

Bloomsburg Town Hall

The Town Hall as told to Patchwork by Bill Brobst.

Interviewed by Marie Davis and Santana Rodriguez in the spring of 2003.

Bill Brobst lived in Bloomsburg all but ten years of his life having graduated from Bloomsburg High School. He works at Bloomsburg Town Hall as a councilman.

Brobst has worked at the Bloomsburg Town Hall for a total of 23 years. He enjoys working at the Town Hall. He thinks that the Town Hall is an interesting building.

PATCHWORK: At one point in time the Town Hall was a fire station, so what encouraged them to turn it into the Town Hall?

BROBST: For one thing, they didn't have to be encouraged to turn it into Town Hall. When that building was built in 1890, it was built as a fire station, town hall, and a police lock-up. It had all three functions incorporated in it originally. So it was not turned into the Town Hall.

PATCHWORK: So it wasn't completely the Town Hall.

BROBST: That's right. In later years when Friendship Fire Company moved, it was the first fire company in Bloomsburg. It was established in the 1860's and the Town Hall was built in 1890, that was the home of the Friendship Fire Company. Then many years later, Friendship went into the building where the Children's Museum is now located. Do you know where that is, up behind us here? Well that's where Friendship was. So originally the building was built to house three functions: the Town Hall, Friendship Fire Company and the police lock-up. Prior to that part in time the town government met in various rented spaces around town. Of course as the functions of the police department increased, the police department moved a portion of the building that was devoted to the police department at times they grow. The fire company moved out so it certainly still has three uses and that's town government, town hall, police station and the tax office.

PATCHWORK: So, what goes on in the town hall?

BROBST: Okay, town hall is the administrative offices of town government, so that's where you get the town administrator and his assistants. You have the code enforcement for example. The town manager is housed in the town hall. It is also space where the elected government, the town council members, hold their meetings. So those are the primary functions of the town hall, and then of course you got a whole separate aspect of the building that was devoted to the police department. That's nearly the entire first floor, all

but a small portion of the building is devoted to the police department and the law office of tax collection. Second and third floors are for government administrative and town council.

PATCHWORK: How long did it take to build the town hall?

BROBST: It took about one year to build. The town hall was built in 1890 and was dedicated September 14th of the year in 1890. It was built by a local contractor and his name was Mr. Hensinger and it cost \$15,000.

PATCHWORK: What kind of architecture?

BROBST: It's a Victorian building and more specifically it's what we would call Richardsonian Romanesque. So specifically you can discover our Romanesque building as one that perpetrates a fully gathered arch. Do you know what the building looks like? The building has never been dramatically altered. The lower part on the back, which is the police station, was added on at a later point in time. That tower at the back of the building was added to accommodate the elevator. Apart from that, the building has never been dramatically altered. From what I was telling you a moment ago, I think it's an interesting building from an architectural standpoint. It is what you call a Victorian building and of course Victorian buildings were built from the 1830's up until about the turn of the century and there was an architect who was practicing at the time, his name was Mr. Richardson. He contracted to design this building but he sort of popularized the use of this type of arch, the support arch. This building actually has two different types of arches on it. The Romanesque arch, they applied the name of the architect who popularized that, that of course is an ancient feature of ancient Rome. He popularized it in the last half of the 19th century and this is a Richardson Romanesque building that has another type of arch, which is called a segmental arch. You'll see it over these windows. This is what you call asymmetric buildings. See how it has a tower sticking up one side and then it has different masses on the other sides. The inside of the building has been altered many, many times to accommodate what office uses are in there. The front staircase is original to the building so that will be one of the few things that will be original to the building. Around the last decade of the 19th century, from the 1880's to up about 1900, that style of architecture that I was telling you about was very very popular. It was very fanciful very sort of Romanesque, sort of romantic style of architecture, kind of inconsistent and picturesque. When this type of thing was going, there was a big building boom going on. These were obviously big, substantial buildings that were being built and in some cases they had to tear down buildings to build those. You also asked me what else that I thought was interesting about the building and when you go up, you guys are going to go up and take some pictures of it, you should actually go up and go take pictures of the outside also and today would be a good day to do that. When you look at the building on the outside, I would like you to look at all the little decorative tiles that are set into the masonry and those are pressed terracotta

and there are at least fourteen different styles. You'll see that some look like little leaves, some that look like rosettes, some are called quatrefoils- there's a whole bunch of those put in there purely for decorative purposes. And those are made of pressed terracotta and it's one of the very few buildings that has that type of decorative device on it. Something else you should keep in mind about that building, maybe recently you heard that they're considering tearing down the big building on the other side of the street, the one that's now called Husky Housing and that building's not quite as old as the town hall. When you look at those buildings, you will see how perfectly situated they are on the street. Town Hall was obviously built right in the exact location where it should be.

PATCHWORK: What are the different jobs at the town hall?

BROBST: Currently?

PATCHWORK: Yeah.

BROBST: You mean the functions that are in right now?

PATCHWORK: Yeah.

BROBST: Okay, right now you got three functions in there. You got town government and that's town council, which is the elected part of the government body of the town of Bloomsburg. You got the home of the town council, that's where we have our offices and that's where we have our meetings. The administrative functions of the town of Bloomsburg are the people who work for the town and part for the town and part of the administrative duties are housed in that building. You have the Bloomsburg Police Department that's housed in there and you have the office of the tax collector. Those are the three functions of the building currently.

PATCHWORK: How has the government of the town changed since it first started?

BROBST: I'm not quite exactly sure that I understand your question. I'll attempt to answer it. Bloomsburg is an incorporated town, and it's the only incorporated town in Pennsylvania in the respect it's different than every other municipality of its type which are the boroughs, cities, and townships and so on. Bloomsburg is a town and has seven elected members on town council, one of whom is the mayor. And each one of those members has a full vote. So that's basically how the town is run and the members are elected at large by the residents of the town of Bloomsburg.

PATCHWORK: How was the government of the town when the town hall was first built?

BROBST: The structure of the government itself has not changed since the town hall was built. The governmental structure of the Town of Bloomsburg was established in 1873, that's the form of town government itself, that's the elected body that I was talking about, has been the same since that point in time. So in other words, when the town hall was built,

you had a town council and a mayor and the registrative act was set forth to establish the government of the town of Bloomsburg has remained the same since the founding in 1873 and that was the time town hall was built.

PATCHWORK: Where else was the town hall before being in the current building?

BROBST: The functions of the town government took place in various rented locations around town. There was no former town hall per se.

PATCHWORK: Where were the other locations?

BROBST: That I cannot answer. They were in just any buildings where there were spaces available for council meetings. They were rented spaces, various rented spaces.

PATCHWORK: What made them decide to build the town hall?

BROBST: Well, the functions of government required a building where they could be housed and various different offices, and also of course there was the infamous of having a fire company there and the police lock-up. So that was basically the decisions that came into play when they decided to build the town hall.

PATCHWORK: Who decided to build the town hall?

BROBST: I'm sure the council decided to build the town hall, and the citizens of Bloomsburg obviously had to accept because they had to pay the bill. The taxpayers.

PATCHWORK: How is the building holding up, is it good?

BROBST: Yes, the building is holding up very, very well. The building is in excellent condition. It was needless to say a very well constructed building when it was made originally. It has never experienced any real major problems. Like I told you, the exterior of the building, that's what you would call the architectural integrity of the building, has remained very much the same the building. It has never fallen in a state of disrepair, it has been changed around inside many many times you know over 113 years to accommodate different needs or administrations of the town and so on and so forth, but the building is holding up very well and the building has no real problems. The town has no reason to replace it or do any major renovations to it. It serves quite well for our purposes, it has for over 113 years.

PATCHWORK: What did it look like inside? I know you said about the staircase and everything. I don't really know about architecture.

BROBST: I gave you a pretty good description of the exterior architecture of the building. The same cannot be said for the inside. The inside has been remodeled beyond recognition of its original architecture. So I cannot put a specific name on the architectural style inside. I mean it has been altered inside in such that it retained the architectural features that it had when it was built. Now if you were in Berwick and you were looking at Jackson

Mansion, which is their town hall, they have gone to great extremes in that town to make sure the interior of the building is preserved very much as it was when it was built by Harold Jackson in the 1870's. In the case of our own town hall, that is not the case. The interior of the building has been altered beyond recognition with the exception of the main staircase going up the front that is original to the building. When you go in, you will see this. You know too it is not a remarkable building inside, it does not have woodwork and all that type of thing inside, that's pretty much all gone.

PATCHWORK: Why did they pick that location? I mean why did they build the town hall where they did?

BROBST: Very central location in Bloomsburg. You got to remember Bloomsburg is only a town of about four and a half miles land area and that was a very central location.

PATCHWORK: What else is there about the town hall? Besides the architecture. What else is there about it?

BROBST: I think we pretty well covered that. I mean I personally am very interested in historic architecture and the contribution that it makes to a community, to the fabric of the community and to the quality of life. And I think that other than the functions that the building actually serves, which we've gone over, those three functions and those types of functions obviously can be housed in any type of building. I mean a brand new building could be made to house those types of functions. In the case of Bloomsburg, this building is about 113 years old, approaching 113 years old, it has adapted very well over time. As I was saying a little bit ago, when you go up and take pictures up there, think about how perfectly situated this building in town. Its location right at the juncture of those streets, Light Street above, College Hill, Second Street, North Street coming down and East Street. It's a very very important location in town, it's a highly visible building, it's obviously a very beautiful building, it's a building that contributes greatly to the aesthetics of the Town of Bloomsburg, to the quality of life. It is architecturally a very important building, it is a very good example of the architectural style that I was talking about, the Romanesque style, the late Victorian architecture, so the building has great importance in the Town of Bloomsburg.

PATCHWORK: Who designed it? I mean you say about the architecture and everything.

BROBST: We do not have a description for a particular architect. We do know who the builder was though.

PATCHWORK: So it was a bunch of people putting their ideas together?

BROBST: Well, in the eras when those types of buildings were built, contractors had a very good sense about those types of buildings. A lot of times a good contractor like the fellow who built this building was able to look in pattern books that were available at the time.

Remember, I showed you about three different buildings that were all taking place at the same time so there was a lot of popularity of that particular style. So even if you did not have an architect designing the building specifically, there would be a good body of information out there. There would be design books, pattern books in which they would be able to refer to come up with something.

PATCHWORK: What would you think the town hall would look like if we just like took it down now and then in this day and age if we put up a new one. What do you think the description of that would be? Would it be like modern houses today?

BROBST: I dread the thought of what it would be. If you were talking about, well put it this way, I told you as great buildings were built in Bloomsburg, there were other good buildings that were torn down. In that era of construction where a new building replaced an older building, but it was a much greater building, a more significant building, than the building it was actually replacing. Now unfortunately, we're in a situation where as older buildings are torn down, new buildings that replace them are not sometimes as fine a quality as the buildings that are torn down. That's why historic preservation is very important to all buildings, and when you go up to take your pictures of the town hall particularly the outside, take notice of that other big building that I'm talking about right across Second Street, right across College Hill. This huge brick building was built in 1918 so it's about an eighty-year-old building. It was the site of a Ford Dealership and has been Husky Housing, which is college housing, for a long period of time. Now there is consideration to take that building down and build an Eckerd's Drug Store in that location. So you've all been around the country, and pretty much when you see one, you kind of seen them all. Another one might be a little bit different, but that's the type of thing that is typically built. To answer your question, if that building were to be taken down, the prospect of having a building of that quality out back there will be highly unlikely because it would just be incredibly expensive, but if you were in a city for example, real estate is extremely valuable and where you've got a very high profile architect and contractor working and so on, then when an older building is torn down, sometimes you'll get a very remarkable piece of modern architecture put in its place. Unfortunately, in a case of small rural communities like Bloomsburg, when older historic buildings are torn down, you generally do not get those kinds of replacement buildings because of cost.

PATCHWORK: It won't resemble the town hall originally.

BROBST: No, no, no, you clearly would not say that. There are things on that building which are not even really available today. I was telling you about all of those little terracotta tiles and you'll see so on. Those types of things would not be available today. I mean, they can be reproduced, but it would be enormously expensive. I don't know if you guys followed the fountain restoration of the fountain project or not. That was built in 1892. It stood there until

1960's and was taken out completely by the 1980's. When the fountain was put in originally in 1892, it cost like \$1,600 which was of course a fair sum of money in that time but not insurmountable. Now we were fortunate that we were able to find somebody that had patterns. They could make all the pieces that had been destroyed that had deteriorated and rotted away and so on, so we were able to rebuild the town fountain as it was 110 years ago in 1892. This time around it cost about \$300,000 so if you can, that's just the fountain, so you can imagine. So if you were looking at building a building like the town hall right now, actually say recreating the building, you would be you know into many millions of dollars.

PATCHWORK: Do you like working at the town hall?

BROBST: Sure, it's a nice place.

PATCHWORK: What do you do?

BROBST: I'm a town councilman.

PATCHWORK: What do councilmen do?

BROBST: Councilmen make the laws and enforce them in the Town of Bloomsburg. Town council is the legislative body of the elected officials of the citizens of the Town of Bloomsburg.

PATCHWORK: You were saying about town hall basically treated where things go in. What are the other things?

BROBST: Besides town government?

PATCHWORK: Yeah

BROBST: Police Department?

PATCHWORK: And what does that do?

BROBST: Well, what we have are police officers. That's their headquarters and that's their offices and you know what police do. Enforce the laws and the office of the tax collector and she does exactly what her name implies, she collects the taxes.

PATCHWORK: Is there a single person for every of the three groups? Like is there a head of all of them?

BROBST: Well, you have one head person for each of those agencies. In the case of tax collector, you would have one person, Mary Ward, she's the tax collector. She's an elected official. In the case of the police department, you have Chief Leo Sobolosky. He is appointed by town council and he heads the entire police department and in the case of town government, we have what we call an administrator, that's Mr. Grey, if I'm correct. He's the chief of public office and then we have seven council members and they are elected by citizens of the town.

PATCHWORK: So the administrator is there to make sure everything is going right?

BROBST: That's right. The administrator oversees all functions of town government. We started talking about the building and the offices that it houses currently and the functions it housed historically, and then we went on and started talking about the architectural details of the building and when it was constructed. We talked about the popularity of that style and other similar buildings that were being built at that time. Then you asked me a lot of questions about the functions of town government and about how town council worked and administrative offices and so on. You're getting into two separate things. Which one would you like to pursue? I would suggest that you separate those things out.

PATCHWORK: Probably the functions of the town hall because I really don't know what all goes on in it.

BROBST: Have I answered most of those questions for you?

PATCHWORK: Yeah. I like knowing about how it was built and everything and who built it, but I think we're more interested in what goes on inside the town hall and why it's there and what it's for.

BROBST: So do you think we covered that?

PATCHWORK: Pretty much.

BROBST: Yeah, you know the town structure. The structure formation of town government has obviously been pretty much the same for a good long period of time, but that is a subject for a whole other matter. Then you get into all the nuances of how the government was run and so on. You got a representative, you got a group of officials elected. The representatives of the Town of Bloomsburg and they're elected by voters in town. That's basically our home, that's basically where we do our business, that's where we hold our meetings. We hold two public meetings per month, and we hold committee meetings, that's where we work out stuff in committee, and committee meetings are held all of the time between courses of the week and the town council make decisions by majority voting. So that's basically what happens in our town hall and that function can be said to be the same for any town hall or city hall you may have heard. For example, some places, larger areas, that are classified as cities, they don't call it the town hall, they'll call it the city hall or if you go to other communities besides Bloomsburg, because remember Bloomsburg is the only town in the entire commonwealth of Pennsylvania. You got 2,600 individual municipalities in the commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and we only have one town and that's Bloomsburg. There are other towns like Bloomsburg and I'll refer to like Berwick and Danville and places of similar size. Those are boroughs and the government is constructed a little bit differently, and when you go to our town hall, they call it their borough hall. They

don't call it town hall, they call it borough hall. In Bloomsburg, we call it town hall because we're the only town. Any other questions?

PATCHWORK: No, I think that we covered it.

BROBST: I always tell every group that I talk to, if you have any other questions, you can always talk to me later or if you need more specific answers to questions, I can go out and get them or go to town hall, it's obviously open to the public.

PATCHWORK: Thank you.