

TELLURIDE

magazine

SUMMER / FALL 2003

**Trendsetters:
Three Decades
of Festivals**

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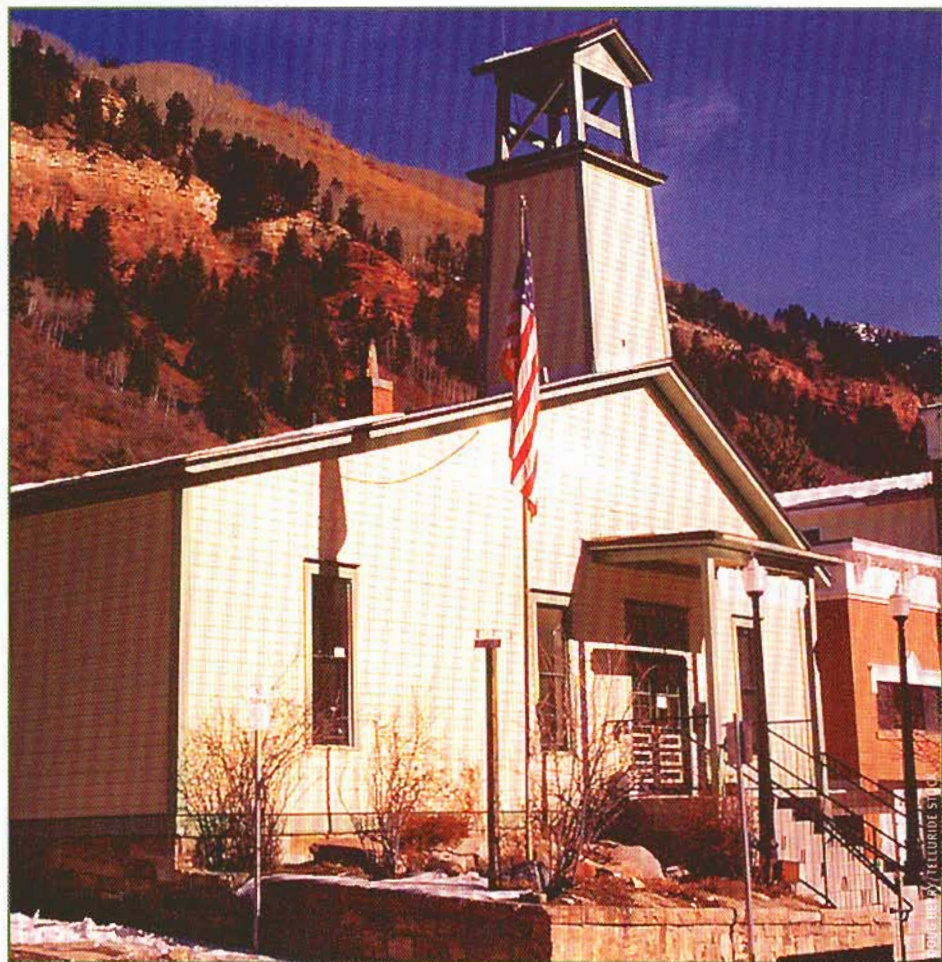
Mapping the Past

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As a National Historic District, Telluride is home to some of the finest representations of mining town architecture in the nation. This ongoing column will tell you the stories behind these structures.



Old Town Hall

BY ALLISON JOHNSON

Old Town Hall doesn't get the recognition it deserves. Ask a local to point it out, and they might confuse it with its neighbor, Rebekah Hall. Located a block off main street at the corner of Fir and Columbia, the building's simple frame construction, uneven roofline and modest bell tower do not stand out in a colorful Victorian town where terms such as "Richardsonian Romanesque" and "Italianate" are employed for some of the more prominent structures. Yet Old Town Hall has served an important civic role since 1883. Today, the building accommodates the planning department and the town clerk offices, but soon Old Town Hall may be reassigned once again to serve as the marshal's office.

SCHOOL HOUSE ORIGINS

When San Miguel County incorporated in 1883, one of the first orders of business was to create a public school district, thereby phasing out the private home subscription schools. The town purchased two lots for a total of \$7 and passed a \$3,000 bond to fund a two-room schoolhouse. George Walcott was awarded the contract for this simple frame construction, and on December 1, 1883, Ms. Minna Jeffs began teaching the first school term in the building to between 30 and 53 students. In 1961, Mrs. Harry Miller, a pupil who attended the school around 1890,

recalled that her classroom was furnished only with chairs, blackboards and a globe. A bell mounted in a belfry on the roof called children indoors, and wooden steps graced the building's front.

Until 1888, only one of the school rooms was used, but a growing population necessitated the addition of a third room in 1892 and a fourth in 1894. Longtime local William Mahoney, Sr., recalls hearing that two cribs to the east of the school also served as classrooms. By 1895, enrollment stood at 193 children, and the building was tapped out for space. A \$24,000 school bond was passed that year to build the

current-day elementary school. *The Daily Journal* noted after the election that “there has been a singular lack of interest manifested by the citizens of Telluride in this matter,” because only 28 people turned out to cast their votes.

THE TOWN AND FIRE DEPARTMENT MOVE IN

When the school vacated the building in 1896, the town government and fire department moved in, and in the late 1890s a large, barn-like maintenance addition was added to the rear of the building to house the fire department’s equipment.

The volunteer firemen put up with a lot in those days. After a series of suspect late-night fires in the bitter cold of January 1899, *The Daily Journal* quipped, “Some night one of these fire bugs will get caught in the act and the coroner will have a job.” A day later, the editor took locals to task for failing to upgrade the town’s firefighting equipment, which consisted of a 15-year-old “lumbering old cart” and no ladder: “Under the present arrangement when a fire breaks out someone shoots a revolver, then someone else makes a run for the Town Hall to ring the bell. It is a hard run and the man is lucky when he reaches the bell if he retains strength to ring an alarm. ...Any one of the three recent fires would have resulted disastrously had a stiff wind prevailed. And the fault would have been largely due to the old, out-of-date arrangements for giving the alarm and getting to the fire.”

Funds for the fire fighters came through by 1904, when a 50-foot-tall hose tower was constructed at the northeast corner of Town Hall for the purpose of drying hoses. After the Smuggler-Union Mill burned down in 1922, between three and five additional bell towers were installed around town to make sounding the alarm more convenient and less likely to cause the men to be “troubled for two or three days with coughs and sore lungs” afterwards.

In the early 1960s, the firemen got their own building to the east of Town Hall, around the same time as they incorporated into a fire district. Mahoney estimates that the wood frame hose tower and the maintenance barn attached to Town Hall were dismantled some time in the late 1950s after being deemed unsafe.

OLD TOWN HALL

While the fire department made use of Town Hall’s meeting space for decades, so too did the local government, and for many years all the town offices were there (today seven buildings are in use). Between 1904 and 1908, Town Hall was expanded on the west side, which created the asymmetrical gable form still evident today. In 1913, a vault was purchased for \$483 to protect town records and was installed in the northeast corner of the building.

“Ever since I’ve been here and long before, that building was used as the Town Hall,” says Mahoney. “It had one great big room where they had trials in the 1940s [with a justice of the peace]. If you had a traffic offense, you went there before the judge and paid a small fine.” Of course, as a child, Mahoney often went there on unofficial business as



well. “We used the room for roller skating,” Mahoney admits. “The doors were always open, and my dad had to stoke the fire in that big stove all night long to keep the pipes from freezing. It was a fun place to go in the winter.” He and his friends also gouged up the original pine flooring in battles with tops outfitted with metal tips. “We’d sharpen those suckers like needles and try to cut up the other guy’s top on those floors, until they put a stop to it,” he says.

Local Claire Bennett remembers that in the late 1940s Town Hall housed a library as well, and her girl scout troop stopped in to clean it one day. By this time the fire bell on top of Town Hall had been silent for decades,

and a siren system operated by the telephone exchange was installed in the belfry. “That siren went off at 9 p.m. every night,” says Mahoney. “That’s when kids had to get their butts home by.”

In later decades when Mahoney himself served on town council, the main room was used primarily for council meetings. “If you anticipated a crowd, you scheduled it in that room,” he says. “But we just had our council meetings in the clerk’s office. No one ever showed up to complain back then.”

THE FUTURE OF OLD TOWN HALL

Although little of the original schoolhouse remains, the historic building retains its exterior schoolhouse charm and is considered a significant contribution to the diversity of the town’s historic landmark designation. A 2001 Historic Structure Assessment stated that “the Town Hall’s minimal exterior ornamentation, footprint, and roof shape are typical of vernacular-style churches, schools, and other public buildings constructed in Colorado throughout the second half of the nineteenth century.”

The square tower, belfry and bell still straddle the roof, but the yellow paint color with black trim (which matches Rebekah Hall two doors down) is not original. According to town planning and building director Hal Hutchinson, the interior window trim and ornamental corner blocks may be original, but the eight-pane hung windows were replaced in the ‘50s or ‘60s. All the interior walls except for the vault have been altered, and although the building has been well maintained, it needs substantial work that includes shoring up the foundation and addressing leakage and drainage issues.

In 2001, the town submitted a grant application to the State Historical Fund to help finance an almost million-dollar rehabilitation project that would have addressed many of these issues and prepared the building for sole occupation by the marshal’s department. “The intent of making new office space within the building and getting grant funds to do it,” says Hutchinson, “is to maintain the historical integrity of the building while making it an efficient and useful structure.” The grant was denied, and now the town must rethink its options for the future use of the building. In the meantime, Old Town Hall continues to uphold its civic duty with an understated dignity that belies its significant role in Telluride’s history. ❁