

**NEWTON PUBLIC BUILDINGS SURVEY  
PHASE II – ANALYSIS OF HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE**

**Building Analysis**

**City Hall**



Address: 1000 Commonwealth Avenue

Year of Construction: 1931

Level of Significance: High

Individually listed property on the National Register of Historic Places, 1990.

Recommended Treatment Level: Preservation/Rehabilitation.

## **PART I - Analysis of Historical Significance**

### *Building History*

The Newton City Hall and War Memorial is monumental building in the Georgian Revival style designed by the firm of Allen & Collens. The building is set within a park designed by the Olmsted Brothers landscape architects.

Newton Mayor Sinclair Weeks was the driving force behind replacing the old City Hall on Washington Street, originally constructed as the Second Parish Meetinghouse in 1764 with a new building. The new building was conceived of as having a dual function as both a City Hall and a War Memorial to commemorate veterans and soldiers who had perished in World War I. The Board of Aldermen considered a number of potential locations for the building, conducting public hearings in Newton's multiple villages to determine the ultimate location. The present location, a swampy, triangular site in Newton Center, was acquired in 1927, accepted by virtue of being the geographic center of the town and what was imagined to become the center of the population.

In 1930 the Aldermen voted to petition the Legislature to give the City the authority to borrow outside the debt limit to finance the building. The Mayor justified this expenditure on construction during the Depression as a way to employ Newton residents. In June of 1930 the Aldermen appropriated money to permit the Mayor to engage the services of an architect. The selected architects were Charles Collens and Harold B. Willis of the firm Allen & Collens. Allen & Collens was a nationally prominent firm, known primarily for their work in the Gothic revival style. Important works included Riverside Church, Union Theological Seminary and the Cloisters Museum in New York; the Second Church in Newton; and numerous collegiate works including twelve buildings at Vassar College constructed between 1893 and 1937. The design of the grounds was by Henry Vincent Hubbard, a partner at the landscape architecture firm of the Olmstead Brothers. Hubbard joined the Olmstead Brothers in 1901. He left to start his own firm, Pray, Hubbard and White, but returned when World War I ended his business and became a partner in 1920. He also taught at Harvard from 1906-1939 where he was the Chair of the City Planning Department.

Between June 1930 and March 1931 the Aldermen considered twenty-four separate plans for the building before accepting the final design. Construction began in 1931, with two cornerstones (one for City Hall and one for the War Memorial) laid on November 11. The building was dedicated a year later with a military parade attended by many thousands. The Boston Society of Architects awarded the building the J. Harleston Parker Medal in 1936. This award recognizes "the most beautiful piece of architecture, building, monument or structure within the limits of the City of Boston or of the Metropolitan District Commission."

### *Level of Significance*

Newton City Hall is significant under National Register Criteria A and C. It possesses integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association. Its construction in the early 1930s is a significant reflection of Newton's civic pride and growth. Designed by the noted firm of Allen & Collens and set in an Olmstead Brothers-designed landscape, the award-winning building is also architecturally significant.

### *References*

Dempsey, James. "Newton's Civic Centre is Tribute to Hero Dead" in *The Official Dedication Program of the Newton City Hall and War Memorial*. Newton, MA: 1932.

Newton Historical Commission. "Discover Historic West Newton". Newton, MA, 2002.

"City Hall and War Memorial Building, Newton, Massachusetts". *American Architect and Architecture* 143 (July 1933): 55-62.

Massachusetts Historical Commission, "Form B NWT.2891—1000 Commonwealth Ave." (1988).

Pressley Associates, "Newton City Hall and War Memorial Grounds: Historic Landscape Preservation Master Plan", September 2006.

Van Lengen, Karen and Lisa A. Reilly. *Vassar College: An Architectural Tour*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004.

**PART I - Analysis of Historical Significance: Historic Images**



Figure 1: City Hall entry (east elevation), c.1940s. The landscape plan was designed so that the building would be mirrored in the reflecting ponds, with the reflection visible from the front steps of City Hall (Credit: Historic Newton).



AERIAL VIEW  
Helen & Collins, Architects      Olmsted Bros., Landscape Architects      Curtis-Wright, Planners

Figure 2: aerial view of City Hall and landscape after construction (Credit: Historic Newton).

## **Part 2 – Description of Historically Significant Features**

### **Exterior Visual Character**

#### *Setting*

- Park-like setting designed by the Olmstead Brothers. The organically shaped ponds to the east, now obscured by trees and undergrowth, were intended to serve as reflecting pools for the building.

#### *Shape*

- The building is roughly “T”-shaped in plan with protruding wings at each side of the long end (the section containing City Hall). The rear walls of the long end curve back to the short leg of the “T”, which is the location of the War Memorial.

#### *Roof and Related Features*

- Slate gable roof with arched dormers and raised brick gable ends at the center section of City Hall. Slate hipped roofs at the side wings.
- The City Hall roof has a small painted copper-clad cupola and low wooden balustrade at the roof edge.
- The War Memorial has a slate gable roof and a large painted copper-clad tower on a square brick base protruding from the roof.

#### *Openings*

- Windows are typically single double-hungs with 12-over-12 wood sashes. Some second floor level windows are 33/20 with arched upper sashes.
  - Most wood windows are intact. Some vinyl replacement windows at the basement level. The windows above the non-original elevator entrance have been bricked in.
- There are multiple entrances at the front and sides of City Hall and the War Memorial, typically contained within elaborate limestone surrounds with pediments. Reflective glass has been installed at the panels of the exterior doors.

#### *Projections:*

- The War Memorial side has a monumental pedimented stone portico supported by Tuscan columns.
- The City Hall side has a smaller pedimented stone portico supported by Corinthian columns.

#### *Trim and Secondary Features:*

- Numerous decorative elements, including a stone frieze at the perimeter of the building, an arcade with brick arches and decorative metal railings at the second floor of the areas of curved walls and wood balustrades at the steeples.

#### *Materials*

- Waterstruck brick with limestone trim, granite base.

#### *Craft Details*

- The pediment at the War Memorial Entrance is carved with a Symbolic Pediment Group, designed by Charles Collens. The three figures represent Patriotism, History and the Spirit of Sacrifice.

### **Interior Visual Character**

City Hall-General (in significant spaces, unless otherwise noted)

- Terrazzo floors (white/light gray in tan cement) and borders (black in tan cement)
- Plain painted plaster walls

Memorial Building-General (in significant spaces, unless otherwise noted)

- Tan/gray veined marble tile floors with black marble borders

#### *Individually Important Spaces*

City Hall-Entry Lobby

- Elliptical space with an airlock vestibule of two sets of double doors. 12-paneled exterior doors with a 5-light transom; two panels on each door are now reflective glass. The interior doors have 12 lights each, sidelights and a transom.
- Ceiling- ornamental, fluted plaster pattern radiating out from a cast plaster rosette
- Walls- eight marble-clad pilasters and their corresponding piers
- Floor- cast bronze city seal within an ornamental, multi-colored terrazzo pattern

City Hall-Aldermanic Chamber

- Ceiling- coffered with acoustic tiles added. Decorative panels on the beams
- Walls- pilasters between windows; frieze with triglyphs. In the space remaining the walls have panels defined and are painted, originally pale red. At west wall, recess defined with pilasters and two columns
- Windows- tall, arched operable windows
- Floor- the plain white oak in the bid set was upgraded to Burma teak-wood in a herringbone pattern.
- Four multi-armed chandeliers, centered in the ceiling coffers

Memorial Building-Memorial Hall

- Barrel-vaulted, symmetrical space; Ionic colonnade, side aisles; west balcony with solid, paneled wood guardrail
- Half-dome ceiling of apse originally had gold stars painted on the field of light blue
- Walls- flat plaster surfaces, pilasters, wainscot, chair rail, two cornices
- Original lighting concealed within vault springline; chandelier centered on each window

Memorial Building-War Museum

- Four dioramas of battle scenes and corresponding weaponry displays
- Ceiling-flat plaster, painted; shallow vault at crossing. Wood cornice.
- Walls-wood paneled, painted. Fluted square wood pilasters at corners
- Doorways- three different styles: two rectangular, one elliptical arch, one segmental arch
- Ceiling-mounted light fixture, likely original, with metal eagles around the perimeter

Memorial Building-Hall of Flags

- Two-story tall space, octagonal footprint at first floor, balcony hallway at second floor.
- Ceiling- vaulted ceiling, painted plaster. Cornice at springline
- Walls- at first floor, rusticated cast stone courses. Second floor, plaster with balustrades, pedestals, columns and trim
- Window- one arched window matching those in the Memorial Hall
- Floor- 17" marble tiles, diagonally laid, with a black marble tile border and star pattern
- Lighting- 10-armed chandelier
- Registry of Newton fallen soldiers, flags, war artifacts including cannonballs lodged in tree trunks

#### *Related Spaces*

Memorial Building-Stair Hall

- Ceiling- flat plaster cross-groin vault

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City Hall

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- Walls- paneled wood at first floor, up to a wood wainscot at second floor. Large mural in niche on second floor
- Stairs- marble with a wood balustrade
- Lighting- single ceiling mounted fixture

City Hall-Corridors

- Ceiling- painted, textured plaster with a cornice. In the north and south wings three intermediate beams divide the long surfaces; the ceiling in the west wing is uninterrupted.
- Walls- 43" tall marble wainscot
- Lighting- ceiling-mounted fixtures centered in spaces between beams
- The north and south wings end at a stair well. The stair is separated from the corridor by a pair of 12-light glass doors, 12-light sidelights, and transom with 21-light fanlight. The doorways to many rooms are wide, shallow-arched openings with rounded edges and no trim. Most have been filled in with wood and glass panels. Other doorways are rectangular with painted metal trim with wood panel doors

City Hall-Stairs (adjacent to Entry Lobby)

- Marble treads, risers, wainscot; ornamental wrought iron balustrade and handrail

*References*

"Newton Civic Centre a Model of Municipal Planning." Edison Service News, December 1932. Vol. 2, No. 12.

**Part 2 – Images**



Figure 3: view of Memorial Hall, looking east. The light blue half-dome was originally painted with gold stars.



Figure 4: view of Aldermanic Chamber, looking west



Figure 5: Portico at the main entrance to the War Memorial. Note the figures at the pediment, representing Patriotism, History and the Spirit of Sacrifice, designed by Charles Collins.



Figure 6: view of the exterior, from the southwest.



### **Part 3 – Treatment Recommendations**

#### **Preservation Treatment Level**

City Hall is a significant building within the City of Newton, and it continues to serve its original functions, both as City Hall and as a War Memorial. Overall it is in very good condition. It is recommended that any work on the exterior and in the significant spaces on the interior be performed according to the “Preservation” level of treatment, as outlined in the U.S. Secretary of the Interior’s *Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties*. The Preservation treatment level places a premium on the retention of all historic fabric through conservation, maintenance and repair.

In typical office and ancillary spaces not directly contributing to the historic character, the “Rehabilitation” level of treatment may be more appropriate. At this level, the emphasis is placed on protecting and maintaining historic building material and significant features while providing an efficient contemporary use of the building.

The following bulleted list contains an analysis of existing conditions and recommended treatments for the significant features catalogued in Part 2 of this report.

#### **Exterior Recommendations**

Critical/Urgent (Timeframe: As soon as possible)

- Roof not accessible for survey, including cupola and balustrade. Investigate roof and gutter conditions at locations above spalling limestone eaves. Repair. Replace leaking gutters.
- Investigate source of water damage at interior surfaces of War Memorial tower. (Peeling paint and rusting at interior surfaces.) Repair.
- Investigate source of water damage at spalling limestone eave on the north elevation. Repair.

First Priority (Timeframe: 1-3 years)

- There is a large vertical crack along the edge of the quoins on the east elevation. Investigate cause and determine if it is still active. Recommendation dependent upon cause.
- Seal exposed, drilled holes in the water table and Dutchman repair.
- Repair spalling stone, including: stairs and cheek walls of the War Memorial and the limestone eave at the north elevation
- Conduct thorough survey of window condition, including sash, frame, lintel and hardware. Repair all window sash and frames where necessary and repaint. Replace the UV film if necessary- some streaking observed at the tall arched windows of the War Memorial Building. Consider replacing vinyl windows with new wood windows to match the originals.
- Repair cracks in concrete, including at service entrance site wall.

Second Priority (Timeframe: 3-5 years)

- Reset and repoint the granite stairs and cheek walls at the entrances.
- Repair exterior sconces and fit with exterior- and historically-appropriate energy efficient lamps.
- Clean building exterior, including:
  - Staining- various locations
  - Biological growth- various locations, including service entrance
  - Ivy growth- various locations
  - Graffiti- service entrance

Maintenance (Timeframe: Ongoing)

- Monitor the erosion at the column bases at both porticos for further damage.
- Continue regular maintenance of character-defining features.
- Maintain all gutters, leaders and drains to keep clog-free.

### **Interior Recommendations**

Critical/Urgent (Timeframe: As soon as possible)

- Investigate the source of water damage at the ceilings and walls of the Hall of Flags and Memorial Building Stair Hall. Determine the cause and if it is still active. Repair the damage at the source.

First Priority (Timeframe: 1-3 years)

- The general office spaces originally had asphalt-asbestos composition tile flooring; investigate the current flooring in these spaces. Encapsulate or remove if still extant.

Second Priority (Timeframe: 3-5 years)

- Patch plaster as required and repaint at the ceilings of the Hall of Flags and Memorial Building Stair Hall.
- Clean efflorescence from the cast stone walls of the Hall of Flags.
- Repair and repaint the balustrade and pedestals of the Hall of Flags.

Maintenance (Timeframe: Ongoing)

- The character-defining features are generally in good condition. Continue regular maintenance.