

Relay Improvement Association Newsletter

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May, 2014 SPECIAL EDITION HONORING OUR GLORIOUS TOWN HALL

Relay's Town Hall – unique among its neighbors



The Relay Town Hall, spring 2014.

(Photo By Karen Sampson Hoffman)

KAREN SAMPSON HOFFMAN

For the Relay Improvement Association

The village of Relay is one of the few older Maryland communities that can still boast of its own town hall, a fixture from its past that generations of community members have worked to save and preserve. Owned now by the Relay Improvement Association, the town hall remains a community focal point.

Fire Hall and Horse-drawn Engine

Beginning as a horse-drawn one-engine firehouse, the two-story building on Arlington Avenue was first constructed in 1892. Below was the garage for the fire engine; above was space for the paid fireman who was assisted by community volunteers. The structure replaced an earlier fire station, which was little more than a garage for the pump.

“The house next door [to the town hall today] was owned by P.G. Mitchell and it was named Arlington, which is why it’s

‘Arlington Avenue,’” community historian Ray Chism said. “Behind was a hand-drawn pump. In 1892 they bought this land, here, from Mr. Mitchell for \$1,000.”

Perry G. Mitchell owned a sizeable estate in Relay along Arlington Avenue and built several smaller houses and cottages for family members on Arlington Avenue, according to Maryland State Archives.

“At one time, this property was two acres,” Town Hall Manager Richard Gloth added. He has recently overseen improvements to the town hall, including new steps leading from the parking lot to the town hall. “The horses were in a barn behind here.”

“They had a volunteer fire department in 1892 – first one in the county,” Mr. Chism said. “It was the center of the community.”

The fire company expanded with Relay. Additions were added to the fire station, including a kitchen and bathroom, although neither Mr. Chism nor Mr. Gloth were sure when the space was built. Two firefighters were stationed full-time, including overnight.

“They slept where the kitchen now is,” Mr. Gloth pointed out.

With the coming of electricity and telephones, the fire station was further improved to serve the community, including

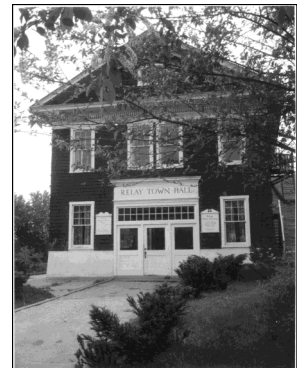
a precursor to an emergency call system.

“If you had the money for a phone, you could call up and a light would come on here in the fire hall,” Mr. Chism said. A signal board, located on the lower level, alerted the firefighters to the emergency and the motorized fire engine was dispatched. During renovations to the town hall, the signal board was rediscovered behind the lower-level front walls.

The fire station progressed from a hand-drawn to a horse-drawn pump and then to an early fire engine before the first modern engines of the middle-1900s. An annual firemen’s carnival was begun in the late 1940s to support the fire station.

“Richard and I could remember seeing a regular fire engine here,” Mr. Chism said during a recent conversation

on the town hall. He suspected it was stationed in the hall temporarily for either construction in Halethorpe or during the civil defense era of the 1940s and 1950s.



The Relay Town Hall and Public Library. Used by both the community and Relay Elementary School, the library was funded by the county and staffed by local volunteers until its closure in 1966.

(Baltimore County Public Library)

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Public Library and Community Center

The first major change was about to come to the building. Baltimore County began to build larger and more modern fire stations and many smaller community fire station houses were closed.

“By 1920, they built the Halethorpe fire station,” Mr. Chism said. “Relay [Volunteer Fire Company] was disbanded but the hall was still here. The volunteer fire department ceased to exist. The Women’s Club of Relay took over the fire department [hall] in 1928. So the women’s club held it. They took care of it from 1928 to 1948 and then the Relay Improvement Association took it.”

During the time of the women’s club, renovations were undertaken to the building to modify it for community use. The engine room was redesigned and the stage for community events added on the second floor. The community began to refer to the building as “the town hall” around this time.

“In 1929, the Relay Women’s Club opened the library here,” Mr. Chism said. “The first Relay School on Rolling Road had the library.” This was a one-room school that closed in 1920 when the second Relay Elementary School, located in the center of Relay, opened. “When we were in school the library was here. They were all-volunteer libraries at the time.”

Cabinets on the main floor of the town hall, in the former engine room, are remnants of the public library, having once been shelves for the books. A county librarian would occasionally visit but the day-to-day running of the library was locally overseen. Students from Relay Elementary took turns coming down from the school to the library for books and research. The library operated until 1966.

“The county provided funds and books,” Mr. Chism said.

From the 1940s through the 1960s, a teen center was also located at the town hall. Teen events, dance lessons and evening activities were offered for community teen-

agers.

“Every community used to have a teen center. I used to go to it,” Mr. Gloth said, hinting at the number of years he has lived in Relay. “I don’t know when it stopped being a teen center because I got too old to go there.”

“They had a theatrical group there,” Mr. Chism said. “They’re the ones who tore out the dumbwaiter.”

However, the care of the building varied during the passing years. Mr. Gloth described it as a “gradual decline” as many groups used the Town Hall but none were charged directly with its care and upkeep.

Relay Town Hall

“At various times between ’28 and ’48, they wanted to tear the hall down,” Mr. Chism said. “The Grandfathers Club saved it. They were very instrumental in saving the hall. They paid in the 1950s to take the big engine doors off and put on the current doors.”

It was the interest of the Grandfathers Club that spurred the community on. The Relay Improvement Association, which had meetings there, purchased the property in 1948. The purchasing process was complicated when neither evident ownership nor a deed could be found. A deed had to be drawn up to make the sale official. The modern era of the Town Hall began.

Renovations and improvements to the Town Hall were a priority to the RIA but funding was a challenge.

“The hall has always operated in a shoe-string,” Mr. Chism.

“They called me up because there was a squabble in the committee,” Mr. Gloth said. “So I took it. Money was misspent. This place had indoor/outdoor carpet and smelled like a cat. When we first got in the hall both the oil burners were broken.”

“All the pictures were stolen,” Mr. Chism added.

The first order of business became raising

funds to undertake the needed repairs. The RIA tried to rely on membership dues.

“I remember block captains going around to try to find dues,” Mr. Gloth said. “So we put out a newsletter and we collected \$2,000 in dues. The Korean church next door rented the hall once a day. We started to get grants coming in. We just kept repairing and fixing, and repairing and fixing. After I was [working] in it for four and half years, I got it pretty livable.”

“We have a fire system in here. Now it’s monitored 24 hours a day,” Mr. Chism said.

The Town Hall hosts RIA events throughout the year, including Relay Day, a wine and cheese party, historical talks and the quarterly RIA board meeting. It’s also available to be rented for private functions; RIA members receive a 50 percent discount to rent the hall.

“The biggest thing we’ve done with the hall is making sure the place is spotless,” Mr. Gloth said. “No one wants to rent a dirty hall.”

The RIA recently received grant money for additional improvements and painting the exterior. Upcoming projects include a new kitchen floor and new rain spouts.

“I’d like new windows,” Mr. Chism said. “We’ve tried to fix these and you can’t.”

“We’ve got a little bit of money to play with now,” Mr. Gloth said. “If this hall is kept in perfect shape it will pay that money back and support itself.”

“That’s due to Richard,” Mr. Chism pointed out, “he’s really done that. It’s actually a three- to four-person job.”

“You can’t do it all or you’ll burn yourself out,” Mr. Gloth, shrugging. “Bill Hermann will slip in do repairs. The men’s club has done a lot in recent years to saving the hall. The next thing they’re going to buy for us is a stainless steel prep table (they already bought a grill).”

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The Town Hall has spent more than a century as the center of Relay's community life and has stood across three centuries – the end of the 1800s, through the 1900s and now into the 2000s – and continues to contribute to the Relay community.

“It's owned by the community,” Mr. Chism emphasized. “It's not owned by the state or the county, it's owned by the Relay Improvement Association. People don't realize how lucky they are to live here.”

“The community as a whole is saving the hall,” he finished. “This is the best time. It's in good shape and everyone's interested.”