

## PUBLIC SAFETY BUILDING

By Ellen Knight<sup>i</sup>



Finished in 1915, Winchester's central Fire Station was built for a new era of motorized fire engines. During that year, the Fire Department dispensed with its horses, motorized its apparatus, and moved into a splendid new Fire and Police Department building.

The building came none too soon for the Fire Chief David DeCoursey. In 1913 he reported that "in the central station we still enjoy the distinction of having the most dilapidated building housing fire apparatus in the Metropolitan District." Repeatedly the fire engineers had called attention to the need of a new fire house, not only because of the condition of the old wooden building but also because the town was changing to motorized equipment.

According to the selectmen's 1913 report, "the erection of a new building has been delayed largely because any available site might be affected by the grade crossing abolition." At that time, the selectmen had a plan to solve the problem of the railroad crossing by lowering the tracks about three feet and raising the streets to a bridge. That would have required the elevation of all the roads and buildings at the center of town.

However, realizing that it might be some years before a grade crossing plan might be adopted and executed, the board recommended that "a new fire house be erected at the earliest possible date."



*The steamer "Mary Ann" outside the old fire station*

An incident reported in January 1914 helped force some action. On "a dark and dreary night" when a cold, drizzling rain that had been falling all day continued all night, DeCoursey had a dream that the corner of the firehouse was going down. So realistic was it that he got out of bed to go down and take a look. He was just in time. The building had sagged down a couple of feet. The only thing to do, it was reported, was for him to go into the cellar, jump up on the hay (kept for the horses still in use to pull the engines), and hold it.

The Town Hall bell had just tolled midnight when his shouts for help were heard. The firemen found DeCoursey on his hands and knees with his back against the ceiling above, supporting the building. "For heaven's sake, pile something under this corner and let me out," he reportedly

pled. Reportedly, “they went at it like the heroes they are, and a few of them got up on the hay and raised the floor a little higher. The others chucked bales of hay underneath until a sufficient quantity was jammed in to hold it.”<sup>ii</sup>



*Buildings formerly on the Public Safety Building site*

At the next Town Meeting, an appropriation for the new station was approved. The new Public Safety Building, for the Police as well as Fire Department, opened in 1915. Town Meeting in March 1914 authorized bonding in the amount of \$85,000 for the new combination fire and police station.

A committee was formed whose first duties were to have town counsel review the deeds to the proposed site and to ask the town engineer to furnish plans of the present grade of the street, “together with the 4 percent grade used for the abolition of the grade crossing projected every 10 ft. on a plan of the property.” While the selectmen’s plan for the grade crossing never materialized and no existing buildings or streets were raised, the new fire and police building was elevated in anticipation of the selectmen’s plan being carried out.

Wanting the building to be situated as near to the center as possible, the selectmen chose the site between the Miller Block (a.k.a. Tedesco Building) and the Savings Bank Building on Mount Vernon Street, around the corner from the old station on Winchester Place. The site was purchased, and the two wooden buildings located there were sold.



*Public Safety building on Mount Vernon Street under construction*

The committee interviewed over a dozen architects and selected Edward R. Waite in April 1914. In July, contractors sent in bids—all too high. The architect was asked to work with the low bidder “to revise the plans and amend the specifications so that a building may be constructed within the amount available.” Three contractors were asked to resubmit bids, and in August, the contract was awarded to F. C. Alexander.

Construction proceeded through 1914 and 1915, and on June 10 the Police Department, which had had quarters in the basement of Town Hall, moved in. Nine days later, the Fire Department moved into their new quarters.



According to the “final statement of receipts and expenditures” dated Jan. 28, 1916, the project was finished within budget and cost \$84,708.71, including the land, grading, building, furniture, cells, and fire alarm. In 1915, the selectmen reported that “the development of the Fire Department during the last year has been one of

the greatest in the history of the town, as it saw the completion of the new Fire Station and the motorizing of the whole apparatus with the exception of Hose 3. The town now has one of the best fire departments of any town of its size in the state.”

Motorizing the department was accomplished both by fitting old apparatus with motorized tractors and by purchasing new equipment. A new Ahrens-Fox pumping engine was purchased and, according to Chief DeCoursey, within an hour of its arrival in May 1915 it was working at a tannery fire in Woburn.

The fire engines have changed repeatedly over the past 90 years, but in appearance the Fire Station has remained essentially unchanged, though marred by holes cut for air-conditioning units, aluminum windows, and occasional disrepair.

Notable original architectural features include the red brick in Flemish bond with cast-stone trim, rusticated stonework outlining each of the three bays, monumental Corinthian pilasters, cornice with dentil molding, round window in the gable, and the cupola based on eighteenth-century design for public buildings.

The building has been on the National Register of Historic Places as part of the Winchester Center Historic District since 1986.



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<sup>ii</sup> *The Winchester Star*, Jan.9, 1914.