

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

Building Analysis

Health Department Building



Address: 1294 Centre Street
Year of Construction: 1927

Level of Significance: High
Individually listed building on the National Register of Historic Places, 1990.

Recommended Treatment Level: Preservation/Rehabilitation

PART I - Analysis of Historical Significance

Building History

Formerly the Newton Centre Branch Library, this building was one of five branch libraries funded by citizen subscription between 1926 and 1939 and turned over to the city. Like most of the others, it is a small-scale, one story brick library of a Tudor Revival style. The building was designed by the firm of Ritchie, Parsons & Taylor and constructed in 1927. It was individually listed building on the National Register of Historic Places in 1990.

The Newton Centre Branch Library was one of the six branch libraries to close in 1991 when the main library came online; the remaining four closed in 2008 due to a budget cut. Today the Newton Centre branch serves as the Health Department Building.

Architect James H. Ritchie was born and educated in Scotland. From 1908 until his death in 1964, he practiced in Boston. During his career, he designed many institutional buildings, including several in Newton, and two houses for himself in Newton.

From approximately 1923-1927, Ritchie was in a partnership of Ritchie, Parsons & Taylor; during these years, his firm remodeled the Somerville City Hall (1923-4) and designed the Lexington High School (1924) and the Newton Centre Branch Library (1927). In the years following this partnership, James H. Ritchie and Associates designed the Ward Elementary School (1928), the Police Headquarters and Courthouse (1931) and built an addition on the F.A. Day Junior High School, now known as the Education Center. Ritchie remained active until the early 1960s. His firm, later named The Ritchie Organization, is still in practice today, as TRO JunglBrannen, one of the largest international architecture/engineering firms in the northeast.

Level of Significance

The building is a well-designed municipal structure and is part of an important civic movement in Newton. It is individually listed building on the National Register.

References

Massachusetts Historical Commission, "Form B NWT.2890—1294 Centre Street" (1988).

AIA Historical Directory

Chrissie Long. "Newton Branch Libraries to Close Friday." *Newton Tab.* June 3, 2008.

<http://www.wickedlocal.com/newton/news/x61384455/Newton-branch-libraries-to-close-Friday#axzz1dss2hS4V>
(visited 11/16/11)

Chrissie Long. "Library branches are roots of their villages." *Newton Tab.* Sept. 4, 2007.

<http://www.wickedlocal.com/newton/fun/entertainment/books/x298908535#axzz1dss2hS4V> (visited 11/16/11)
<http://www.troj.com/history.aspx>

Phase II: Analysis of Historically Significant City Buildings, Newton, Massachusetts
Health Department Building
DRAFT 3/9/2012

PART I - Analysis of Historical Significance: Historic Images
Additional Information Sources for Future Research

Historic Images

Part 2 – Description of Historically Significant Features

Exterior Visual Character

Setting

- Facing west towards a busy intersection on Centre Street, set back from the road.

Shape

- One story with a partial basement and an unoccupied attic. It is long and narrow, with a gable end facing the street. A gabled wing projects north from the building center. The main entrance vestibule is set at an angle between the north and west wings.

Roof and Related Features

- Slate gable roof with raised end walls, closed valleys, slates and exposed, intricately profiled rafter tails. The east wing roof is hipped. The gutters and leaders are copper.

Openings

- Windows are typically 6-over-6 double-hung with brick sills and steel lintels.
- A small oval window at the west gable, attic level has a decorative cast stone surround.
- A set of three 6-over-6 double-hung windows with half-round arches separated by engaged columns is set in stucco west wall of north wing.
- Four large square openings contain four sets of original wood 6-over-9 double-hung sashes.
 - West gable: cast stone hood; four 6-paned transoms.
 - North elevation, west wing: ornamental brick hood, gable dormer; four 6-paned transoms.
 - North gable: a stucco half-round panel above within a brick arch with cast stone keystone; four 3-paned transoms.
 - South elevation: casements, no transom
- There is evidence of exterior shutters at east wing; no longer extant.
- The main entrance is contained within an elaborate wood surround with an arched pediment, modillions, engaged pilasters and wood paneling. The doors are wood replacements with a leaded transom above.
- The rear door at the north elevation of the east wing is a replacement paneled door with two glazed panels
- The south entry is set within vestibule with a brick round arched opening.

Projections:

- A large brick chimney with cast stone coping is located at the south elevation.

Trim and Secondary Features:

- Cast stone cornerstones at the west gable end; water table; band above window at north elevation, north wing. Brick soldier course above water table at stucco elevations. Wood rafter tails; fascia board at north gable end.

Materials

- Brick with cast stone trim at the west wing and north gable end; stucco with cast stone and brick trim at the north and east sides.

Craft Details

- Decorative cast stone brackets flank the west elevation parapet.
- The date of construction (MCMXXVII) is inscribed into cast stone at the west elevation.
- The large window bay at the west wing, north side has a decorative brick hood.

Interior Visual Character

Individually Important Spaces

Center Room (currently used at reception, office space, administrative space)

- The stained plywood ceiling next to the main entry has a grid of stained wood beams and purlins, and elaborate stenciled ornamentation; elsewhere the ceilings are plaster.
- The walls are plastered above paneled wood wainscot.
- The pair of entry vestibule doors are wood paneled with large screened panels. The ornate wood surround with stenciled ornamentation includes the inscription, above the doors: "This Building Was Erected By Public Spirited Residents And Friends Of Newton Centre."
- A wood paneled door with sidelights and transom is set within a round arched masonry opening to the west room. It is flanked by two round arched masonry openings, each of which encloses a non-glazed double window separated by a Byzantine column. All elements are elaborately painted and stenciled; there is wood trim at the West Room side.
- A 6-armed chandelier with light bulbs mimicking candles hangs from the plywood ceiling.
- Ornamental wall brackets are carved with faces.

West Room

- The shallow pitched gable plaster ceiling has exposed, profiled wood beams.
- A partial height wall and dropped acoustic tile ceiling separates two offices from the space.
- Windows are set within recessed plastered masonry openings.
- An elaborate chandelier hangs in the center of the space. Non-original linear fluorescent fixtures are suspended from the ceiling.

East Room

- The ceiling is flat plaster with exposed wood beams and sloped north and south segments.
- Two 6-armed chandeliers, matching the one in the center room, are supplemented by linear fluorescent and recessed ceiling fixtures.

North Room

- The flat plaster ceiling has exposed, profiled wood beams.
- Adjustable shelf bookshelves are built in to the plaster walls with paneled wood wainscot.
- A partial height wall and dropped acoustic tile ceiling separates one office from the rest of the space; the dropped ceiling is hung just above the height of the window meeting rail.

Related Spaces

Entry Vestibule

- The walls of this triangular space are finished with stained wood panels and trim.
- A decorative fixture base with a single (non-original) CFL is centered in the plaster ceiling.
- The vinyl tile flooring is not original.
- A radiator is enclosed with a metal grille.

Stair Corridor, between Center Room and East Room

- The ceilings and walls are plaster. Three steps lead up to east room. The simply carved wood rail and radiator on a small ledge next to the stairs may be original.
- This area appears to have been significantly altered. Portions of walls have been removed to accommodate a wheelchair lift. Vinyl tile flooring, aluminum nosings, and adhesive nosing strips are not original.

Other Significant Interior Features

- The interior doors are typically wood paneled; the number of panels varies. Some have non-original hardware.

Part 2 – Images



Figure 1: ornamental window at the west gable elevation.



Figure 2: the former west reading room has been subdivided into offices at the west end.



Figure 3: the main entry doorway, with a pair of wood paneled doors and ornamental leaded glass transom within a detailed wood architrave.
x



Figure 4: the ornamental wood architrave surrounding the pair of wood doors from the center room to the entry vestibule is stenciled in a multi-colored pattern. Note the wood ceiling above, which is similarly stenciled.

Part 3 – Treatment Recommendations

Preservation Treatment Level

The Health Department Building, with its origin as one of the branch libraries built by citizen subscription in the 1920s-30s, is significant to the civic history of Newton. While the building's use has changed and many spaces have been altered, many of the most significant features remain intact and in good condition. It is recommended that any work on the exterior, in the significant spaces on the interior, and to the historically significant features (listed in Part 2 of this report) 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 related spaces 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)

- The roof was not accessible for survey and could only be inspected from the ground. Several locations on the interior and exterior indicate the presence of leaks. Thoroughly inspect the roof and repair as required.
- Replace missing leader segments, including at the east elevation of the north wing. Repair the localized water damage, including stucco failure directly above the brick soldier course.
- The wood main entry surround is in poor condition. Repair or replace as necessary missing and damaged elements, including pilaster bases and other deteriorating wood elements. Scrape and repaint.

First Priority (Timeframe: 1-3 years)

- Remove rust and repaint all ferrous elements, including snowguards and pipe railings. (replace with non-ferrous)
- Remove extraneous ferrous elements from building exterior. Patch as required.
- Remove ivy from building exterior.
- Remove rusting ferrous cap flashing at the west gable. Repair coping and install weather caps at skyward facing joints. If not feasible, replace with non-ferrous cap flashing.
- Replace rusting ferrous exterior conduit fasteners with stainless steel.
- Survey condition of all steel lintels. Replace all severely rusted lintels, including at north elevation of west wing. Reset and repoint displaced bricks where rust jacking has occurred and where removed to replace lintels. Retain or rebuild in kind decorative brick window hoods. Clean and paint all steel lintels.
- Repair and repoint large cracks in chimney mortar joints.
- Repoint all brick window sills. Install flashing below sills, especially at north elevation.
- Repair, resecure, or replace deteriorated wood elements as necessary. Paint all wood elements.
- Conduct thorough survey of window condition, including sash, frame, lintel and hardware. Sashes and frames are very weathered, with peeling paint and exposed wood. Replace deteriorated elements, including wood window sill at north elevation. Provide new glazing putty. Scrape and paint.

- Repair cracks and minor spalling in stucco, at corner between east and north wings.
- Remove rust from exposed rebar in concrete stairs at rear entry. Patch concrete.

Second Priority (Timeframe: 3-5 years)

- Replace broken bricks and repoint where mortar is missing or failed (minimal)
- Replace non-original window panes with glass to match existing adjacent panes.
- Install appropriately-designed operable interior storm windows.
- Remove and replace poor repairs at concrete sidewalks and ramps.
- Clean building exterior, including:
 - Rust staining: under ferrous elements, including west gable cap flashing, conduit, handrails, snowguards
 - Biological staining: particularly at north elevation; in the shade; above main entry
 - Atmospheric: general
- Consolidate or relocate multiple exterior wires, conduit, and other appurtenances to more suitable locations, where still necessary, particularly at south elevation.

Maintenance (Timeframe: Ongoing)

- 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)

- There is evidence of water damage in several locations in the building. Locate and repair the source on the exterior to prevent further damage. Includes:
 - Center room, southwest corner: plaster wall and ceiling
 - Center room, north wall: vertical cracks in plaster wall, roughly aligned with intersection of entry pavilion and west wing
 - West room: peeling paint at ceiling; horizontal crack and bulging in plaster wall. Investigate to determine if related to water damage in center room.
 - Stair corridor: above northeast door at top of stairs; cracks in west wall
 - Stair corridor: (*check this- previous patch at south wall???*)
 - Bathroom, south exterior wall: cracks at plaster wall, stained acoustic ceiling tiles, peeling paint at window. Building occupants explained this is an active leak.
 - North room, southwest corner: ceiling

First Priority (Timeframe: 1-3 years)

- Patch plaster and repaint at water-damaged locations, following repair of source. See locations, above.

Second Priority (Timeframe: 3-5 years)

- Review the current lighting and develop a lighting strategy consistent and appropriate to the needs and historic character of the spaces.
- Repaint walls with a matte finish to minimize visibility of patch, particularly at change in texture where walls were cut for access to the non-original lift.

Maintenance (Timeframe: Ongoing)

- Continue regular maintenance of character-defining features.