

Homer, N.Y.: A Town and its Hall

Break out the confetti! It's time to celebrate! And for more than one reason! While Cortland County celebrates its bicentennial this year, 2008, the Town Hall for the Town of Homer is observing its centennial celebration. Truth be told, there would be no Hall without the Town, and there would be no County without the Town, for the origins of the Town of Homer predates the origins of the County of Cortland by fourteen years. And what an interesting story it is of the Town of Homer, of some citizens who went on to state and national fame, and of its historic Hall at 31 North Main Street in the village of Homer. It is an account of men and women striving to offer their talents and to do their best to bring themselves and their neighbors the municipal services needed in their lifetimes; it is an account of a building that has had to be many things to many people. It is, above all, a story of adaptability through 217 years.

First Residents of Homer Area

The first residents of what would become Cortland County were the first residents of what would become the Township of Homer. Their names were Joseph and Rhoda Todd Beebe and her brother, Amos Todd. Originally from New Haven, Connecticut, they journeyed up the Tioughnioga (pronounced *tie-off-ni-o-ga*) River to take possession of Lot No. 42 in the dense forests of New York State's Military Tract, which was already home to the Onundagaono members of the Haudenosaunee, or "people of the long house." Arriving in the autumn of 1791, it is believed that these three hardy pioneers built a temporary shelter near the spot now marked by a large boulder and plaque erected in 1924 at the intersection of Hooker Avenue and Route 11 at the north end of the village of Homer. Like the Native Americans before them, they, too, were able to demonstrate an ability to adapt to the harsh wilderness of central New York. Eventually, they made their way to their Lot at the top of West Hill, cleared it, and started farming on what is now part of the Sweeney farm on Route 90. Agriculture still remains the main occupational pursuit within the township.

By 1793, when George Washington had started his second term as President of the young Republic, there were six families in the area, all from New England. The Beebes and Todd were joined by John Miller and his sons, Silas and Daniel; John House; James Mather; and James Moore. Darius Kinne came late in 1793, and others soon followed.

Homer Organized as Township

Like any fledgling culture trying to survive, the citizens of the newly independent Republic knew the importance of organization and government at the grassroots level. In 1794, Onondaga County broke off from Herkimer County. On March 5th of that year, Homer (derived from the name of the Greek poet) was organized as a huge township of Onondaga County and included what is now Cortlandville, Solon, Cincinnatus, Virgil, Harford, Lapeer, Taylor, and the southern halves of Truxton and Cuyler. The few residents of this 300 square mile township were to be served by town officers appointed by three Onondaga County judges.

On April 5, 1795, these town officers met at the home of “Squire” John Miller. The next year, the first election of a Homer Town Board was held. Only white males who owned property were legally eligible to vote, and the property qualification would remain until the new state Constitution of 1822. The “Squire” was elected the first supervisor of the Town of Homer. John Keep was “judge,” Amos Todd was the first “collector,” and Peter Ingersoll was the first town clerk. The clerk position continued to be an elected post until 1963 when it became an appointed position and has remained so. Today, the Town Clerk is responsible for maintaining town records, maintaining a record of local laws, issuing licenses and permits (such as marriage licenses, dog licenses, and conservation licenses), collecting town and county taxes, and taking the minutes at all Board meetings.

The early Town Minutes were handwritten (some more legibly than others), and writing continued until typing was used in 1943. The Minutes for the 1790s reveal some interesting job titles. There was a “constable,” or law enforcement officer, and a “fence viewer” whose paid responsibility was to see that all fences constraining livestock were kept in good repair by their owners. The “poormaster” took the indigent into his home and was allocated public funds for their needs (early welfare program); the “pound keeper” maintained an enclosure to keep stray animals (cattle, sheep, swine) until they were claimed by the owner and compensation made for any damages sustained; and the “sealer of weights and measures” was paid to attest to the accuracy of all scales and weighing devices used in commercial transactions.

By 1795, there were 29 families in the town. By 1799, there were fifty-two families. The first male child to be born in the town was born to the Moores, and, appropriately, they named him Homer. The first female child was Betsey House. According to one source, Roderick Beebe and Betsey Mather were the first couple to be married in the town, but another source disagrees. The first wheeled vehicle in town was an ox cart brought in by John Hubbard in the spring of 1795, and the first frame building was a barn put up by Col. Moses Hopkins in 1798.

Town Board Meetings at Turn of Century

Annual board meetings were held at board members’ homes until Tuesday, April 7, 1801. That meeting was held “at the meeting house in Homer” which was also “the school house on Lot No.45.” Lot No. 45 was the “Commons,” or what would become the “Village Green.” The same edifice was used for both worship and schooling. Buildings were multi-functional even then.

Some of the resolutions drafted in the 1790s included: “no inhabitant of this Town shall bring in or take the care & charge of any cattle belonging to any inhabitants of any other Town (bulls excepted) upon the penalty of one Dollar per head . . .;” “that the inhabitants of the Town build a bridge across the river at the mill;” “all four footed beasts shall run at large...horses excepted.” This last resolution was replaced in 1812 by this one: “That horses, cattle, sheep & hogs be not suffered to run at large within half a mile of any meeting house, mill stone or tavern.” In 1801, the board voted to “give 4 Dollars for

every wolf shot” and one dollar for bears killed during the months of May through August. Later, panthers were added to the list. In 1802, one Elijah Hayden, for the offense of swearing in public, was fined a sum of thirty shillings to be handed over to the poormaster.

Special meetings occurred for the purpose of laying out the roads in the town. The early Minutes show the Board to be almost entirely focused on dividing the Town into Road Districts and establishing the boundaries of “Publick Roads.” Trails through the forests and swamps would become designated roads duly noted in the records. A marking point for delineating one such road in 1797 was simply “a yellow birch tree.” The designated direction of a road could be appealed. A panel of three judges made the final decision. The town’s “commissioners of highways” laid out the roads, directed repairs, and constructed bridges. Each road district had a “pathmaster” who supervised road maintenance and had the power to annually assess each male resident several days of labor on the road. The records list their names and the number of days assessed. Clearing the woodlands and maintaining the dirt roads, especially after the damages of storms, was crucial to this growing agrarian society in the center of the state.

Homer Grows Rapidly; Cortland County Born

In 1798, Solon broke off from the township, and Virgil did so in 1804, but the population of the town of Homer grew rapidly. The 1810 census shows the number to be 3000, scattered over an area of gently rolling hills and valleys. Besides farmers, there were teachers, preachers, merchants, millers, tanners, carpenters, masons, innkeepers, four physicians, and at least one lawyer, Horatio Ballard, who had arrived in 1803.

In the year 1808, an event occurred which is the cause for the biggest of this year’s celebrations. Cortland County, of which the Town of Homer was a part, separated from Onondaga County. By act of the State Legislature, Cortland County was born on April 8, 1808.

Soon after this event, a silversmith, John Osborn, arrived and set up both residence and a shop. It was in his house, the first made of brick (No. 5 Albany Street, Homer), that a grandson named William Osborn Stoddard would be born in 1835 and would later go on to serve as an assistant personal secretary to Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln at the Executive Mansion (now called the White House) during the bloody American Civil War.

School Districts Created

In 1813, during the War of 1812 with England, in which several citizens of the town participated, the Town was divided up by three “school commissioners” into some 27 school districts. The Minutes for 1815 show that \$300 was to be raised for the support of the schools and \$200 raised for the support of the poor. Also, it was mandated that “every pathmaster be a fence viewer.” Consolidation of governmental functions was apparently of concern back then, too. Among the votes taken in 1822 was one calling for Rufus Chafee to “clean the meeting house this week for \$2.75.” Among those in 1823

was one calling for the prosecution of Ira Hammond in a case of child support. Apparently, “derelict dads” is not just a modern phenomenon.

As one peruses the Minutes of the 1820s, one begins to spot the names of Rufus Boies, Townsend Ross, John Keep, and Noah Smith. These were prominent men of the day who secured a charter in 1819 for the Homer Academy. Among the first trustees of the Homer Academy, their portraits would later be captured forever in oil on canvas by a young Homer native, Francis Bicknell Carpenter. Later, four U. S. Presidents would have their portraits painted by Carpenter.

Dastardly Political Skullduggery

In 1829, the southern portion of the township separated from Homer, and the Town of Cortlandville was created. Former municipal historian, Curtis Harris, has pointed out that a vote taken in 1829 to poll the feelings of the residents of the town about the proposed division had the following outcome: 616 against, 120 in favor, and 38 blank ballots. Harris concluded that the division was made and that “the passage of that law in the face of such an overwhelming local expression against the division suggests the perpetration of dastardly political skullduggery.”

The Minutes for April 16, 1833, show that the location of Town Meetings changed. They would be held in “the Basement Story of the Episcopal Meeting House.” That church had just been built the year before and still stands to this day on the Homer Green. The same site would be referred to as the “Town Hall” in 1849. In 1835, Andrew D. White, born in Homer, was baptized in this church, not knowing he was destined to become the first President of Cornell University in nearby Ithaca.

Village of Homer Incorporated

By 1835, a community within the township, also named after the Greek poet, was expanding around a “Commons” lined with churches and the Academy. In that year, the Village of Homer was incorporated. Today, with a population of 3,230, it is the largest community in the Township. The hamlets of East Homer and Little York are also included in the Town.

Former town historian, Josephine Brown, has noted that during the 1830s, “it appeared that the town supervisor changed about every year -- as the tax levy increased a supervisor was out of a job.” Such has been the nature of the relationship between the elected official and the electorate.

In 1831, the amount of bills allowed against the Town by the Board of Supervisors was \$539.33. In 1849, under Supervisor Fred Ives, the town had an end of the year balance of \$2.09. Samuel Sherman took over the post the next year, and the amount raised by tax was \$3,125.89 for county expenses, \$250 for highway expenses, \$394.15 for the school district, and \$250.58 for town expenses. In 1860, Giles Chittendon was town supervisor, and the tax levy was \$7,919.56. In one decade, taxes had nearly doubled. Now, the town

tax levy is six figures, or \$443,300, and total appropriations for 2007 amounted to \$1,667,358.

War Between the States

In 1845, the United States annexed Texas, and a war for territorial expansion ensued with Mexico. This was followed by the War Between the States (then called “the Rebellion”), which broke out in April of 1861. On August 19, 1862, a special town meeting was called. By a vote of 360 to 3, a resolution was carried calling for “fifty dollars to be paid to each person who should volunteer from the town of Homer from July 2nd 1862 until the whole number of the quota should be raised... under the two last calls of the President of these United States.” The bounty was raised to higher amounts over the next three years. Three months short of the war’s end in 1865, the amount was \$400 per volunteer who enlisted for one year, \$500 for two years, and \$600 for three years. Three men were to receive bounties for having secured substitutes to enlist in their places.

To preserve the Union, men from Homer served in such regiments as the 76th and the 157th, and men from Homer made the ultimate sacrifice. Among them, Private William Carpenter, Francis B. Carpenter’s 28-year old brother, died from wounds received at Gettysburg, and Asa Moore, a 17-year old bugler, starved to death in July of 1864 at the infamous prison camp at Andersonville, Georgia. The Spanish-American War of 1898 and the military conflagrations of the twentieth century would exact their price, as well, and Homer names would appear on casualty lists well into the 21st century, right up to the name of Private Shawn Falter, who died in Iraq on January 20, 2007.

William Osborn Stoddard and Francis B. Carpenter

Meanwhile, in Washington, D.C., in 1862, Homer’s William Osborn Stoddard was asked to make copies of an order President Lincoln had drafted. It was the Emancipation Proclamation calling for the freeing of slaves in the rebel states and beginning the process that would lead to the Thirteenth Amendment, which ended slavery forever in the United States. In 1866, Francis B. Carpenter returned to his hometown with the painting of Lincoln that would make this native son famous. “The First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation before the Cabinet” was exhibited on October 8. To see it, people filed up the stairs to the Keator Opera House on the third floor of the Barber Block on Main Street. Eventually, with the help of his good friend, Stoddard, the painting would come to hang, as it does today, in the Capitol building in Washington, D.C. In 2007, Harold Holzer, acclaimed Lincoln scholar and Senior Vice President for External Affairs at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, credited Homer’s Carpenter with being “the most important artist ever to portray Abraham Lincoln.” Both Stoddard and Carpenter wrote books about Lincoln and life at the White House in the 1860s. These are primary sources used by Lincoln scholars to this very day.

Eli DeVoe Thwarts Assassination Plot

Of course, Lincoln would never have been President were it not for the fine detective work of a man born in a log cabin on the Scott Road in 1809, the same year Lincoln was born in a log cabin in Kentucky. Eli DeVoe was his name. He was one of the men involved with thwarting a plot to assassinate the President-elect on February 23, 1861, when his train was scheduled to stop in Baltimore while en route to the nation's capital. Ironically, in 1865, DeVoe would be instrumental in arresting two of the conspirators in the successful plot to assassinate Lincoln and the unsuccessful attempt made on the life of Secretary of State William H. Seward (from Auburn, New York).

Yet another local hero of the era was Sgt. Llewellyn P. Norton of Company L, 10th New York Cavalry. For having charged, on horseback, a Confederate artillery position and for capturing two men and a fieldpiece, he was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. The actual presentation, however, was not made until 1888.

On April 2, 1867, at a special town meeting, consideration was given to a resolution calling for the raising of \$20,000 in taxes "for the erection of a new [Cortland] Academy building in the Village of Homer" to replace the edifice constructed in 1819. 466 were in favor of the tax, and 140 were opposed.

Nation's Centennial

In 1876, the nation was one hundred years old. To celebrate the centennial locally, the Reverend William A. Robinson prepared a "Sketch of the History of Homer N.Y." and read it on the Fourth of July. The oration began with these words: "To compress a hundred years into twenty minutes is a feat rivaling the achievements of the railroad and the telegraph in annihilating space." If only this "unofficial" town historian could see what the technology of 132 additional years has done in "annihilating space"!

In 1878, a special town meeting was called to elect a supervisor to fill the vacancy caused by the resignation of S. McClellan Barber. The result was 276 votes for A. Judson Kneeland and 127 for David H. Hannum. While Hannum would be the inspiration for the colorful protagonist in Edward Noyes Westcott's novel David Harum (published in 1899), he apparently was not all that popular with Homerites in 1878. Could it have been his unfortunate conviction for fraud in 1868 and his attempt to gain money from the Cardiff Giant Hoax the next year (more fraud) that stuck in the public's mind? His reputation would posthumously improve over time, once he was linked with the fictional Harum.

Also, in 1878, the Town Board approached the Officers of the Episcopal Society about the possibility of purchasing the Episcopal meeting house (in the basement of which the Board had been holding meetings for 43 years) for the Town's purposes. The Minutes for February 20, 1883, show that negotiations had been abandoned. The next year, the Board held a public vote and moved to relinquish all claims to the basement of the church as soon as the Town, with or without participation of the Village, could secure a site and

construct a building to serve as a firehouse and with “a large room to be situated on the first floor, fronting the street, to be used jointly by Town and Village, for town caucuses, Town meetings, corporation meetings or other public meetings....” In the 1890s, Board meetings were held at the First National Bank on Main Street, and annual town meetings were conducted at different locations: the Murray Building, the Porter Block, the “vacant store” in the First National Bank building, and the Hakes Block. Clearly, one permanent location to conduct the town’s business was needed.

Post-Civil War America in Transition

Post-Civil War America was in transition. A different way of life was emerging at “the turn of the century.” It was an age that saw the rise of big business and the advent of new services. The following businesses were headquartered in the city of Cortland and the town exacted of them a “special franchise tax”: Homer & Cortland Gas Light Co., Cortland Home Telephone Co., Cortland & Homer Electric Co., and Cortland County Traction Co. This last business provided electric trolley service, and it was taxed \$7,500. It carried passengers between Cortland and the park in Little York. History was made in Homer on February 17, 1903, when mechanical “U. S. Standard voting machines were used for the first time,” instead of paper ballots. The records show that “the taking off the returns from the machines was accomplished in 17 minutes.” The Town Board decided that three machines were to be purchased for \$500 each.

Indeed, the first two decades of the new twentieth century witnessed the “progressive movement.” Americans were eager to correct economic, social, and political ills, and that desire for progress was keen in Homer, too. At the biennial town meeting of February 19, 1907, Fire Chief E. C. Darby and the Fire Council of the Homer Fire Department offered a resolution “in regard to a joint Village and Town Building” to be erected “upon the plot of ground formerly occupied by the National Hotel in North Main Street....” These reasons were cited for such a building: office space for Town and Village officials; safe repository of town and village documents; storage of “voting paraphernalia [sic]”; a jail “with better facilities for handling criminals;” “a suitable auditorium where public meetings can be held without the expense of paying rent, the lack of such a hall being felt most keenly in both village and town life”; “more capacious and easily accessible quarters for the companies of the local Fire Department;” and “a place for holding political caucuses, party meetings, and elections.” The eighth reason clearly shows the spirit of the times: “...Homer should have such a building to maintain its reputation as a *progressive community* [italics added], and to hold its own with other towns of similar size in this and neighboring counties....” A motion was made and carried “that the Town Board appoint a Committee of Five to look into the matter of a joint building.” M. J. Pratt, the Town Supervisor, along with George Klock, W. H. Foster, George A. Brockway, and Harry Hull comprised the Building Committee, as appointed on February 23, 1907. They thought it best to combine an engine house (fire station) with the Hall and to build it south of the Union Building (the lot where the David Perfetti residence now stands). They secured an option to buy for \$3000.

The site the Fire Department wanted was selected, but plans would not include an engine house. For ninety years this site had been occupied by a hotel built by Enos Stimson. As of 1894, the village had three hotels to accommodate travelers passing through central New York State. Through the years, under changing management, each hotel had changed names and had experienced fires at different times, causing great confusion decades later for those trying to correctly identify photos and postcards of the fires. A "lower hotel" (only one balcony across the front) stood where the present fire station stands; it was destroyed by fire in 1934. The "upper hotel" (with a balcony along two sides) was known as the National at the time of its fire in November, 1904. On the northeast corner of Main Street and Water Street and at the eastern end of Clinton Street, the National had boasted of 52 rooms, a stable to accommodate 100 horses, and one flush toilet. According to the late Anna Hilton of The Landmark Society, during the 1904 fire, "the crockery was thrown from the windows" while the feather beds were "carried down the ladders." At an estimated loss of \$12,000, it is this hotel fire that opened up a space in which the Town Hall could be constructed.

The owner of this piece of property was Burdette H. Griffin, who had served the town as a justice of the peace from 1901 until his resignation was accepted on May 1, 1906. The Fire Council's petition, also, stated that Griffin "has publicly announced his deep interest in this proposition and is willing to give the sum of \$500.00 toward purchasing the site," the value to be determined by a representative of the town, a representative of the village, and a third to be named by the other two.

Property Acquired for Town Hall

On June 11, 1907, a special village election was held to decide the question of purchasing the proposed site, constructing an edifice for joint town and village use, and furnishing it, with the Town picking up 35% of the cost and the Village 65%.

On January 28, 1908, at a special town meeting held in the Porter Block on Main Street, eligible voters got to determine if the Board should be authorized to issue bonds not to exceed \$22,000 and to add to the assessment roll for the year 1908 \$1,000, making a total of \$23,000 for the purpose of purchasing the Griffin property, erecting a Town Hall, and furnishing same. 376 ballots were cast. 291 were "Yes," 77 were "No," and 8 were "Spoiled and Mutilated Ballots." Two weeks later, five individuals were appointed to supervise the construction project: F. M. Briggs, W. H. Foster, W. A. Coon, S. F. Andrews, and D. N. Hitchcock.

At the same meeting, a resolution was carried calling for the appropriation of \$100 "to assist said town in celebrating the One Hundredth anniversary of the formation of Cortland County." Cortland County had reached the centennial mark, and Homer was to have a new Town Hall.

Sixty year old Charles F. Colton of Syracuse was the architect selected, beating out the plans submitted by four other architects from Elmira, Binghamton, New York, and Syracuse. He was a prominent designer whose buildings in Syracuse still stand,

including City Hall. According to the *Homer Republican*, the contract for the construction was awarded on April 25 to William L. Hoag of Tully, who trumped eight others with the low bid of \$20,983. Separate contracts were awarded for excavation, masonry, carpentry, heating and plumbing, electrical, and interior finishing.

Ground for the foundation was broken on May 20, 1908. The basement walls were of concrete. The basement story above grade is ten feet and was constructed of rock-faced "Miracle" cement blocks. The story above the basement is seventeen feet to the cornice and was made of smooth-faced "Miracle" cement blocks. The blocks were cast in Syracuse by the "Miracle" Cement Block Manufacturing Company. The company's business manager, E. C. Ide, had come to Homer to tout the block's many points of superiority over other makes of cement work and to explain that the firm had been casting cement for about eleven years and this particular patent process block for four years. The blocks are two feet long by eight inches high and ventilated, having 30% air space. The blocks were stained brown in color with a soft, light gray block for trimming, which, supposedly, was to provide the effect of brown stone and granite. The same "Miracle" blocks were used in the foundation of the Preble school building.

Architectural Plans

The plans called for a 57x52 foot assembly hall in the basement, and an auditorium and stage on the upper floor. No doubt, this was to compensate for the recently closed Keator Opera House on Main Street. Located on the third floor of the Barber Block, this had been the main gathering place in the village until it was deemed too costly to install the fire escapes that had been mandated. The 60x53 foot auditorium was to have removable chairs and a seating capacity of 504. A balcony with a capacity of 194 more seats made a total capacity of 698 seats. The vestibule at the west end was to have a short flight of stairs leading to the auditorium, with a ticket office at the lower level and two office spaces, one in the north corner and one in the south corner, at the upper level. The stage at the east end was to have an opening of 30 feet and a depth of 27 feet, with a dressing room in the basement and a stairway leading to the northeast corner of the stage above. At the rear of the basement and beneath the stage would be the lock-up with three cells, an office for police court, the heating plant, and coal bins. The lock-up was to be fire proof and noise proof. A kitchen, pantry, storage room, offices, closets, and two toilet rooms with flush closets and lavatories were to be at the front end of the basement.

By October, 1908, the roofing was nearly completed, but it was determined that the dome planned for the new Town Hall "be covered with copper instead of tin" for an extra \$100. In addition, 752 chairs were to be purchased from Briggs Bros. Furniture store on James Street, Homer. The old jail cell was to be sold to Contractor Hoag for \$75, and three jail cells were to be purchased from Pauly Jail Building Company for \$645. The Village put in a six-foot cement walk in front of the Hall. By mid-November, the Lane Plumbing & Heating Company of Cortland was installing the steam heating plant. Plastering was completed and most of the wainscoting was done. The anticipated completion date was December 15th. As the current Town Clerk has observed, to build with the date "1908" carved in stone over the entrance reveals a contractor constructing "with confidence."

The actual completion was only off by ten days but still within the calendar year still visible over the front entrance.

Town Hall Completed in Seven Months

On Christmas Eve day, 1908, the building committee made a final inspection, and the Town Board accepted the building “with the exception of the plumbing, which will be accepted when certain necessary changes are made.” The *Homer Republican* proclaimed the building to be “beautiful” and “a credit to the architect,... the contractor, the building and town committees, and to the town which caused it to be constructed.” The paper also cited the absence of the kind of criticism and fault-finding one frequently finds engendered by such building projects. It boggles the modern mind that the Town Hall was up and running in **seven** months time, but as Fred Forbes, the current town supervisor, has stated, “One must keep in mind that there were no state mandates and ‘red tape’ to slow things down, like today.” Someone had the presence of mind and a Conley folding plate camera to photographically document the phases of construction. In October of 2007, the seven glass negatives, owned by Patricia Gray Jackson, were conveyed to the town historian by Frances Armstrong, and they were developed for the Town into seven remarkable 8x10 prints by Industrial Color Labs of Syracuse.

On Wednesday, January 13, 1909, the scenery for the stage, from the Chicago firm of Sosman & Landis Co., was delivered. Thomas Knobel of Homer, who had the contract for stage settings in the auditorium and was busily installing the fittings for the various curtains, was pleased with the scenery representing woodlands, a grand parlor, a kitchen, and a prison. Knobel had hand-painted the scene of the Village Green on the drop curtain, the same curtain that had originally been used for Dr. G. A. Tompkins’ drama, “The Village Green,” that had been presented at the Keator Opera House. Now, it is clear how Homer teacher, Rona Knobel, comes by her interest in art and drama.

Grand Dedication

According to the *Homer Republican* of January 28, 1909, the new Town Hall was officially opened to the public on Tuesday, January 26, 1909. All afternoon, it was reported, throngs of visitors were greeted and escorted through the building by Town Supervisor Melvin J. Pratt, Town Clerk Lewis M. Austin, and President of the Village [mayor] Dr. L. W. Potter, along with members of the village board, the town board, the building committee, and their wives. Mrs. W. H. Foster played the piano that had been purchased from R. J. McElheny for \$290 (it still exists but not in good condition), and C. D. Dillenbeck, the electrical contractor, operated the stage lighting switchboard to show off the possible lighting effects. A reception was also held that evening, during which musical selections were provided by Alvord’s eight-piece orchestra. At 7:30 PM the curtain was raised and the town and village officers took their seats upon the stage presided over by Dr. Potter, President of the Village. He spoke of his pleasure “to be called upon to preside at the first formal meeting to be held in the town hall and that the people had deemed it fitting that something in the nature of a dedicatory exercise should be held.” He complimented the efforts of the building committee and praised them for

“having erected the building without exceeding the appropriation.” He then introduced Attorney E. W. Hyatt as Homer’s “City Judge.” Hyatt spoke at some length about the past record of the town and of the noble example left by the past generations. Next, a rendition of “Annie Laurie” was performed by a glee club consisting of Rev. Albert Broadhurst, Fred T. Newcomb, R. J. McElheny, Carl E. Bates, Charles F. Fisher, Ralph S. Bennett, and Fred J. Nixon. The audience responded by clamorously calling for more. The club responded twice to encores, “singing popular college airs with fine effect.” County Judge J. E. Eggleston of Cortland then offered his recollection of the many leading citizens of Homer who had made a name for themselves and congratulated the present citizens for showing pride in their town. The orchestra then played while Thomas Knobel exhibited the stage curtains, scenery, stage settings, and stage equipment. The general satisfaction expressed by all that day with the building was “most gratifying, and especially so to... the building committee and town board.” Today, a door near the Board room leads to a short flight of stairs that takes one up onto the old stage. Sadly, the curtains and equipment of that first day are either tattered or gone.

The price for entertainments in the new Hall was set in 1909. Local parties would be charged \$20 per night and outside entertainments would be charged \$25 per night. Rehearsals would cost a dollar an hour. The first public entertainment ever given there was a benefit concert on the evening after the official opening. Proceeds were to go toward buying furnishings for the hall. The program consisted of local talent presenting recitations, orchestral selections, and several solos by voice, violin, piano, and cello. The newspaper claimed that the most pleasing were the soprano solos by Miss Marsh of the Cortland Conservatory of Music. The acoustic properties of the hall were deemed to be “excellent.” Home talent again took the stage as Triumph Hose [Firefighting] Company presented the comic opera, “The Sleeping Princess,” on February 9th and the farcical comedy, “Charley’s Aunt,” on February 10th. Both fundraising performances played to a packed house.

The municipal offices were first occupied in December, 1908, and in January of 1909 a motion was made and carried “that the assembly room of Town Hall be designated as polling place of Town Meeting to be held Feb. 16th 1909.” The Hospital Aid Society was given use of the Hall’s basement. The upper room on the southwest corner of the Hall was to be outfitted for use for Town Board meetings and as the office of the Town Clerk, and the northwest corner room would be used for Village Board meetings. Today, one room is used by both groups for their meetings. In 1912, the position of Deputy Town Clerk was created, and it has been filled ever since.

In 1914, the Dillon Brothers, managers of The New Cortland Theater (site of “picture shows” and live vaudeville entertainment in Cortland), requested use of the Town Hall for a “picture show” -- a foreshadowing of the adaptability of the edifice that would come in twenty-four years. Movies in the “silent film” era were shown on weekends in the Briggs Building (or Union Building; now the branch office of First Niagara Bank) on Main Street, Homer, for ten cents. The films came with sheet music for the young pianist, Florence Foster Durkee, to provide the only background sound. Dialogue was

printed on the silver screen. By force, Homer was truly “a community of readers” back then.

That same year, bids were accepted for the painting of the Hall, and a flag was purchased to go on the Hall. In 1916, the Board had to contend with the health of the community. It determined that any child of age 16 or younger who entered into and remained in the Village of Homer from an area infected with infantile paralysis was to be quarantined (confined to his/her home with visitors forbidden) for at least three weeks under penalty of a \$25 fine.

Soldier’s Honor Roll for World War I – Town Historian

Town records make no mention that the United States was involved in the Great War (World War I) from 1917 to 1918, other than permitting the Red Cross to use the Hall free of charge and noting that it was “impossible to buy stone on account of the war.” On February 11, 1919, the board was authorized to purchase a “Soldiers Honor Roll Register” and “to register all returning soldiers and sailors as requested by the War Dept. at Washington.”

This mandated list was to be compiled by a newly mandated position. Every city, town, and village in the state was required to appoint an historian. Mabel B. Hyatt was the first to hold the appointed post of Homer Town Historian. There was a long period of time when no one filled the post at all. Interest renewed in 1974. Since then, the post has been held by Miss Ella Perry, Mrs. Josephine Brown, and Mr. Martin Sweeney. In the 1920s, Frank Kinney was contracted to build a vault with a steel door and frame in the northwest room in the basement of the Hall “to store the Town Research at a cost of \$285.” The Town archives are stored there today, and the Village has a separate vault in the same room. Town historians operated out of their own homes until 2007 when shared space was provided in the Town Clerk’s Office at the Town Hall.

“Doughboys” returning from “Over There” may have thought the Town Hall would be a fine post-war site of entertainment. After all, the Homer Academy’s Centennial Ball was held there on the evening of June 27, 1919. In December of 1919 the Homer Band was permitted to rent the assembly room for roller skating and dancing. However, the next month the skating was terminated because “the skates were splintering the floor.”

Once women in New York State finally got the right to vote in 1917 and across the nation in 1920 upon the ratification of the 19th Amendment, women in Homer started holding such positions as poll inspector, tax collector, and overseer of the poor. However, no woman sat at the Board table as “councilman” until the year 2000. Mrs. Frances K. Armstrong holds that distinction. She was appointed January 5, 2000, to fill the post vacated by Donald Ferris upon his election as County Treasurer, and then she became the first woman to be elected to the Board. She is still active in civic-minded organizations today.

The 1926 Senior Class of Homer Academy left its mark on the Town Hall -- literally. A three-act play, "The Mummy and the Mumps," was performed there on April 22 and 23. The cast left their names on the stage walls where they still remain, along with the graffiti of other townsfolk of a bygone era, making a rather interesting archaeological artifact.

1920's - Road Repair and Bridge Building

The "Roaring Twenties" saw an increasing demand for the "horseless carriage," in particular Henry Ford's Model T and Model A. It is no surprise, therefore, to find the Town Board focused in the 1920s on road repair and bridge building. For example, in 1922, the Board authorized the expenditure of \$2,000 for construction on Clinton Street of a bridge 30 feet in length to handle traffic over Factory Creek (just west of the present Homer Intermediate-Junior High School). In addition, a resident of Spafford submitted a wish to start a bus line between Homer and Skaneateles, using the Scott Road.

Other matters taken up in the '20s included repair of the ceiling of the Town Hall. The interior was to be re-varnished and redecorated and the exterior repainted. Two 2 & one-half gallon fire extinguishers were bought, and the exits were marked with red lights. The allowed capacity was set at 336 persons, a number determined by the width of the existing exits. A Brockway truck, manufactured in Cortland by a company that had first begun in Homer, was to be leased for \$1775. The Cortland County Traction Company and the New York Power and Light Corporation were contracted to supply electrical lines for "light, heat, and power" along the town's highways. W. J. Stafford provided coal to heat the Hall for the budgeted amount of \$40.12, and on June 17, 1929, William E. Burdick was appointed the first "Enumerator" to make a list of dogs in the town. Truant officers were to be paid \$3 per call to round up students "playing hooky" (skipping classes for no legal reason). In 1930, the title was changed to "attendance officer."

Great Depression of the 1930s

Signs of the Great Depression of the 1930s can be clearly detected in certain money-saving adaptations deemed necessary by the Board. The salaries of Board members and election inspectors were reduced. The seven voting districts were reduced to five. The post of town attorney was cut, with the understanding that the county attorney could provide legal advice. The inadequate "Village Lockup" was closed down, and persons arrested were henceforth to be detained at the County Jail in Cortland. The "Gospel Fund" that had existed since 1808 "for the support of the Gospel & Schools," was appropriated in 1931, and the entire amount of principal and interest, \$2060.96, was distributed among the thirteen school districts of the town. Road work was to be done under "work relief projects." A new, more efficient heating system was to be installed at the Hall, and insurance on the Hall was cut by \$8,000. Redecorating and repairing the building would be done by "unemployed labor and to be paid for by the Federal C. W. A." The Civil Works Administration was a New Deal program providing the unemployed with five months of work constructing and improving buildings and bridges. The "poor account" was renamed "welfare" (until 1947), and the fees for renting out the Hall were cut in half, which was probably a good thing, considering all the folks who

found enjoyment dancing on the stage or attending “amateur shows” during the ‘30s. In 1933, the basement of the Hall was rented out for \$50 a month for use by the *Homer Post* to print its newspaper. Three years later, during the persistent hard times, the *Post* was evicted for inability to pay the rent.

Notable Figures in the Depression

Of all the names recorded in the history of the Town of Homer, there are five from this depression era that are worthy of singular attention for their longevity of service. They are Harold L. “Cap” Creal, J. Henry Knobel, Earl Gutches, Elma Mineah, and George Venum.

“Cap” Creal, born and raised in western New York State, graduated from Cornell in 1921 and came to the Homer area to take up farming, at which he was extremely successful for 65 years. In 1931, friends asked him to run for town supervisor, but he declined. The next evening, four friends came by to say they were not asking but telling him to run. They were certain his many contacts in the farming community would help. So, he was elected town supervisor and served for seven years during the Depression. As town supervisor, he set up a Cortland County work program. This paid 30 cents an hour for a 44-hour week. Later, the federal government set up a similar program. Creal’s energetic leadership later came into play when he served as a New York State Assemblyman from Cortland County for twelve years and Director of the State Fair for over a decade. He lived into his nineties, and when asked how to attain such longevity, “Mr. New York State Agriculture” wryly replied, “Pick your ancestors.”

J. Henry Knobel became Town Clerk in 1934, when Creal was Supervisor. Knobel, son of an earlier Town Clerk, Thomas Knobel, would have the distinction of the longest tenure of office of all the Clerks. He would serve for 31 years, until he died in office, in the Town Hall, on February 2, 1965. Fittingly, the current Town Clerk, Mrs. Anita Jebbett, is a descendent of the Knobels. J. Henry was her grandfather, and Thomas was her great-grandfather. Civil service must be in the Knobel Family’s blood.

Earl Gutches of East Homer was another who rendered long and faithful service to the town. He was a town justice for 54 years. Upon his death in 1959, he was the oldest justice in the state in point of continuous service. Gerald Young took his place, serving many years as a justice and later as the supervisor and a councilman.

Mrs. Elma Mineah was the first female deputy clerk, serving from 1934 until she became the first female town clerk on February 4, 1965. She gave up the job in the Fall of 1969 because of mandatory retirement.

On June 13, 1932, George Venum, a former mounted New York State trooper with a down-state accent, was appointed town constable, thus beginning a long career in the environs of Homer as “George the Cop.” At the next meeting, Harry and Ethel Davis were granted a license to operate a dance hall in the Buckingham Place north of the village, with the stipulation that it close at midnight on Saturdays. Enforcement, no

doubt, fell to Constable Vernum. In 1937, additional tasks of “Dog Warden” fell to Vernum (remember the post of “pound keeper” in the early 1800s?) In 1939, he became school attendance officer, too. In this era, the Town handed law enforcement over to the County Sheriff’s Department, and Vernum would be hired by the Village to be Chief of Police, a post he held until retirement in 1956. Today, a village park bears his name.

Capitol Theatre

A Special Meeting of the Board was called on April 26, 1938. This was for the purpose of hearing a lengthy presentation by William M. Priven of Staten Island. He proposed to rent the Town Hall for a motion picture theatre. At a meeting on May 10th, the Board unanimously rejected Mr. Priven’s proposal. Present at the same meeting, however, was a Mr. Shay of the Corona Theater of Groton who made his pitch for using the Town Hall for a motion picture theater. On May 16th, the Board traveled to Groton to meet with the proprietors of the Corona Theater. They looked over the theater arrangement, discussed the possibilities of changing the Town Hall into a movie theater, and returned to Homer - - but not until after they had taken in the show, of course.

Next, they decided it would be best to bring the matter before the Chamber of Commerce, in hopes of ascertaining public opinion as to the desirability of a theater. On July 14th, the Chamber presented a petition signed by 103 persons, “including nearly 100% of the business men of the village,” calling for the leasing of the Hall for use as a movie theater. It needs to be recalled that the motion picture industry fared quite well economically during the 1930s, because for 25 cents and through the cinematic magic of Hollywood one could escape from the travails of the Great Depression. Thus, on August 18, 1938, the Board entered into “an agreement with the Townhall Homer Theatre Corporation” to lease the auditorium, the stage, and the main entrance for a theater. Thus, the Capitol Theater came into being. No doubt, the dome on the Hall was reminiscent of the one on the nation’s Capitol, and so the theater derived its name. With a marquee over the front entrance, it would remain for eighteen years.

Other changes to the Hall came in the fall of 1939. The old Board Room on the ground floor in the rear of the Town Hall was rented to Leonard Denison as a radio service shop for \$10 per month or \$100 if rented by the year. The shop remained there until January, 1948.

On the snowy afternoon of March 8, 1940, the Board spent the afternoon observing different vehicles up for consideration for snow plowing operations. What did they see? The seven ton Brockway plow slid off in a ditch. A county plow came to render aid and was also ditched. The Caterpillar grader pulled them both out. The Board bought the Caterpillar.

On December 8, 1941, after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, the United States entered the Second World War. The next month, the Board made the Hall’s basement available to the Post Office Department “in event the local office was burned or destroyed by enemy action during the present emergency.” In the rear, the jail cell block was removed,

and in the front, Murray Briskin, theater manager, had new front doors installed. That Christmas season, the Newton Line Company and its president, Ed O'Connell, hosted a party in the theater for its employees and their children, complete with party hats for the children and a visit from Santa upon the festively decorated stage.

During the war years, the Capitol (telephone no. 255), with its concession stand offering popcorn and candies, had two complete shows nightly at 7 and 9 PM., with a newsreel first. There was a Saturday matinee at 2 PM and continuous shows Sundays and holidays from 2 to 11 PM. Some senior citizens today can recall going to the "very nice" Capitol as youngsters. They can tell you that Jane Fellows was either a ticket-taker or a ticket seller. They can even name the projectionists: Carlton Niederhofer, Jim Hawley, Leonard Denison, Harold "Jack" LeRoy, and Floyd Hamilton. In 1942, the price of admission was as follows: 25 cents for adults in the balcony, 30 cents for adults in orchestra seats, and children were "always 11 cents." Tax was included. On October 14 through 16, 1942, the featured film, appropriately enough, was "To the Shores of Tripoli," starring John Payne, Randolph Scott, and Maureen O'Hara. The Capitol was, as well, "the official issuing agents for war bonds."

By 1946, admission for adults had increased to 40 cents and to 12 cents for children. A movie calendar for March and April had advertisements for A. B. Brown & Son on the Cortland-Homer Road (Tel.222) and Jackson's Meats & Groceries on 42 James Street, with "free delivery every day" (Tel.77). Sunday through Monday had a double feature, "all in Technicolor": Comedians Abbott and Costello starred in "In Hollywood," and James Craig and Ava Gardner could be seen in "She Went to the Races." On Wednesday and Thursday, "The Princess and the Pirate" was featured, with the legendary Bob Hope, Bing Crosby, and Virginia Mayo. April started off with Judy Garland and Ray Bolger in "The Harvey Girls."

Saturday matinees found the youth of the village coming to see the latest Hopalong Cassidy or Roy Rogers western. Before the main feature, there would be cartoons and a Flash Gordon or Rin Tin Tin serial. The space adventurer or the clever canine would get into some thrilling "cliffhanger" situation, but the moviegoer would have to return the next Saturday to see how it all played out.

Homer Academy Fire

On the evening of January 26, 1945, fire ravaged the elementary section of the Homer Academy on the Green (School District No. 1), and classes had to be housed at various places around the village -- St. Margaret's Church on Copeland Avenue, upstairs in the fire station, Phillips Free Library -- until a new addition was ready in 1951. The basement of the Town Hall was used, too, for grade three classes. The auditorium/theater had frequently been used through the years for school plays and even commencement exercises. In January of 1948, it was the Hall's turn to experience a fire. Insurance of \$7,363.41 covered the repairs, and fire insurance was increased from \$16,400 to \$51,400. The recently centralized school districts, known as Homer Central School, gave up occupancy of the Hall in 1951. In lieu of rent, the Town accepted all permanent

modifications the school had made to the building and the school would paint the interior as desired by the Board.

The 1950s saw the advent of television, and the new technology was starting to adversely affect movie theaters by offering competition. The Capitol was no exception. In early 1952, Murray Briskin closed one night a week because of “the drop in attendance,” and the Town reduced his monthly rent from \$85 to \$75. A request to rent a portion of the Hall for a “photographic studio” was denied. A public complaint was lodged concerning a smoke nuisance from the chimney of the Hall, and the matter was referred to Mr. Briskin, since he owned and operated the heating system. The theater lease came up for renewal in 1953, but only “after several months of bickering between lawyers” was an acceptable agreement reached, and the next year the rent was reduced to \$60 and then to \$50. On June 7, 1955, Mr. Briskin informed the Board that he was terminating the lease and closing down the Capitol Theater. As of July 3, 1956, the Capitol Theater officially ceased to be. The marquee on the front of the Hall was removed in 1959, but remnants inside are visible today. There is the ticket booth, the original carpeting and seats in the balcony, the projection booth, the original four carbon rods needed to project images, and the graffiti upon the walls of the stage. There, one finds, scrawled among the names of townfolk, the title of one film, “The Talk of the Town,” a 1942 release starring Cary Grant as an unlawfully imprisoned activist. Upon entering the Hall today, visitors are greeted by two movie posters from the 1930s, and for a brief moment one is transported back to an earlier era. One can almost smell the buttered popcorn again and hear the dashing Rhett Butler tell the headstrong and beautiful Scarlett O’Hara, “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn.”

Another recreation issue of the mid- to late-50s involved complaints from the residents of the hamlet of Little York. It seems that boisterous swim parties were not uncommon after 10 PM on summer evenings at the site of the dam at the lower end of Little York Lake, and the neighbors were seeking help from the highway patrol. Later, residents requested the area be fenced off and swimming prohibited.

In 1955, the decision was made to replace the old flat roof of the Town Hall with “a Flintcote specification, 20 year smooth surface built-up roof including flashings.” The \$499 bid was granted to Burden Roofing Company of Homer. The next year, the dome structure and roof were repainted with paint specifically to come “from local dealers.” The local Lions Club requested permission to use the Hall for motion pictures, and it was granted “at \$10.00 per night.”

Post-World War II “Baby Boom”

The post-World War II era experienced a “baby boom,” an explosive increase in the nation’s population. An expanding population in the township of Homer required more services, and the Town tried to accommodate. Two sites were selected and purchased for town dumps in the mid-50s: one on Brake Hill and another on the O’Shea Road. Littering along the roads leading to these dumps became an environmental problem. In 1957, a Zoning Commission, chaired by “Cap” Creal, was to prepare a much needed

Zoning Ordinance. Such a document was adopted April 8, 1958. In June, a vote determined that a new town highway garage be constructed on Prospect Street at a cost of \$56,000. In August, the Hayes Ambulance Service was contracted to provide ambulance service for the residents of the Town and Village of Homer. A Town Planning Board was appointed in February of 1959, with John Gustafson as chairman, "to provide for the sound growth and development of the Town." That mission has been pursued by that Board to the present day. A Youth Recreation Program was initiated and a gravel quarry just north of the village became a municipal swimming pool operated by both the Town and the Village. Today, it is known as Albert J. Durkee Memorial Park, but swimming is no longer permitted there. Mr. Durkee was co-founder of Durkee's Bakery, which operated in Homer and Cortland from 1931 to 1972.

Cortland County Sesquicentennial - 1958

1958 was the Sesquicentennial, or 150th anniversary, of the County. Homer had a long parade down Main Street, complete with floats and horses and bewhiskered members of the "Brothers of the Brush," to celebrate its past. Being hirsute was "in." Actually, it was required, or you paid a two dollar "fine."

With the movie theater gone, the 1960s began with a discussion of possible uses of the Town Hall. Alterations were suggested, and alterations were made. Office space for the Town Supervisor, Town Clerk, Tax Collector, and Assessors was provided. The possibility of selling the Town Hall to the Cortland County Extension Service for its County headquarters was considered. Local dentist, Dr. Lloyd Haverly, representing the Homer Recreation Commission, pursued the possible use of the basement for a Youth Recreational Center. The Cortland-Madison Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) expressed interest in renting office space in the Hall, and ground floor office space was provided. A small, renovated room at the back of the Hall was provided the Village for a police office for \$300 annual rent, and Virgil Moffitt was allowed to use the auditorium for "Sunday Night Musical Entertainments on a trial basis, for \$20.00 per night." Apparently, the trial run was not satisfactory; a later request by Mr. Moffitt for the Sertoma Club to rent the auditorium on a Sunday night for a Western Jamboree fundraiser was denied.

In 1967, a New Building Construction Code for the Town went into effect, and Charles W. Jermy was the first to be appointed Building Inspector to enforce the ordinance. New housing developments were springing up, which created additional roads for the Town Highway Department to maintain under the Highway Superintendent, John Vaber, who served with dedication from 1950 to 1973.

The matter of renting the auditorium became a moot point in 1969. The auditorium space was renovated for BOCES to use. Carpeted office space with two toilets was installed and used until the McEvoy Center in Cortlandville was completed in 1971. The transformation work was done by students enrolled in BOCES' building trades program to give them a real life, on-the-job construction experience. Today, standing on the stage or in the balcony, one can see the handiwork, including heating and ventilation ducts,

nestled into a space once filled with rows of chairs -- a veritable symbol of adaptability. When BOCES vacated the Hall, the Village offices moved from James Street to the office spaces in the Hall. In 1971, facing a space crunch, the Homer Central School rented administrative office space in the basement of the Hall until a new Junior High School was annexed to the Intermediate School in 1974, thus allowing the administration to return to the south wing of the High School, where it is today.

In the early 1970s, town assessors were reduced in number from three to one. This appointed post was filled by Lawrence E. Fitts, who held that position continuously until September 30, 2007, possibly making him the longest serving assessor in the state. Also, a Code of Ethics Ordinance and a Code of Ethics Board was established. A Snowmobile Ordinance determined where snowmobiles could and could not be operated. Town dumps were closed, and a county-wide sanitary landfill was created that still exists today. The feasibility of consolidating town and village governments was discussed, as it would be again in 2007 when the state offered grant money as incentive.

U.S. Bicentennial - 1976

By the summer of 1975, the United States had experienced two “wounds”: a protracted war in Vietnam that had just ended and the resignation of a President after a scandal called “Watergate.” “Healing” for the nation came in the form of preparations for its bicentennial and a chance to celebrate what was good about our past. The appearance of the Town Hall needed sprucing up in time for the occasion. Paint applied to the blocks had peeled off after only two years. A bicentennial parade made its way down Main Street on July 3, 1976, and members of the Board participated. It was about this time, too, that the Cortland County Nutrition Program took up residence in the basement of the Town Hall. The program still exists and seeks to provide nutritious meals for senior citizens. It is known as the David Harum Senior Citizens Center.

A town ordinance was passed in 1976 prohibiting dogs from being allowed to run at large. Compare that with the year 1796 when horses were the only creatures to be so prohibited. The fine for the twentieth century dog owner was \$10.

In 1978, the Board voted unanimously to oppose the establishment by the state of nuclear waste depository sites in the County “because no one has had a satisfactory knowledge of what can happen over the years to the storage of such waste materials.” The proposed sites generated much controversy, and protests from citizen activists succeeded in keeping the radioactive waste out.

In 1983, there was another protest. Some twenty residents attended a Town Board meeting. They were there to protest the colors being used in the painting of the Town Hall. The dome was to be a copper color, but when the paint was applied, a pink tone appeared, which, Josephine Brown recalled, prompted some rather colorful descriptions of what the dome looked like that “could not be printed in a family newspaper.”

On October 19, 1991, the bicentennial of the first settlement of the Town was celebrated. A program of speakers and a skit on David Harum was held at the high school auditorium, captured on video for posterity, and made part of the Town's archives. At this time of celebration, the much respected William Wright was into his sixth term as Town Supervisor, and Town Attorney, Robert Jones, had been offering legal counsel for three decades.

1994 saw the issue of consolidation of town and village services again raised as a cost-saving measure, but neither the town nor the village indicated too much excitement about the prospects. The issue of controversy in 1996 was the proposed construction of a Pennfield Corporation feed mill in Little York, where residents felt it threatened the quality of their life. In 1998, the Village Recreation office in the Hall became the Assessor's office, and the Recreation department moved to the present site south of the fire station on Main Street. The decade of the '90s concluded by seeing the town budget surpass the million dollar mark for the first time. Remember, that in 1831 the amount was all of \$539.33, but, of course, back then the roads were not maintained by sanders, plows, pay-loaders, and asphalt compactors, nor did workers receive health care insurance or state retirement funds, and million dollar property and liability insurance policies were unheard of.

Town Hall Renovations

It was liability concerns, aesthetics, and an appreciation of history that prompted the Board to start renovating the Town Hall, from the top down. As the building entered into the 21st century, its interior had offices with all the technology of the age -- computers, faxes, printers, calculators, and copiers -- but its exterior showed signs of deterioration. The removal and repair of the cupola atop the dome began in November of 2003. After 95 years of exposure to pigeons and the elements, the wooden structure was crumbling and hanging precariously from its post. Woodford Brothers Inc. of Tully used a cherry picker and a crane to bring it safely to the ground and take it to Tully for restoration. Eight months later, a refurbished cupola with a new gleaming copper top was reattached.

The Woodford Brothers had used, in 2002, two orange and white steel supports, drilled into the sidewalk, to hold up a roof over the front entrance. This was required because the weight of the four Roman-style columns (originally built in Syracuse) to support the roof was starting to wear on the block foundation. The dome, front steps, and the windows were sorely in need of repair, and handicap accessibility needed to be addressed to be in compliance with the federal Americans with Disabilities Act. An application for a \$350,000 state grant to fix the building was denied. Surplus funds were then dedicated to the task of restoring the front portico, completely redoing the town court, and installing a wheelchair-accessible elevator. A Syracuse architectural firm, Crawford and Stearns, was hired for the project of bringing the landmark back to life. In June of 2006 the Board approved a resolution to purchase a vacant house immediately north of the Town Hall (No. 33 North Main Street). Previously owned by Randy Thomas, the house was bought from the county for \$34,220 in back taxes. The site was eyed by the Board for a possible parking lot for the restored Hall. A public hearing on the subject showed division. Half

the speakers supported razing the house and creating 20 to 30 parking spaces. The other half deplored the loss of property tax money for the town. Discussion also focused on which of four locations to use for the installation of the elevator. In the end, the Board voted to put in a parking lot and to install the elevator at the northeast corner of the Hall after the renovations to the courtroom were made, according to designs by preservation architect, Randy Crawford -- all for a cost of close to \$700,000.

Paul Yaman Construction started work on the front portico in the summer of 2006, with December 8, 2006, as the deadline date. After months of costly delays, partly due to winter and to poor casting work by Steps Plus of Syracuse, the front entrance did not open to the public again until August 1, 2007. Paul Yaman Construction had to pay the Town \$6,900 for 69 "late days". Putting in the front sidewalks and moving the flagpole to the north side of the entrance was done by Homer contractor, Tom Kile.

At this time, renovation of the century-old landmark situated in the Homer Historic District proceeds. As it celebrates its centennial, the Homer Town Hall is still adapting. It is a symbol of the 6,424 townspeople it serves in a 50.37 square mile area-- a people mindful of the past and yet trying to adapt to the requirements of the future.

Countless numbers of individuals have served the Town during the past 217 challenging years. To mention them all and the problems they confronted would require a book. The town officials dealing with the challenges of the present age are as follows: Frederick J. Forbes, Sr., Supervisor; Anita Jebbett, Town Clerk/Collector; Barbara A. Crandall, Deputy Clerk; Gary D. Shiffer, Town Justice; Barry E. Warren, Dan A. Weddle, Kevin M. Williams, and Brian D. Young, Councilpersons; and John R. Phelps, Superintendent of Highways. Village officials, with offices at the Hall include: Michael McDermott, Mayor; Louanne Randall, Village Clerk; Beverly Berry, Deputy Clerk; and Dawn Stevens, Clerk Assistant. Village Trustees are Michael Berry, Andrew Brush, Roy Crandall, and Genevieve Suits.

Through the years, the names of the public officials working in the Town Hall have changed, and so, too, have the functions of the Hall. Like a versatile actor, the building has taken on many roles: center for municipal services, jail, courthouse, movie theater, dance hall, roller-skating rink, newspaper office, radio repair shop, classroom, school business office, senior citizens center, and, yes, even home to a colorfully painted cigar store Indian princess who will greet you in the front foyer! Stop in! She will silently bid you to toss the celebratory confetti and to ponder the possible roles the Homer Town Hall may be asked to play in its next 100 years.

Sources Used

- Berry, Beverly. Village Deputy Clerk. Supplied archival material on the Capitol Theater and "A Look Over Our Shoulder," a booklet prepared by the Leisure Hour Club of Homer, 1985.
- Bird, Ina H. "Eli DeVoe of Homer and President Lincoln." *Bulletin of the Cortland County Historical Society*. Vol. 3, No. 8, August, 1949.
- Butler, Bessie B. "Early Homer, Cortland Co.," in *Yesteryears*. Scipio Center, NY. Vol. 5, No.19, March 1962, pp. 162-169.
- Brown, Josephine. "Town of Homer, New York: 200th Anniversary of Settlement, 1791-1991." (Booklet printed up by Town Board).
- Crawford, Randy. Crawford & Stearns, Architects. Architectural data supplied September 13, 2007.
- Ellis, David M.; Frost, James A.; Syrett, Harold C.; and Carman, Harry J. *A Short History of New York State*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1957, 1962.
- Forbes, Fred. Town Supervisor. Informal discussions of the problems of building/renovating municipal buildings over the past century.
- Hamilton, Harriet. "David Harum and David Hannum," in *Yesteryears*. Scipio Center, NY. Vol. 8, No. 29, Sept. 1964, pp. 17-28.
- Hilton, Anna. Presentation on "19th Century Homer," cited in *Cortland Standard* news clipping (date unknown).
- Homer Republican*. Issues from January 30, 1908 through February 11, 1909.
- Jebbett, Anita. Town Clerk. Supplied financial and governmental data and the Knobel Family genealogy.
- Kane, Mary Ann. Cortland County Historical Society. Supplied information on Homer's hotels and on Llewellyn P. Norton.
- Knapp, Anna Moore. "Early Settlement of Homer, Cortland County," in *Yesteryears*. Scipio Center, NY. Vol. 5, No. 18, December 1961, pp. 101-113.
- Larison, Douglas. Superintendent of Homer Schools. Provided the scrapbooks of Dr. Frederick W. Putnam, Class of 1876, Homer Academy, which included "Sketch of the History of Homer N. Y. by Rev. William A. Robinson, July 4th 1876."
- Members of the David Harum Senior Citizens Center, Town Hall, Homer, NY. Interviews conducted on September 10, 2007.
- Newspaper clippings on file in Town Hall for 1982-2007.
- Quinlan, David. Member of Homer Board of Education. Provided letter he received from Harold Holzer, dated June 16, 2007, in which he assesses Carpenter to be *the* painter of *the* image of Lincoln.
- Stevens, Dawn. Village Clerk Assistant. Supplied data on Police Chief George Vernum.
- Town of Homer Minutes from 1795 - 2007.
- Town of Homer profile. <http://www.cortlandbusiness.com/county/profiles/homer.html>. Cortland County Business Development Corporation /Industrial Development Agency, 2006. Accessed October 24, 2007.
- Village of Homer Minutes for 1907-1911.

Researched and written by Martin A. Sweeney, Homer Town Historian