

“TOWN HALL” ~ PAST AND PRESENT

A Story of Form vs. Function vs. Money

BY MARK COLLINS

Dateline September 15, 1930 — Dedication of the Mt. Lebanon Township Hall. Bands played, dignitaries spoke, politicians gladhanded the crowd. More than 5,000 people stood in the pouring rain for the festivities, some to see the new building, others to hear Pennsylvania gubernatorial candidate Gifford Pinchot, speaker of the state house and a leading advocate of Prohibition.

Pinchot's fans were not disappointed. The Republican — who had already served one term as governor in the early '20s — praised Mt. Lebanon's innovative city-manager government and the township's rapid growth.

Those who came for the tour were not disappointed, either. The modernistic building of white brick and limestone featured an impressive art-deco rotunda, 46 feet from floor to ceiling. The entryway (“Dedicated to Those Citizens Who

Served in the World War”) was later topped by a hand-painted mural which reflected the building's inscription, “Wisdom in Government.” The mural depicted the seals of Mt. Lebanon, Allegheny County, the state and the country, along with the symbols for justice, religion and enlightenment. And, for the first time, the township operations were housed under one roof — enough

room for the police, commissioners, administrative offices, road crews, court rooms, even a revolver range.

(Of course, the Mt. Lebanon of this vintage looked a little different: an eight-man police force to guard 15,000 souls and patrol just 45 miles of paved roads; the all-volunteer fire company used a hand-cranked siren mounted on the front of its one and only pumper.)

Though many locals had been in favor of a new building (the township had been renting space for \$75 a month), construction costs kept escalating. The price tag had risen to the \$200,000 level by May 1928, well above the original estimate. The *Mt. Lebanon Times* dismissed this new figure as “somewhat high,” but defended the building as “no cheap john affair...[but] the finest municipal building of any suburban town in Allegheny County.”

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The new Municipal Building meant that all municipal services could at last be housed under one roof. But the arrangement was short-lived. As Mt. Lebanon has continued to develop, the Public Works and Recreation Departments, as well as the Tax Office and the Library, have been moved out to accommodate expanding departments such as Police and Fire and make room for Finance, Planning and other new services.



PHOTOS BY BILL METZGER

Both its lofty rotunda and its hefty price tag commanded public attention when Mt. Lebanon's Municipal Building debuted in 1930. Construction had begun in a healthy economic climate, but by the time the building was completed, many residents were beginning to feel the effects of The Great Depression.



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TOWN HALL

Continued.

"I don't remember much about the building itself," says Myra Nevin, daughter of the architect, William H. King, "though I do remember some kind of controversy attached to it."

The price tag would be a good guess: by its opening, the cost had risen to nearly a quarter-million dollars.

William King studied architecture both at Carnegie Tech (Class of '12) and in Paris. King's career was sidetracked by the Great War, when he went to work in a secret post for the U.S. government. (Mrs. Nevin remembers stories of "suitcases with false bottoms.") After the war, King restarted his stalled career, and one of his projects during the booming '20s was the Mt. Lebanon Township Hall.

At the time Mt. Lebanon's commissioners approved the new building, the township's future never looked brighter. During the '20s, Mt. Lebanon was the fastest growing community in the state, gaining 11,000 residents in 10 years. Thanks to innovative residential plans like Mission Hills (one of the first housing areas to map its plan according to the contour of the land), Lebo's housing boomed. Yet the growth remained orderly — Mt. Lebanon's renowned building codes and subdivision controls were already established by 1922. More important, the diversity of housing brought in a strong middle-class element — shopkeepers and middle-managers who took advantage of extended mortgages to purchase \$10,000-\$20,000 homes in Seminole Hills, Beverly Heights, Lebanon Hills and the rest. They also could escape the city's smoke, thanks to the 1,200-foot altitude and the prevailing westerlies. The completion of the Liberty Tunnels in 1924 was the crowning jewel — speedy transportation to the metropolitan hub.

King's modernistic building took several years to design, as did the actual construction. But a funny thing happened on the way to dedication: Wall Street collapsed.

Those hearty souls standing in the rain listening to Speaker Pinchot were just beginning to feel the impact of the Great Depression. According to the *Pittsburgh Press*, 1930's Mt. Lebanon was dubbed "Mortgage Hill," as thousands of homeowners struggled to make ends meet. Public services began to suffer: the tax office had trouble collecting levies for the swelling school system, bus service was

curtailed, and the water system — already burdened by too-rapid growth — could barely provide enough pressure for a good shower, let alone a fire hydrant... yet the township did not have the revenue to update the inadequate system.

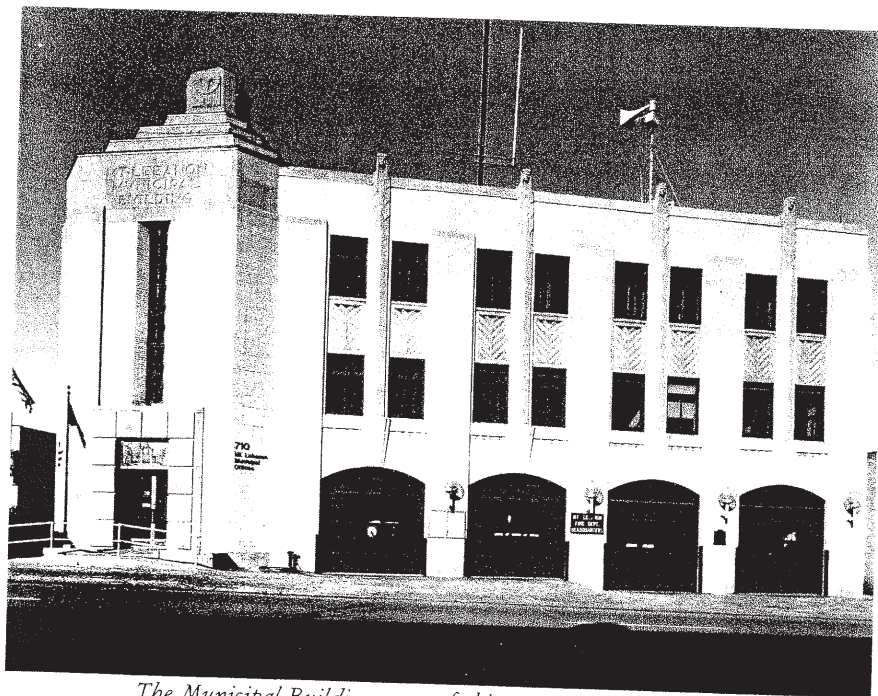
But the community, along with the rest of the country, survived the Depression. In some ways, Mt. Lebanon did better than most townships: residential building in Mt. Lebanon continued in the '30s, though at a slower clip. By the 1950s, the population had grown to nearly 30,000, and total valuation had jumped nearly twentyfold, from \$4 million to \$78 million, in just three decades.

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very cramped quarters or move
out altogether.**

Today the municipality includes 35,000 people, 100 miles of streets, 43 officers in a dozen police vehicles, 14 full-time and 35 volunteer firefighters and 11 paramedics... not to mention 200 acres of parks, a golf course, athletic fields, a swimming pool, ice rink and tennis complex. This expansion of services has led to an ever-worsening space problem, forcing many departments — the recreation department, the library, the tax office, to name a few — to move out of the municipal building altogether.

Despite the problems, the building has survived. The unique, German-made lights were refurbished in 1988, as was the rotunda itself. Last year, James Fersch of the A.J. Vater Company restored the mural atop the entryway. Fersch was "amazed at the detail (of the mural), especially considering that they painted the design onto sand (rough) plaster... I can't imagine the intricate work that went into this. It's hard to appreciate unless you're up here (on a scaffold)."

It's fitting, somehow, that the only thing known about the mural's artists are their names — F.J. Koch and A.L. Dudek. Unlike Gifford Pinchot, Koch and Dudek didn't make speeches at the dedication, or shake hands with the crowd, or get a write-up in the newspaper. The artists' work — precise, difficult, lasting — was just another important, unnoticed contribution along the way.



The Municipal Building, one of this area's best examples of art deco architecture, may be a candidate for the National Register of Historic Places. The mural that bands the interior of its pyramidal peak, thought to have been painted as part of a WPA project, was recently restored.



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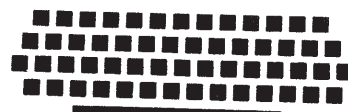
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