

History of the Underhill Town Hall



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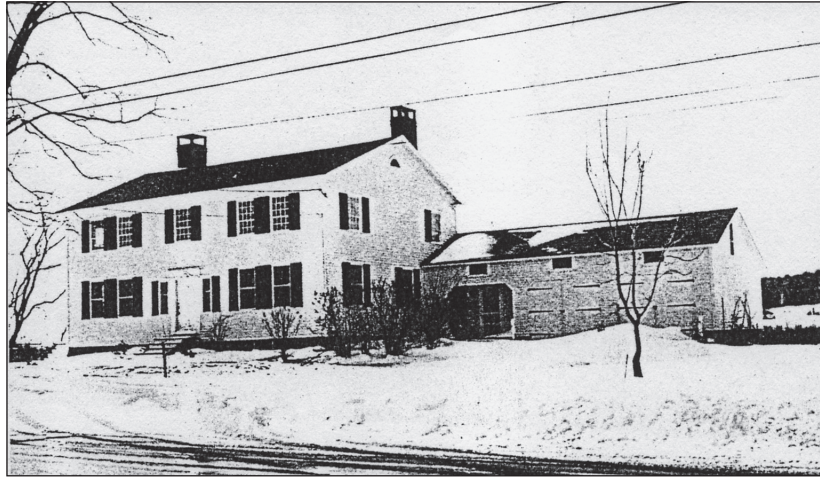
Although the Town of Underhill was officially chartered in 1763, there was no settlement made within the Town boundaries until after the Revolutionary War was settled and peace declared. The Hill Road, (now called Poker Hill) was laid out in 1791 and became the Post Road, the commercial route north to Cambridgeboro. In 1786 Abner Eaton had already settled with his family halfway up the hill. It was there that he found open meadows, cleared long before by beavers, whose ancient pond had since become open land, a treasure in a heavily wooded mountain town. Caleb Sheldon soon followed as well as a number of Revolutionary War veterans. By 1791 the Town of Underhill had a population of 65. The first community building was the log schoolhouse, built in North Underhill 1787. The Town of Underhill was not formally organized until 1795, four years after Vermont had relinquished its status as an independent republic and become accepted as the fourteenth state.

The first officially warned Underhill Town Meeting was held March 9, 1795 in the home of George Olds on the Hill Road. Earlier, in 1794, perhaps at a special meeting, William Barney had already been elected to be Underhill Town Representative to the Legislature. At the 1795 Town Meeting, William Barney was also elected Underhill Town Clerk. Abner Eaton, Archibald Dixon and Cyrus Stevens were elected Selectmen. Subsequent Town Meetings were held in North Underhill at the home and Tavern of David Birge. (now PH 291) The Birge Tavern also became the Stage stop and housed the Post Office. By 1800, another group of settlers had developed a hamlet midway along the Hill Road. Many of the new settlers were from Connecticut and were Congregational in persuasion. In 1800 they covenanted to establish the first church in Underhill. The first services were held in the homes of members or in the new Birge Tavern. By 1805 they had laid out a cemetery and built an adjacent church Meeting House on the Hill Road. As was customary in those days of theocratic governance, Town meetings were also held in the same building.



Former Birge Tavern, Poker Hill Road
(now a private home) c.1800

In 1786, early settler Elijah Benedict had built a log cabin on a large acreage in the area which came to be known as Underhill Flatts. (He had been a Tory, living in Canada during the War, his property confiscated,) The center of the community began moving from North Underhill to the Flatts, especially after the opening of the Creek Road from the Flatts to Cambridgeboro in 1827. The more level Creek Road became the Post and main stage road. In 1832 the town voted to hold Town Meetings at William Barney's new Tavern in the Flatts. The Tavern was also the Stage Stop.



Former Barney Tavern, Underhill Flatts. (now a private home at 417 VT RT 15) c. 1800-10

Meanwhile a hamlet was growing on the east side of the Town. In 1820 a 'highway' to Cambridgeboro had been built paralleling Mount Mansfield. (It was later called Pleasant Valley Road.) A new group of settlers came from New Hampshire and were mostly Methodist in persuasion. In 1824 they established a Methodist Episcopal church congregation in the new village which was emerging, with its own cemetery (now the Underhill Town Cemetery on Sand Hill Road). The village soon had a store and sawmill. In 1836 a congregation of Free Will Baptists had formed and in 1850 built a fine meeting house which they then shared with the Methodists, (and for a short while with a second group of Congregationalist). Because it was shared by several congregations, it was known as the Union Church and the hamlet became known as Union Village. Sometimes the Town Meetings also were held in that building



Union Church, Built 1850

The Green Mountain Academy in Union Village (later, officially Underhill Center) closed in 1881. The building was occasionally used by the Catholics until their new church was finished on adjacent property. Then in 1900 the Town voted to purchase the Academy building to serve as a formal Town Hall. There was no room in the building for a Town Office and Town records were kept at the home of the Town Clerk, but the large former schoolroom was used as a place to hold the Town meetings. The building served as the official Town Hall until 1950, when the Town voted to buy the unoccupied. Union Church and renovate it for Town use.



Underhill Town Hall, c. 1900 (Former Green Mountain Academy)

After World War I the US Government purchased large parts of Underhill, Jericho and Bolton to create the Underhill Artillery Range for use in conjunction with the Ethan Allen Army base in Essex Junction. Population declined in all three towns and the many churches suffered serious losses of parishioners. From 1920 to 1950 the population of Underhill declined from about 900 to around 700. The Union Church had been unoccupied for some time when the residents voted in 1949 to assess themselves at 15% of the Grand List to purchase the building. The 100 year old church needed considerable work to make it useable. Orville Wisley, retired farmer turned carpenter, along with Selectmen Carl McClellan and Crick Walker and other volunteers from the community, did the major reconstruction. The steeple was removed and a Town Office was created in the basement with a separate entrance on the front of the building. A space heater was installed in the office, along with the heavy safe in which Town records were stored. The upstairs meeting hall was heated with a wood stove. The hall was painted, refurbished and decorated with the help of a volunteer ladies organization. Town Clerk / Treasurer Louella Lamphere kept account of the expenditures to the penny. The entire renovation was accomplished at a cost of less than \$2300 and the new Town Hall was ready for occupancy in 1950.

IBM opened its manufacturing plant in Essex Junction in 1957. By the late '60s the operation had grown and along with it the population in all the local towns, Underhill included. Toward the end of the decade the population of Underhill was rapidly approaching 1200. Over the years the Town Office had outgrown the small space and a leak by the chimney had seriously rotted part of the main support structure of the building. Underhill Zoning Administrator and professional architect Bill Linde designed an office addition and a plan for renovation of the main building, but in March 1969 a construction bond for \$71,500 was rejected. But something had to be done if the building was to be saved. Town Clerk, Zilda Bolio, approached Ed Moore, then a local builder, for ideas. In the "do-it-yourself" tradition of the community, he offered to supervise local volunteers for Saturday work sessions for as long as it might take to renovate the building. Lucius Jackson, president of the Underhill Historical Society, offered to raise funds for the undertaking. The Selectboard agreed to underwrite the construction of a fireproof vault for storage of Town Records, replacement of the roof and installation of a septic system. The rotting structure was reinforced. Matt Parisi built the fireproof brick vault. Then over the next two years, working every Saturday, volunteers of all ages from children to grandparents, managed to completely transform the building. Improvements included not only a spacious Town office, but a new septic system, two lavatories, a kitchen facility, improved wiring and lighting and electric heat. The Historical Society donated tables and chairs which are still in use. Resident artist Roy Kennedy and Roland Ellis collaborated to stencil the back of each chair with an attractive eagle motif. The meeting hall was completely redone with volunteers on their knees filling holes in the wide board floors; the woodwork and walls were repaired and spackled and painted.



Duane Gravelin, Janet Towne, Ed Moore, 1969



Underhill sculptor Roy Kennedy reworking the balcony.



Librarian Faith Durbrow



John Moore



UNDERHILL TOWN HALL, Underhill Center — A frame building built in the mid-1850s in Greek Revival style. Underhill can be proud of the heroic effort put forth in recent months to render this old building useful for contemporary community needs. The citizens organized as the Underhill Historical Society and found a variety of ways to raise the necessary money. The basement has been done over to house the town library and the town clerk's office, with a fireproof walk-in vault and new carpeting. Upstairs the main assembly room has been redecorated for town meetings. Electric heat has been provided throughout the building, and the exterior has been painted.

The Underhill Historical Society members worked hard to raise the funds for the materials, holding auctions, raffles and sales of various kinds. The summer auction was very popular and became a tradition for quite a few years. In 1970, even before the work was completed, the Town hall received an award from the Chittenden County Historical Society. The Town Hall project had been rewarding for all involved and was celebrated with a grand opening party. The music was provided by local musicians who got together for the occasion: Doc Raymie Town on piano; Father Depeaux of St. Thomas on banjo; Selectman Ed Moore, clarinet; former Selectman Matt Parisi, trumpet; Maurice Nadeau of Nadeau Lumber, guitar; Bob Blaise on trombone. The festive celebration was enjoyed by all.

The newly renovated Town Hall served for many years, but the pace of population growth overtook it. The attendance at Town Meetings was exceeding the Fire Marshall limits and a larger venue was required. In 1991, with great sorrow, the Town of Underhill faced up to holding both the yearly School and Town meetings in the gymnasium of the Browns River Middle School

in Jericho. The Town Hall in Underhill Center continued to house the necessary town offices and meeting rooms. The "Great Hall" served for Special Town Hearings and as a Senior Center and was available for many social events.

Then in 1999 the Town was challenged to comply with Federal Regulations for public buildings and make all the building facilities "handicapped accessible" or face legal action. There was no space for an addition on the rear of the building, since the land was the location of the well and septic system. Margaret Hummel, then Chair of the Selectboard, came up with the bright idea to buy the very old house adjacent to the Town Hall and demolish it to make room for an addition on that side of the Town Hall which would meet Federal requirements. The Town so voted and the purchase was made. Brad Holden offered to take down the building for the materials which could be saved. There would be no expense to the Town. It took more than a year to accomplish the projects, but the land became useful.

In 2000 a construction bond was approved to implement plans for an addition to the building, as well as serious renovations. They had been designed by Stan Hamlet, architect and Selectboard member. The handsome building became even more useful, with a new brick vault, elevator, wheelchair ramp, handicap-accessible lavatory and kitchen. The Senior Citizens used the hall regularly for monthly lunches and all the officers and committees had better facilities. The hall has been in use for special celebrations and gatherings. In 2011, the landscaping was transformed by the Boy Scouts as an Eagle project designed by Andy Chamberlain.



Along with the new addition to the Town Hall, the bond included funds for a new Town Garage. It was built in 2000 and the old former blacksmith shop that had served as a very inadequate Town Garage for many years was replaced by a spacious and well-appointed Town Garage on New Road next to the former land fill. The building was dedicated to George Bradford, who had served as chair of the Selectboard for many years and given many years of service to the town.

The small piece of land across the road from the Town Hall, following the bank of the Browns River, had supported not only the Town Garage, but piles of gravel, sand and salt used on the roads. Their location close to the Browns River was unacceptable. The piles were moved to the New Road, close to the new Town Garage, a safe and secure location.

The soils on the empty property were hard packed and in poor condition, but with the hard work of many town volunteers, a fine small park was created. All of the landscaping materials, including tons of topsoil and plantings were donated. The park was created under the oversight of the Town Conservation Commission. By 2002 the new park created a fine new setting for the renewed Town Hall. A list of the many volunteers and donors is framed in the Town Hall.

In 2004, in a well attended ceremony, the newly created park was dedicated to Edwin Moore, who had served the town for many years in many roles. It was named Moore Park.

