

A Window On The Past, Washburn's Historic Buildings -3

CJ 3/8/12

From 1886 to 1896 two large government buildings were constructed in Washburn. In September 1886 the Town of Washburn Board of Supervisors approved the construction of a town hall on the northeast corner of Bayfield Street and Second Avenue East. The decision to locate the town hall on the eastern edge of the village must have been based on an expectation that the village was going to expand eastward from the original settlement, whereas in fact only three years after its founding the town was growing westward toward the mill sites.

Washburn newspapers were ecstatic, the Washburn Bee declaring that the "future prospects of the coming metropolis of Chequamegon Bay are anything but discouraging," and the Washburn Itemizer—which insisted on referring to the building as "the city hall"—noted that "When completed it will be a magnificent structure and by all odds the finest building on the shores of Chequamegon Bay." In fact, the new town hall was not a "magnificent structure," but a plain, strictly utilitarian building, 48 by 80 feet with two stories, constructed of brick with brownstone trimmings. On the first floor the front along Bayfield Street included rooms for a bank and a store. The fire department room, the office of the chief of police, and the jail opened onto Second Avenue. The second floor, reached by a "grand stairway" from the first floor, was divided into a large "society hall," a court room, and offices for "various city officials." Two towers surmounted the building, a tall one with an elaborate spire on the Second Avenue side of the building for a fire alarm bell, and a smaller one on its southwest corner for a clock (never installed).

Over the years the town hall was used for many different purposes. Town leaders, not satisfied that Washburn was the seat of town government, hatched a



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scheme to make it the county seat. In November 1892 men from Washburn stole the county records, office furnishings, and the tower clock from the courthouse in Bayfield and brought them to the town hall where it was intended that the county offices would henceforth be located (the clock was later returned to Bayfield). The town library (160 books) was briefly installed there in 1897, the town clerk serving as librarian. The "society hall" was the setting for many activities. High school proms were occasionally held there, the Washburn Times noting for the 1915 prom, "the hall was prettily decorated for the occasion in class colors, streamers of crepe paper being hung from the center of the room to the sides and the lights were also trimmed in class colors." During the Spanish-American War crisis of 1898, the hall served as the meeting and drill hall for the naval and army volunteer militia units, and became known as the armory.

The town hall eventually proved to be unsuitable for county offices and the county board decided to build a new courthouse on the site occupied by the Pioneer School, which was moved

across First Avenue East to a new site. In mid-July the county board accepted a plan submitted by an architect from Minneapolis, and the building contract was awarded to a Washburn contractor for \$28,670. Built of native brownstone in the Beaux-Arts Classical style, the building is two stories tall, surmounted by a large dome, with a portico over the front entrance supported by four large columns. The cornerstone for the new building was laid with a Masonic ceremony on October 19 1894. Work went smoothly, the Times declaring that the dome of the new courthouse, "stands as the apex of a monument of perseverance and triumph." Work was suspended in November for the winter, resuming in early spring 1896. In October 1896 the nearly completed building was opened for public inspection. The county board accepted the building at the end of November and the county offices were moved from the town hall. Everything had gone without a hitch except that the county board was presented with bills by the contractor for cost overruns amounting to \$10,177. The board grudgingly approved \$3,891, raising the contractor's fee to \$32,651. The total cost of the project was \$40,022 (excluding the architect's fees), far in excess of the \$5,000 to \$10,000, which the proponents of moving the county seat to Washburn claimed would be the cost of remodeling the Bayfield Courthouse.

By 1930 the town hall, long abandoned, had deteriorated badly. Over the years the city council had decided on several occasions to tear down the building, but perhaps because it was a symbol of Washburn's glory days, it had been reprieved. Finally, in early 1931, the council ordered the building dismantled to provide employment and to salvage the construction material.