

# Woods Hole Community Association and Community Hall Centenary

*By Rob Blomberg*

One hundred years ago, on September 22, 1919, the Woods Hole Community Association (WHCA) was incorporated. The organization's starting point, however, reaches back decades earlier, to when a group of Woods Hole citizens banded together to build a hall for village gatherings, community meetings, and other events.

Dedicated in December of 1878, Liberty Hall (as it was then called) served as the location for social and civic organizations, the Congregational and Baptist churches, local theater groups, and musical shows. The Woods Hole Social Library used Liberty Hall two hours per day, when residents mingled with famous scientists to discuss the issues of the day. A

barber shop, a pool-room, and a tailor shop occupied a portion of the basement. Despite all this activity, by 1919 Liberty Hall had failed as a separate commercial venture, and at that point the Woods Hole Community Association was born.

The WHCA's 1919 Statement of Purpose notes that "The Corporation is constituted for the purposes of acquiring the property on Water Street, Woods Hole, consisting of Liberty Hall, its furnishings and equipments in order to provide for the Residents of Woods Hole a larger and adequate hall for social, civic and



The Woods Hole Community Hall on Water Street next to the Eel Pond bridge, circa 1960. Courtesy Falmouth Museums on the Green.



# Community Hall

owned by the people  
of Woods Hole

Dear Friends,

COMMUNITY HALL NEEDS YOUR HELP!

to fulfill the needs of an active and growing village. This building is the only adequate space available for:

Meeting Hall  
Polling Place  
Art Gallery

Dance Hall  
Theatre  
Youth Center

IMPORTANT TO ALL PARENTS!

is the Teen Center which is open week-ends in the winter and offers a full-time trained director of youth activities in the summer. The Hall maintains facilities for such a program including basketball, badminton and pool tables.

WON'T YOU SHARE OUR RESPONSIBILITY!

by a contribution that will help us meet the operating cost of about \$2,500.00 a year. Except for small rentals, the Hall is supported entirely by the people of Woods Hole.

AND BE A MEMBER!

for \$1.00, or more, we hope. Both summer and year-round residents contribute to the Association and use Community Hall.

Trustees of Woods Hole  
Community Association  
(Community Hall)

Mrs. Alfred Redfield  
President

A 1940s appeal from Mrs. Alfred Redfield to support the operating costs of the Community Hall. Courtesy Woods Hole Historical Museum.

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The original signers of the Agreement of Association were John P. Sylvia Jr., Franklin L. Gifford, Charles Hall, Grace Howes, Elinor Hughes, Gilman Drew, Frank MacNaught, George David, Nellie Gray and Sarah Fisher. Most notable is Franklin Gifford, who is better known for completing over 200 paintings highlighting the rich history of Woods Hole.

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educational purposes, entertainments, amusements and for other purposes of a similar character. And also to acquire other property or take any other action for community purposes." The first significant act of the new WHCA was to buy Liberty Hall for \$2,000 and rename it Woods Hole Community Hall.

As their charter suggested, the WHCA did indeed acquire more properties and expand their activities over the years, but Community Hall remains the heart of the organization and the village. The hall has hosted civic meetings, art and craft shows, theatrical and musical performances, a men's basketball league, scout meetings, science fairs, a food co-op, and more. Perusing the archives of the *Falmouth Enterprise* one can sense the wide scope of the

hall's activities—from an "Old Maids Convention" in 1922 ("Twenty old maids looking for husbands...Tickets 40 cts...Bachelors and Widowers cordially invited"), to a photography exhibit in 1946 (cash awards of five dollars each to winners in snapshot and finished print categories), to children's square dancing classes in the 1960s.

Theatrical and musical performances have been a mainstay at Community Hall from its earliest days (and, indeed, at Liberty Hall in its time). Theater groups performing in the hall included the Calico Players, the Penzance Players, the Priscilla Players, and others. On at least one occasion, in 1944, the multi-talented staff of the Woods Hole Oceano-

Below: The Calico Players performing on the Community Hall stage during the 1930s. Courtesy Woods Hole Historical Museum.



graphic Institution “delighted” a capacity crowd with “a program of comedy, music, song, and dance.” For the past 45 years, the Woods Hole Theater Company has been the resident troupe, performing everything from Shakespeare to the campy rock musical “Rocky Horror Show,” which played to sold-out houses in the summers of both 2005 and 2008.

When it comes to music, performances in the Hall have been no less diverse and popular—from a 1925 barn dance sponsored by the Campfire Girls to a series of chamber music concerts in the 1930s, ‘40s, and ‘50s. An *Enterprise* article from 1934 gives a taste: “A good-sized audience braved Sunday night’s downpour to hear the chamber music concert at Woods Hole Community Hall. Mu-

sicians complain of dampened strings giving out less than their usual quality of melody.” The Woods Hole Folk Music Society was founded in 1973 and produced well-attended concerts for 47 years, until the sad announcement earlier this year that the society is disbanding. In 1978, village resident and WHCA board member Tom Renshaw founded Woods Hole Jazz, which continues to bring world renowned jazz musicians to Community Hall.

The building’s civic purposes have included serving as a Selective Service registration center in 1941 and as a polling place for many years. In February of 1942, under the auspices of the WHCA and with the full support of Woods Hole residents, Community Hall was used “as a recreation room for enlisted Servicemen. Recreational activities were offered to the personnel of Navy, Coast Guard and Marines who were stationed in Woods Hole. Visitors from thirty nine of the forty eight states were registered in the guest book. Home town flags covered the wall map. Pool and ping-pong were popular. Friday night dances highlighted the week.”



Popular folk singer Bill Staines at the final concert of the Woods Hole Folk Music Society in April 2019. He performed 47 consecutive years for the Society. Photo by Tim Parker.

In 1946, a Teen Center was created at Community Hall and would remain in existence until 1974, with the center's director reporting to the WHCA. While its schedule was more limited in the winter, the Teen Center was a vibrant gathering place, open every day in the summer. Dues were fifty cents. Musical acts were performed there, and dances of all types were frequent. Pool and ping-pong tables were located in the lower level, and the basketball tradition continued on the second floor. In 1953, the Cub Scouts thanked the WHCA for their support of youth groups by washing all the chairs in the Hall while the Girl Scouts planted ivy outside and "prettied the ladies room with a shelf frill and painted mirror."

Old buildings, of course, require upkeep, so a constant theme for Woods Hole Community Hall has been fundraising for repairs and refurbishment. In the 1920s, funds were raised through such endeavors as whist parties and an ongoing rummage sale in the hall's basement. A 1946 fund drive, according to the *Enterprise*, sought to raise the unusual sum of \$2,879 "to completely renovate, modernize, and equip a civic center of which any village



Cast members rehearsing *Mia's Cloud*, the 2019 spring production of the Woods Hole Theater Company. Photo by Annie Hart Cool.

might be proud." The article goes on to note that a "mailing list of 850 names has been carefully prepared," that "handbills will be displayed throughout the village," and that "Street captains under the direction of Mrs. Charles Packard will conduct a house to house canvass for subscriptions." In the end, the drive organizers exceeded their goal, raising \$2,924.50.

Just two years later, "in their annual fundraising appeal," Mrs. Martha Redfield wrote that "aside from the Library, there is but one building in Woods Hole which can be considered a public building, open to all. In Community Hall, opportunity is afforded for all ages to have healthful group sports, cultural events, recreation, and civic and public meetings—basketball, badminton, dancing, card parties, art, exhibits, job shows, club and civic meetings and theatricals." Another large-scale, multi-year renovation project was undertaken in the mid-1970s. Tom Renshaw, a local carpenter and former WHCA President, has been instrumental in leading renovations since that time. Perhaps the most notable project in recent years was the installation of an elevator in 2005 to make the building more accessible

to those who might not otherwise be able to attend events in the main hall.

Not all WHCA events take place at Community Hall. The Association is also responsible for The Old Fire Station, the Swift Barn, and the Woods Hole School. Controlled by the WHCA since the new fire station on Woods Hole Road was built in 1976, The Old Fire Station hosts yoga, drawing, and other classes, a farmers' market from June through October, and film screenings (some as a part of the Woods Hole Film Festival). Along with Community Hall, the Old Fire Station is also a key location for the extremely popular Renaissance Fair each December, with people gathering to enjoy music, a wreath making workshop, and more than thirty local food and craft vendors.

Speaking of both Community Hall and the Old Fire Station, WHCA board member Liz Saito says, "The life of the village, and what makes it so special for those of us who love it, is composed of many intangibles, but so much of it happens in those buildings. It's about people and our relationships to one another, but so much of those relationships are built and fostered and celebrated in those buildings."

The Swift Barn on School Street—nicknamed the Sugar Shack—serves the community for woodworking and other large craft-related projects. The Woods Hole School, built in 1886, no longer functions as a public school but instead houses the Woods Hole Day-care Cooperative. The Children's School of Science has held classes there every summer since 1914. And the WHCA also uses the ball field and Taft's Playground on Bell Tower Lane



Musical entertainment by the Morgan Rattler trio at the 2016 Renaissance Fair with Ron Geering, Jacek Sulanowski, and Barbara Blair.  
Photo by Leonard Miele.

to coordinate and host the annual May Festival, where hundreds of residents and visitors come to celebrate the approach of summer. Longtime WHCA Co-President Catherine Bumpus adds that "the annual Eel Pond cleanup is a communal effort that the WHCA provide a space but is successful because of the volunteer energy that comes with it."

One hundred years after its founding, the WHCA Board of Trustees and members continue to take a leading role in supporting and preserving the special nature of the village of Woods Hole. An illustrative example comes from the late 1990s, when there was a move to establish a McDonald's restaurant franchise at the site of the old Lee Side, across from the ferry terminal. Concerned that the fast food chain would indelibly alter the character of the village—not for the better—residents, including many members of the Association, mounted an ultimately successful multi-year defense. Locals breathed a sigh of relief when McDonald's withdrew its proposal, and Quicks Hole Tavern eventually opened on the disputed spot in 2014.

In 1919 there were thirty-four members of the Association. Today's mailing list numbers about 700, "most of whom," according to Co-President Bumpus, "give some kind of annual donation." Co-President Steve Junker describes the monthly meetings in the Old Fire House as "formally informal," with members gathering to discuss matters ranging from



Crafters sell their wares at the annual Renaissance Fair. Photo by Beth Colt.

building maintenance to local zoning matters to upcoming programs and activities. The only requirement for membership continues to be an interest in the association and a willingness to contribute in some way. "One of the reasons I love the Woods Hole Community Association," says Catherine Bumpus, "is that people step up and take on projects almost magically, and they get things done."

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#### About the Author

Rob Blomberg, who retired in 2015 after working 38 years for Liberty Mutual Insurance, is a trustee of the Woods Hole Public Library and a tour guide for the Woods Hole Historical Museum and at Fenway Park.