THE FINEST HALL IN NEW ENGLAND: THE HISTORY OF HOLYOKE CITY HALL



CITY HALL, HOLYOKE, MASS. 1879

DEDICATED APRIL 6, 2023



Happy Anniversary Holyoke! 2023 is the Sesquicentennial, The 150th Anniversary of the 1873 Incorporation of the City of Holyoke.

It is our good fortune that we, the citizens of Holyoke, will, at long last, will hold the official dedication ceremony for Holyoke's City Hall, a structure that is not only of notable architecture, but also a fundamental component of Holyoke's past, present and future and the foundation of our thriving, diverse community.

"Holyoke's City Hall is a living, working monument. Our City Hall welcomes every citizen from every neighborhood in our diverse, dynamic city. It is a monument to democracy and equality." Mayor Joshua Garcia, 2023

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Friends of City Hall

Much credit needs to be given to the Friends of City Hall who keep a watchful eye on this magnificent building so that it is maintained and preserved according to its historical significance to this community. The Friends of City Hall is an active group of concerned and committed Holyoke citizens whose mission is to raise awareness of, and raise funds to support this magnificent Building. The Friends of City Hall often host a variety of events to raise funds for preservation of the unique and artful elements that make this building so interesting and beautiful. The group is also engaged in grant writing and documenting any preservation efforts. If you are interested in supporting the preservation efforts of the Friends of City Hall, take a minute to explore their Facebook page: @Friends of Holyoke City Hall. You can make a Tax deductible donation and send it to:

> Friends of Holyoke City Hall 536 Dwight St Holyoke, MA 01040

Any questions or requests for information can be emailed to: FriendsofHolyokeCityHall@gmail.com

Construction

The Holyoke Transcript July 1876 article about the construction of City Hall reported:

There ought to be public spirit enough in this city to appropriately dedicate this noble building. There seems to be a small faction opposed to it, but they should not be allowed to present a fitting dedication by those whose money has been spent in the construction of the finest hall in New England.

That's right, Holyoke City Hall was never dedicated upon its completion. Apparently, that small faction held out and other circumstances derailed the building's official dedication. So, it is only appropriate that we take time now to dedicate this magnificent building as it has stood in service to Holyoke for 149 years.

Most of the story about city hall is documented in Holyoke Annual Reports and a lengthy, detailed, unsigned article in the Saturday Morning Edition



of the July 1, 1876, Holyoke Transcript. And as history so often reveals itself in layers, there are likely many more stories about the building. This bookelet has been written to provide background information and details about the construction.

The total financial outlay to build this magnificent building when all was said and done was \$372,000 in 1876. (Additional

research done by the Historical Commission indicates that final cost was closer to \$500,000 at the time.) In any case, in 2023 dollars it would cost over \$10 million.

The Town of Holyoke was established by an act of Massachusetts Congress Chapter 71 and signed into law On March 14th, 1850, by Gov. George Nixon Briggs. The town's first board meetings were held in rented meeting halls like Chapin Hall, Parsons Hall and the Exchange Hall. Starting in 1861 a separate selectmen's office was rented. The largest financial challenges for the town at that time were fees to West Springfield in relation to the contract of separation.

In the March 20, 1871, Town Warrant, Article 30 was submitted: "To take action to purchase Land for a Town Hall, build a Town Hall and raise money for the same." Followed by the 1872 Annual Report in Article 18 it states: "*To see if the town will raise and appropriate money, and how much for the erection of the Town hall Building or any part thereof. D.H., J.H. & J.C. Newton sold a lot to the Town for \$20,000.*" And thus, with these two articles the Town Hall Building Committee was created.

By 1873, due to the population growth and density Gov. William Barrett Washburn established Holyoke as a City through another act of Massachusetts Congress, Chapter 154 on April 7, 1873. However, select board meetings were still taking place at Parsons Hall. And that year's Annual Report Article 23 states: "To see if the Town will authorize the Town Hall Committee to employ an inspector to oversee the construction of the Town Hall building and raise money for the same."

Constructing a building of this size and character was not an easy task, nor was it inexpensive. Delays and contractual issues increased the amount of time and money it took to complete this monumental undertaking.

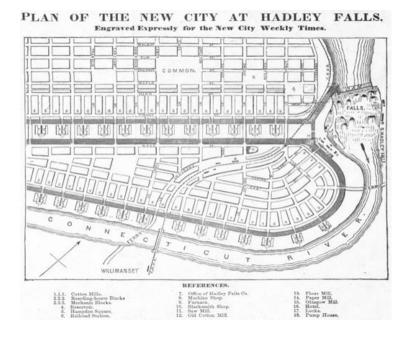
Excerpts from the Saturday July 1, 1876, Holyoke Transcript Article, supply numerous details of the lengthy building process,

and again, may be yet another reason why Holyoke City Hall was never dedicated:

The town voted 'that a committee of five be appointed to consult with parties holding land as to location and price of land for a site for a town hall.' W.B.C. Pearsons, Joel Russell, H.A. Chase, E. H. Ball and Rufus Mosher were appointed. At the adjourned meeting, April 3d the following vote was passed: 'That a committee of seven be appointed to buy or take a lot of land between Dwight and Appleton Streets, on High Street, and that the town treasurer be authorized to borrow a sum not exceeding \$20,000. ' May 1st, 1871, Wm. Grover, Wm. Whiting, W.B.C. Pearsons, A.L. Shumway, A. Stursberg, N.H. Whitten, and John E. Chase, were appointed a building committee and were authorized to put in the foundation that year, and the treasurer was authorized to borrow \$25,000 to pay for it. At the same meeting the town voted to take the lot of land 200 feet square, owned by the Newton Brothers, as the site for the new town hall, and the 135 votes were cast in the affirmative, and 103 votes against it. March 18th, 1873, the town appropriated \$175,000 to be used subject to the orders of the building committee, and to be expended in the erection of a new town hall. March 17th. 1873. the committee were authorized to take or purchase twelve feet additional land on High Street, at a cost of \$12,000. May 24th, 1875, the city appropriated \$90,000 to complete the building, and October 11, \$25,000, and February 1876 \$15,000 were voted. These appropriations are exclusive of the \$7,000 appropriated for furniture and the \$1,000 for the cost of the bell. The total cost of the land and building, including furniture, will not vary much for \$372,000.

Unfortunately, division arose early on when deciding where the building should be located.

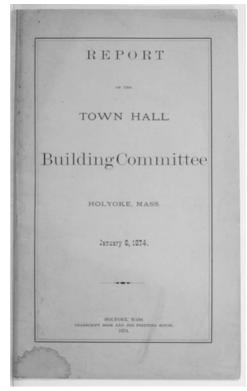
At the time the location was voted there was a large minority vote in favor of locating the building on Suffolk or Appleton Street, instead of Dwight, and the bitter



feeling on the subject, bid fair at one time to defeat the project. The building committee met May 15, 1871, and organized electing Wm. Whiting, Chairman, and W.B.C. Pearsons Clerk.

August 14th, 1871, the committee formally accepted the plans presented by C.B. Atwood of Boston, provided the costs do not exceed \$120,000, and that Mr. Atwood's compensation be fixed at \$6,500. The excavation for the sub-basement was made by J.W. Davis, and the digging and filling for the foundations was done by W. A. Barrett and McCoy & Son. John Delaney & Son obtained the contract for laying the foundation, and for constructing the basement and the partition walls. Bids were received for the erection of a brick or stone building, and the contract was awarded to Richard Ponsonby of New Haven, Conn., the price being \$167,500. This price included the completion of the building with the exception of the stained glass, the decorating and the heating apparatus. More delays arose during the building of city hall and were memorialized in Holyoke's Building Committee reports. The following are extracts from these Building Committee reports explaining the many reasons.

> Unfortunately, Ponsonby allowed the winter of 1872 and '73 to pass without contracting for the granite work for the building, until late in the spring, when there was an active demand for such work, and the contract price for the building making it



necessary that he should get the stone at the lowest possible price, a contract was finally closed with Messrs, Flynt, & Co. at such rates, as afforded them no inducements to reject other work which was soon offered them or to make any outlay for any apparatus to enable them to do more work, and consequently precedence was given to work, for which higher prices were paid and work for the Holyoke Town Hall was done as it happened to suit the convenience of the contractors for the stone. In this manner the work dragged along until late in July, 1873, when Ponsonby and the committee, finding themselves powerless to move the contractor to furnish the stone in sufficient quantity to complete the walls of the buildings in season to get the roof on before winter, the committee made a special contract with Flynt & Co., by which they were to get out and deliver at Holyoke all the stone, cut

and rough, by November 1st in consideration of the sum of \$3,250.00 to be paid to them as extra compensation.

Flynt & Co. faithfully performed their contract, but the committee were prevented from realizing the full benefits of the arrangements, by the extremely cold weather for the season, during the early part of November.

Mr. Ponsonby labored under difficulties and disadvantages, which would not have been, had he contracted for the stone and other work immediately after closing his contract with the committee; but it should be said to his credit, that the work so far done, has been well done, and will compare favorably with work of like character in other places, and good judges have pronounced the workmanship superior to that in a costly structure of the same material, now about completed in the neighboring city of Springfield.

Fortunately, the City's incorporation in 1873 brought about the re-organization of elected officials and most importantly, new Building Committee members that acted quickly and effectively to get the construction work back on track... but it wasn't a smooth process.

...a new committee was elected, consisting of Wm Grover, Timothy Merrick, J.C. Newton, James Doyle and C. W. Ranlet. They organized electing Wm. Grover chairman, and Timothy Merrick clerk. June 25, 1874, Mr. Ponsonby having broken the terms of the contract, the committee passed a vote declaring the contract void, and five days later they posted a notice declaring that all persons doing work on the building who were not hired by the committee, must not look to the committee for their pay. New proposals were called for and the bid of Norcross Brothers of Worcester was accepted, they offered to finish the building for \$75,000, but they afterwards "receded" from their offer. As if to further complicate matters, the architect Mr. Atwood, became very dilatory in his actions, neglecting to furnish drawings as they were needed. The committee appointed Messrs. Grover and Merrick a subcommittee to visit Boston to obtain the plans. Mr. Atwood was not found in his office, but the designs were found, and the committee forwarded them to this city.

In October of 1874, the new Building Committee contracted H.F. Kilburn of New York to serve as architect under the supervision of Watson Ely of Holyoke. In order to facilitate the completion of the building in a timely manner, Mr. Ely ordered that everyone that had moved into the unfinished building vacate the building and then closed City Hall during the winter of 1874.

...a contract was executed with Mr. H. F. Kilburn of New York, to furnish the necessary drawings for the completion of the building, and to act as architect during the remainder of the work. Mr. Kilburn's connection with the work commenced the first of October, 1874, at the time the walls of the building were up and most of the roof on. The drawings for the tower above the roof of the building, and interior finish, including the roof of the large hall, were made by him and have been carefully carried out under the supervision of Mr. Watson Ely, although Mr. Kilburn has paid several visits to the work during the progress.

The article concludes listing many of the contractors of the work and includes information about the stained-glass windows, the bell, and decorative elements.

The stonework has been well laid, and will bear inspection. Messrs. Bievins & Marrs of this city furnished the stone for the upper portion of the tower. The doors, blinds, and panel work were supplied by C. P. Fobes & Co. Of Crown Point, N.Y., and some of the doors are beautiful specimens of natural wood. The judge's desk in the Police Courtroom is of handsome wood. J. Merrick & Co. of this city, supplied the moldings and casings and satisfactorily fulfilled their contract. The bricks were from the yards of L.P. Bosworth and Lynch Brothers. E. Chase & Sons furnished considerable of the lumber, and the southern pine flooring was all supplied by the, and needs

no other recommendation. The plate glass was from the house of Semon Bache & Co. of New York, whose immense business and foreign factories enabled them to make and import the glass at a lower price than their competitors. The glass is of unusual purity. Samuel West of Boston, was the maker of the stained glass windows. The carved work was done by Messrs, Smith and Crane of New York, from drawings and instructions given by the architect. The beautiful bronze trimmings are from the house of P & F. Corbin of New Haven.



Walker, Pratt & Co. of Boston were the contractors for the heating apparatus, including boilers, radiator pipes, &c.

The Tennessee and Italian marble mantels were furnished by J. F. Cook & Co of this city. The slating was the work of W. H. Raynor of Northampton. The wood filling and painting was done by John Tyler of Northampton. The decorating was done by Braser of Boston. The bell is from the Jones Bell Foundry of Troy, N.Y. The woodwork has been well done under the superintendence of Mr. Watson Ely, assisted by J R. Howes and Caspar Ranger...It is believed that the heating apparatus of the building is arranged in the best possible manner. The contractors, Messrs. Walker, Pratt & Co. of Boston, have fulfilled their contract to the letter, and their work is first-class in every respect. The furniture is from the long established and well-known house of Bancroft & Boyden, No. 18 Tremont Street Boston, who makes specialty of just such work, as well as furnishing first class dwellings with strictly first class goods... Another special feature of the building is the cathedral glass in the large hall. It will bear both inspection and comparison with any other work of the kind in the state. The designs are well wrought and the windows give general satisfaction to everyone. They are from the Ecclesiastical Stained Glass Works of Mr. Samuel West, No. 115 Elliot Street, Boston. Many visitors greatly admire the fancy grained natural wood in the basement story and the workmanship of the doors and blinds is creditable to C. P. Fobes & Co, the furnishers of that portion of the work.

William Whiting, Holyoke's 3rd Mayor, and driving force behind the building of City Hall was drawn away from the project due to travel and ill health. Mr. William Grover took over as Building Committee chair, and project to fruition.

Thanks to the city are due Mr. Grover for the faithful manner in which he has fulfilled his trust and more than mere thanks for his constant surveillance of the progression of the work. The services of the other members should be held in remembrance, according as their labors and motives have sided in the great work.

As of July 1876 City Hall was never dedicated, and continued research has not found any indication it was ever dedicated.

The city hall has never, as yet, had any formal dedication. The Hutchins House fire in February last, drove the city clerk's office from that building, and it found shelter in the new offices, but with temporary furniture. The Police Court, City Council, Public Library and other occupants have moved in at different times. The large hall has not been occupied as yet, but the High School intends to have their graduating exercises there.

There ought to be public spirit enough in this city to appropriately dedicate this noble building...a fitting dedication by those whose money has been spent in the construction of the finest hall in New England.

The Architectural Details

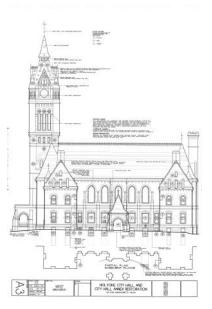
In 1975, the Holyoke Historical Commission of Holyoke undertook creating an inventory of historically significant buildings in this city. Number one on the list was Holyoke City Hall at 536 Dwight Street. That Massachusetts Cultural Resource Information Systems database (MACRIS) inventory form (available online at www.macris.net) contains the original research done by Judith Jacobs of the Holyoke Planning Commission and has since been updated. This preliminary work led to City Hall being placed on the National Register of Historic Places in December of 1975. It is also listed in the National Register of Historic Districts, and both of those designations place preservation deed restrictions on any renovations to the building.

Sadly, prior to those designations, there were renovations that removed some of the original decorative wall treatments, moldings and flooring.

Much of the information for this article comes from the MACRIS Inventory Form B, which is the form used to record

historical buildings into the database with much of the research done by Olivia Mausel of Holyoke. Massachusetts designates the building's significance in terms of architecture, art, community planning, law and politics and government. The building is used as city hall, with a public auditorium and at one-time housed the police station.

Charles B. Attwood was the original architect who created the Gothic Revival and Romanesque Revival structural plan in 1871. However, many



others contributed structural and decorative details including local builder Casper Ranger; John Delaney; Ecclesiastical Stained Glass Works; Watson Ely; Henry F. Kilburn; Kronenberger and Sons; Filippo Santoro; Serpentino Stained Glass; and Samuel West.

Beyond the granite exterior walls, stone steps and pavers, and slate roof, other building materials include random ashlar, galvanized iron, glass, led, marble, wood, brick, sheet metal, and copper.

Here are some of the architectural details described in the July 1, 1876, Holyoke Transcript article.

Original and principle entrance to City Hall is on Dwight Street. There are 18 granite steps to the large porch 14ft. x 32 ft. long. The entrance is finished with deep moulded arches and polished Aberdeen granite columns, carved capitals and elaborate timber ceiling. Six more steps approach three double oak doorways, each six feet wide, which open into a vestibule with a slate floor.

Holyoke City Hall is in a free form Gothic Revival,

Romanesque Revival style, incorporating such typical elements as spires, turrets, pointed arches, buttresses, ribbed vaulting and stained glass. The length of the building on High Street is 190 feet and the width on Dwight Street is 114 feet. The exterior of the City Hall is quarry faced Monson granite laid in irregular courses. The foundation is made of granite that is 4 feet thick; inside the granite is a layer of brick then sheet metal a quarter of an inch



thick. The roof is covered with dark slate interrupted by bands of red and green slate and surmounted by iron cresting and finials. Rising above the central entranceway on Dwight Street is a tower... At each corner of the tower are circular turrets, which terminate in conical roofs of galvanized iron. The tower contains a belfry and a clock face on each elevation.

The plan of the hall is that of a rectangle with two transeptional wings crossing it at either end. Its handsome wainscoting and mouldings and rich use of black walnut, oak, white ash, marble, and slate mark the interior of the building. One of the most noteworthy interior features is the great hall on the second story, which measures 113 feet long by 75 feet wide by 42 feet high. The roof of this hall is carried by two large longitudinal lattice trusses, 94 feet by 15 feet, finished with heavy moulded transverse braces and terminating on richly carved corbels. The building as a whole remains virtually unaltered, and its towering spire continues to be a landmark in the City of Holyoke.



The vertical layout of the building from sub-basement to spire:

City Hall consists of approximately 7 multi-levels beginning with

- 1. a sub-basement [housing the heating system],
- 2. basement level: water, electrical and other systems, storage spaces and former police firing range.
- 3. The ground level has handicapped accessible offices, parking deck and elevator.
- 4. The [first] level: Room One, offices and front door under the Porte cohere- (another entrance off High Street), the City Council Chambers (a 30 by 40 feet room features a descriptive painted mural of the Connecticut River dam and local landscapes painted in 1952 ... by artist Filippo Santoro.)
- 5. [second] level features the ballroom/auditorium and 22 by 76 feet gallery space, and more office space.
- 6. *The [third] level has offices, storage space, and access to the clock tower.*
- 7. The [fourth] level has a crawl space over the ballroom...In some stairwells and walls there can be seen the gas light connectors from the past. Some original tin ceilings are still visible.

Additional details about the public ballroom with its stained glass windows give us a full picture of the grandness of this building.

The ballroom/auditorium on the second level seats 1300 people with gallery capacity of 150... The 40 ft. stage in the southern end of the room is shallow and 5 feet above the main floor. Side doors at each end of the stage allow easy assess.



There is no doubt about the magnificence of this building. Preservation and restoration have remained a priority and MACRIS tracks restoration projects

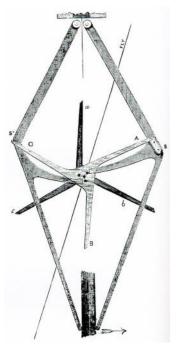
First major restoration project occurred back in the early 1980s, which [replaced] the slate roof, and all built-in copper gutters, downspouts and related conductor boxes. The 1999- 2000 restoration completed the roof repair to the bell tower along with repairs to the overall roof. Other areas included: complete interior restoration of public spaces, new lighting fixtures, slate roof replacement, repointed granite masonry, 170 windows restored and lead and asbestos abatement. All wood trim was repaired and office windows were restored or replaced in kind to match the original.

The Clock and The Bell Tower

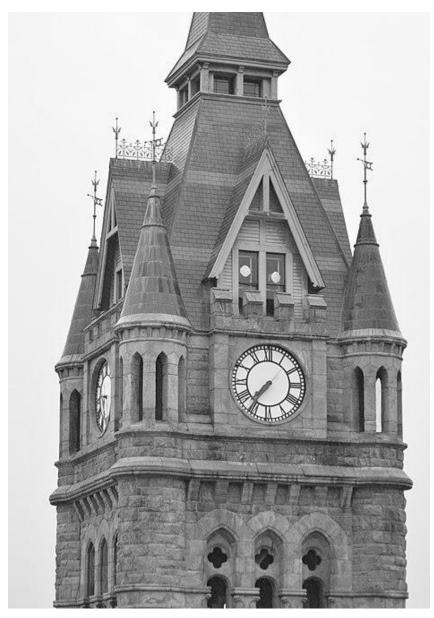
One of the most important historical and stately features of Holyoke City Hall is the looming clock and bell tower. The imperial tower stands 225 feet high and houses a bell that weighs nearly 5,000 pounds. The clock's face is composed of 2 inch thick Belgium milk glass. Sadly, the clock was inoperable and the bell was silent for decades. Thanks to the Friends of City Hall, David Cotton and a team of volunteers, the clock was restored after completing hundreds of hours of repairs to the clock, and on July 4th, 2018 the clock was lit up and began keeping time again after almost 30 years.

Here is a complete description of the tower and its interior, extracted from the Massachusetts Historical Commission's Building Inventory Form B.

Standing high above is the 225 feet tall bell and clock tower, 28 feet square at the base. The city purchased the \$700 Seth Thomas clock on July 16, 1877. The clock face is 8 feet in diameter on all four sides. The face of the clock was originally Blackwood with gold numbers and hands, but was soon replaced with Belgium milk glass after townspeople complained that the black and gold numbers were hard to read. The clock has a "# 14. Dennison Double Three-legged Gravity Escape Method" movement. The pendulum was 13 ft. long and swung the 500-pound ball on the end every two seconds.



14, Dennison Double Three-legged Gravity Escape Method" movement.



When it was first installed, caretakers would have to wind it up about 500 cranks, said Albert Lehmann, former caretaker of the clock and bell tower. The clock was electrified in the 1930's. Currently both seem to be intact but are in need of repair. In 1982, the clock was

valued at \$50,000 by the National Watch and Clock Museum of Bristol, CT. and is one of three of its kind in New England.

In May of 1975, a sub ceiling in the tower rotted out and collapsed. The underlying reason for the collapse? "The collected droppings of hundreds of pigeons," as was written in Robert Chipkin's article in the Springfield Union on August 17, 1975. Chipkin writes:

[the] cause of the collapse was officially listed as weakened structural elements But what weakened those structural elements could clearly be seen as DPW workmen spent the next few days hauling away hundreds of plastic bags of accumulated bird droppings.

Subsequently, The DPW Superintendent, James A. Moriarty reported minor repair work was done without great expense. In addition, several of the banisters leading up the tower were enclosed with chicken wire, with no further plans to make refurbishments.

The tower used to be opened informally to any city resident who wanted a good view of the city and was willing to brave the walk to the top. ...But in recent years the tower is off limits except for repair personnel. William O'Meara of Chicopee has worked on the clockwork in the tower for the past 20 years.

Although the collapse of the sub ceiling temporarily stopped the clock, O'Meara said there was no permanent damage to the clockwork, and the clock is now more accurate than ever. 'It loses about a minute each month, and most people would be happy if their wrist watches kept such good time,' he said.

He noted, however, that the pigeons are a constant problem. Their droppings are always underfoot, they get into the clockworks, they build their nests near the gears. They seem to be everywhere, he lamented. In 1984, a flock of blackbirds struck again, causing the 104 year old clock to cease keeping time. The damage to the clocktower and clock was chronicled in an article titled, *Holyoke's City Hall Clock Catches Up-One More Time* by journalist, Walter Hamilton, in the Springfield Union on July 4, 1984. Hamilton reported:

> The crew found that water seeping into the clock tower past disintegrated caulking around the clock face cover glass had caused the clock to stop.... Water froze where the



The bell is 110 feet above the sidewalk and weighs 4,925 lbs. and was purchased from a bell foundry in Troy, New York.

clock's hands meet a driveshaft from the mechanism below...The water caused wood around the shaft to warp and swell and eventually bind the shaft...The restoration team succeeded in freeing the hand after about three hours of work...An estimated 1500 blackbirds which the crew encountered Thursday night, also returned to roost as the crew was completing its repairs...The birds screeched and bumped against the men as they worked...A 12 page report on the clock has been prepared and will be reviewed by the DPW...and plans for a springtime clean up at which time bird droppings, four inches deep in places will be removed.

Restoration projects in 1999 and 2000 were

completed the roof repair to the bell tower along with repairs to the overall roof...The bell tower restoration included flat seam lead coated copper roofing for the open bell level floor/roof along with all four turrets, and finial replacement with new cast aluminum finials patterned to match original including all new ridge cresting.

The Stained Glass Windows

The thirteen windows in the ballroom/auditorium were all designed and manufactured by Samuel West of Ecclesiastical Stained Glass Works, Boston MA. ca. 1876 when City Hall was built. In the main auditorium, there are ten windows. Six are female figures, representing various aspects of Holyoke's economy of the period (commerce, music, painting, agriculture, water power and industry). The other four are decorative. These windows are 15 feet x 5.5 feet in size. In the hallway in front of the auditorium is a large window with two figures representing Liberty and the United States of America. In the back of the auditorium are two small lunettes above large windows in stairwells. All windows were made of painted antique glass, which were hand blown, and the most common type of glass found in the nineteenth century European painted stained glass windows. The figural window of Agriculture shows the city's rural and agrarian origin reaching into the eighteenth century. The mountains in the background evoke the Holyoke and Mt. Tom mountain ranges. Sheaves of corn and wheat are depicted, while the figure herself holds a sickle and rests a hand on a plow. Likewise in the Water Power window, canals, cotton mills, and paper industry are depicted with a hammer and anvil and geared wheels, showing a river above a waterfall. Music and the Arts windows depicts a figure in front of a red wall or curtain, perhaps reflecting the textile industry. Her left foot placed on a stack of books and holding a quill, a palette and brushes are in her proper left hand. Other background images show smokestacks, barrel-vaulted roofs, marble monuments, a golden chain or beads, a pier alluding to the presence of the Connecticut River and a train crossing a masonry bridge, and a balance scale in her right hand.

In 2014, two windows (# 8- Music and #10-Industry) were removed for restoration and reinstalled the following year. Julie Sloan served as consultant and Serpentino Stained Glass, of Needham Heights did the restoration work. On advice of the consultant, three windows were removed in 2015 (#9, 11- decorative and # 12- Commerce) and stored on site due to the delicate and fragile nature of the windows. Until funds are raised, the windows are crated and stored. In place of the three, crated stained glass windows are temporary Plexiglas and plywood.



The Arts



Industry



Liberty Window



Water Power



Commerce



Agriculture

