 a year; family \$5; sustaining \$10; patron \$25; and life membership \$100.” Membership was to include a quarterly or bi-monthly report on renovation progress and the future museum’s schedule of programs and events. H.H. Stone & Sons agreed to donate paint for the exterior and local resident, William Bette, donated his time and labor.

Hoping to have renovations completed for Southbury’s Tercentennial in 1973, OTHMA launched another campaign in 1972 to raise \$15,000. Local architect

William Blum donated renovation plans for the restoration project. Local Girl and Boy Scout troops cleared the landscape of overgrowth and debris. However, by 1974 renovations were still incomplete and the town had not yet transferred title of the Old Town Hall to OTHMA. According to a Newtown Bee article from March 28, 1974, fund drive Chairman, Harry Bassett, announced another fund drive – this time to raise \$25,000. According to Bassett, “The \$25,000 is needed to defray expenses for such items as the installation of fire stairs and outside fire escape to meet State building code, to rewire the entire structure and install new lighting, relocate the furnace and put in new heating ducts, insulate the building and sheetrock interior walls, re-do restrooms and plumbing as well as provide for many other items necessary to restore and operate the property as a public museum.” Only when enough money was raised would Southbury agree to sell the property.

In July 1974, OTHMA held \$5,000 in its treasury and its \$25,000 fund raiser was well underway. The town finally agreed to sell the property. A deed ceremony was held with First Selectman, Michael Kenney, First Selectwoman, Margaret Plunkett, and OTHMA President, Walter Koons, Jr., and Fund Drive Chairman, Harry Bassett. Assistant Town Clerk, Joyce Hornbecker, officiated. Koons presented the Town with a dollar borrowed from Bassett – apparently the official \$1 presented to the town at an earlier date had been misplaced.



Lynn Manville and Rebecca Kennedy of Girl Scout Troop 4033 participating in the 200 Pennies fund raiser, 1976

With the country’s bicentennial slowly approaching, the Old Town Hall received a \$3,000 grant from the Connecticut State Bicentennial Commission in March of 1976. With the cooperation of local Girl Scout troops and the newly formed Southbury Historical Society (SHS) another fund drive was launched. The new campaign, called 200 Pennies, hoped to collect 200 pennies – one for each year since the birth of the United States – from 2,000 Southbury households.



1977 Flag Pole Dedication. From left to right: First Selectman, Michael Kenney; OTHMA treasurer, Evelyn Hickock; Mrs. William Kane; OTHMA president, Walter Koons, Jr.; VFW Auxiliary secretary, Margaret Fleming Starchak.

By the spring of 1977, the \$25,000 goal had not been reached, but quite a few renovations were complete. OTHMA had spent close to \$11,000 painting the exterior and first floor interior, replacing the interior staircase, walls, floors, ceiling, electrical and plumbing, and installing new windows and triple back storm windows. Renovations not completed included the exterior fire escape and detail work on the first and second floors. A flag raising ceremony was held in April to commemorate the donation of a 24-foot flag pole. Mrs. William Kane of Southbury donated the flag pole to honor her grandfather, Theodore Wheeler, who served as First Selectman from 1883 – 1922. The flag was a gift from the Women’s Auxiliary of the VFW.

Despite OTHMA’s tireless restoration efforts, the proposed Old Town Hall Museum was still unfinished in the fall of 1977. The organization decided it would be in their best interest to sell the building back to the town of Southbury. OTHMA president, Walter Koons, Jr., reported in an October News-Times article his hope “that town ownership might help boost funding and raise

local interest in the old town hall.” That same month Southbury Selectmen voted 4-2 to reclaim ownership of the Old Town Hall with the condition they would appoint the trustees to maintain it.

The Old Town Hall was deeded back to the town for \$1 in 1979. In 1980, the Historic Buildings Commission (HBC) was formed to maintain Southbury’s historic buildings. The Old Town Hall was the second building acquired by the town and run by the HBC; Bullet Hill School was the first and the South Britain library the third. The Southbury Historical Society has operated out of the Old Town Hall since 1983.

## SOCIETY WELCOMES STUDENT VOLUNTEER

The Society would like to welcome our newest volunteer, Jonathan Bedosky. A Southbury native, Jonathan is a 2015 graduate of Pomperaug High School and is currently a freshman majoring in History at Western Connecticut University in Danbury. Jonathan will be assisting in the museum and archives.

## THE SOUTHBURY HISTORICAL SOCIETY TURNS 40



On April 30, the Society celebrated its 40th anniversary during its Annual Meeting and Social held at Cornucopia at Oldfield Bed & Breakfast in Southbury. Thank you to innkeepers, Ed and Christine Edelson, for allowing the use of their beautiful historic home. And a very special thank you to the following Pomperaug High School students who provided the afternoon's musical entertainment: Heidi Ohngemach, violin; Abigail Dwight, violin; Natalie Dahl, viola; and Emma O'Connor, cello. The Society is grateful for the continued support of its members and the community. Here's to another successful 40!

## HISTORY BITES LECTURE SERIES RETURNS

History Bites, the lunchtime lecture series that runs annually from April through June, continues at Bullet Hill School on Thursday, May 12 at 12 PM. With this year's theme, *Behind the Scenes: Hidden Stories*, the Society revisits the lesser known histories of Bullet Hill School. As with all History Bites lectures, attendance is free. Registration is not required. Attendees should bring lunch; the Society will provide drinks and dessert for a suggested \$2 donation.

Bullet Hill School is a town treasure located at 215 Main Street North in Southbury. Built in the late 1700s, this brick school stood firm while generations of families used the building. Bullet Hill School Director, Melinda Elliott, will share the stories of the people and the building that was the center of the community for so many years. Plan to spend a few minutes to explore the restored school and museum before and after the lecture.

The 2016 History Bites lecture series is sponsored by the Connecticut Community Foundation.



## SBCC CELEBRATES 250TH

The South Britain Congregational Church will celebrate its 250th Anniversary June 4—5. The weekend will be filled with a variety of entertainment including colonial games, displays, music and walking tours. The Old Town Hall Museum will be open from 2—4 PM on Saturday, June 4 during the festivities. The Society will also unveil its 2016 Christmas ornament commemorating this historic event. For more information visit the SBCC website at [www.southbritainchurch.org](http://www.southbritainchurch.org) or call

203-264-5890.

## OTHM FORMAL OPEN HOUSE

Join us on Sunday, June 5 from 1—3 PM for an Old Town Hall Museum Open House debuting our newly renovated exhibit room and gallery. Consultant, Rachel Carley, will discuss her experience in researching and designing the new space. Light refreshments will be served. Parking is available at the SBCC parking lot across from the church.

THE SOUTHBURY  
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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A Newsletter of the Old Town Hall Museum

SAVE THE DATE

- ◆ **May 12, *History Bites*:** A presentation titled, “Behind These Brick Walls: Stories of an 18th Century Schoolhouse,” will be given at Bullet Hill School. The one-hour program begins at 12 PM. Bring lunch. Drinks and dessert provided.
- ◆ **June 4, *OTHM Open House*:** The Old Town Hall Museum will be open from 2 –4 PM to celebrate the SBCC’s 250th Anniversary.
- ◆ **June 5, *OTHM Formal Open House*:** Join us from 1—3 PM to celebrate the official unveiling of our new exhibit space and gallery at the Old Town Hall Museum.
- ◆ **June 11, *Bullet Hill School Open House*:** BHS will be open from 10 AM—4 PM for Connecticut Open House Day.



Evelyn Hicock & Harriet Koons  
inside the Old Town Hall during  
the Flag Pole Dedication,  
April 1977