

Waterville Masonic Temple (1950)

A history of the Waterville Masonic Temple.

MASONIC TEMPLE and BELL TOWER

The following is an historical account of the Waterville Masonic Temple and its chapter room as compiled by Worthy Sister Gertrude Allen and Sister Beverly Allen. It was given to the members of Crystal Chapter, O.E.S. on the occasion of the celebration of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Chapter, February 14, 1950.

"This evening our chapter meeting assumes an unusual attitude in that instead of thinking of the business of the evening and the coming activities of the order, our thoughts are turning in retrospect through the past fifty years of our chapter history. It is only appropriate that on this occasion we also think of our chapter room and this interesting building - our Temple. We of Crystal Chapter are so very fortunate in holding our meetings in one of the most unique lodge rooms in the state. This Temple is known throughout our state Masonry for its beauty and its unusual features. We have always conducted our meetings with pride in our rooms and it is with the same proud feeling that we welcome visitors into our rooms that they too may appreciate our beautiful surroundings.

We have searched diligently through Masonic records, old newspaper accounts and talked with members of long standing in Sanger Lodge and Crystal Chapter to learn all we could of the historical facts and the lore connected with this building.

REUBEN TOWER

Waterville is noted for many famous personages, not the least of whom was Reuben Tower, the designer and original owner of this building. Tower was born in Waterville in 1829. He came from old New England stock. His father was a prominent Waterville merchant and one-time New York Legislator. Reuben was given the best of educational opportunities and entered Harvard where he attended two years, leaving because of ill health. He returned to Waterville at the age of twenty-one to take up the business of the manufacture of alcohol. By the age of twenty-five he had accumulated the ample fortune of \$23,600 which was proof of his business ability.

But at heart, Tower was a lover of the land and he soon turned his energies to agriculture. The famous Tower barns, known by everyone in this locality, stand as evidence of his interest in farming. He maintained heads of fine blooded cattle and many pure bred horses, some of his colts being worth \$2000 apiece.

Reuben Tower's interests were not confined to agriculture alone. He was a most civic minded person holding local offices as Supervisor of Sangerfield and President of the Village of Waterville. He was considered a distinguished democrat. He is said to have spent more from his personal funds than from

the village treasury. He furnished the laborers for the construction of Tower Avenue and the improvement of various other village streets. He even built and maintained his own water system and reservoir to supply water to his various farms, far surpassing the water system of the other villagers of the time.

But probably the greatest memorial to Reuben Tower is this building where we are tonight. This was his home. In 1886 he felt the need of an office and more adequate living quarters, so he designed this building as his home. The house behind this (now occupied by Sister Marion Bancroft), was constructed for his servant quarters.

The building itself attracts the visitors first by its tower. This was planned in the home as in all other structures built by Tower as a symbol of his name.

The room in which we are now sitting was Mr. Tower's reception room. It served as his office and his living room. It is 100ft. x 40 x 15. His original oak paneling remains as it was in his day. Sister Gertrude Allen will tell you more in detail of the individual appointments in the room.

The foundation and walls outside the building are constructed of the finest granite rock from the Oxford (N.Y.) quarries. It is told of Mr. Tower that he purchased the entire output of the quarry to assure himself of an ample supply and also that it would be used only in his buildings. Since he then owned more than he had need for, he discarded the surplus in the pasture land behind the house on Sanger Avenue which is now the home of Sister Jennie Allen. (Kent Cole).

The tower itself arises from the ground 103 feet. A stairway with carved balustrades in the tower leads to the second floor where some of the servants lived in Tower's time. Here was located the clock room holding the mechanism of the large Seth Thomas clock and the key board used in ringing the chimes. The next story up is the dial room, there are hung the four ground glass clock faces each six feet in diameter. These dials face the four points of the compass and these with the bell tones informed the citizens on all sides of the town. The remaining story is the bell deck and there are hung the famous nine bells which comprise the chimes. These Westminster Chimes cast in Troy, N.Y., are the crowning glory of the building. They undoubtedly equal the worth of the building. The chimes rang out, as today, every fifteen minutes of the day and night. The hour was tolled by the three thousand pound bell, the largest of the set. On this deck is also hung the Masonic Memorial Bell. The bell, the oldest in the village was cast in 1824 and was placed in the tower after the purchase of the building by the Masons to be tolled at the time of the burial of a brother of the Masonic order.

The tower is surmounted by a cupola with the circular windows facing again the four cardinal points of the compass. These windows were provided by the Masonic Order with individual blue lights to be reminders to the Brethren for miles outside of the village that lodge was in session.

The original basement was used by Mr. Tower for his wine cellar. Here wines of old and doubtless savory vintage were stored under the vigilant eye of the owner. After the building became the property of Sanger Lodge the large oak posts which interspersed the room were removed. The support which the posts supplied was replaced by the use of large horizontal steel beams thus leaving the floor space free. The small room at the left of the foot of the basement stairs was changed into a small kitchen for the use of the various lodges for many years. The entire source of heating other than the large fireplace in this room was a large hot air furnace located in the back right corner of the basement. This was artfully screened by heavy green curtains. The present kitchen was added at a later date and did much for the convenience of especially the ladies of Crystal Chapter.

Many of our members have more than once complained of the tremendous weight of the folding chairs still in use in our basement dining room. It is interesting to note that these massive oak chairs were placed there in 1899 by the then Master of Sanger Lodge, William J. Butler. Mr. Butler no doubt, was thinking of his own needs (and the needs of several other then active Masons) rather than the frailties of future sisters of Eastern Star. His weight of well over 300 pounds necessitated a solidly well built chair.

After the death of Reuben Tower in 1902, the property, house and contents were sold at auction. It is recorded that the office and home contained many oddities of massive furniture, paintings, twenty-five buffalo robes and rugs and innumerable horse whips, some selling for twenty-five to thirty dollars apiece. But the building including the beautiful chimes were purchased by R. Wilson Roberts who paid the unbelievable low price of \$3100.00. Despite the fact that they could have resold the house or the bells separately for more than his purchase price his devotion to his Sanger Lodge prompted him to magnanimously sell it to the lodge for the same low figure that he had paid. The building officially became the Masonic Temple at a formal dedication on November 3, 1903 at which time the Grand Master of the State of New York presided. On New Years Day a reception was held formally opening the Temple to all friends of Masonry that they might observe its conversion to a beautiful temple with its rich and unique appointments.

Immediately after the purchase of the building, Sanger Lodge had no less than three offers to sell the Chime bells to out of town concerns. Despite the fact that the Order had no use for the bells in its ritualistic work it most unselfishly retained them for the pleasure they brought to the citizenry of this village. Only recently (1940's) the Lodge electrified the mechanism of the clock and bells so that they might again be heard telling all in the melody of the bells the time of day and night and they are now a constant source of joy and pride to all of us who hear them.

Thus it was that this distinctive building, once the eccentric home of an eccentric man became the beautiful chapter home of Sanger Lodge, Warren Chapter, and Crystal Chapter. We of Crystal Chapter will be eternally grateful to Reuben Tower of long ago and Sanger Lodge of today for this privilege.

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THE CHAPTER ROOM

The most unique feature about this room is the few changes that were necessary to convert it from a living room into the perfect Lodge room. It was well proportioned and laid out in the proper direction to conform with Masonic teachings. The wainscoting used throughout the room is of beautiful handsome quartered oak which makes it especially impressive as a Temple. The only changes in the building that were necessary to be made by the Masons were the construction of a dome in the ceiling, the raised platforms at the ends of the room and the placing of doors in each corner of the western end of the room; the original door being in the center of the west end of the room. The necessary changes in woodwork on these doors and wainscoting were done by Brother William Suters, and great uncle of W.B. Henry Suters, Past Patron of Crystal Chapter. Bro. William Suters had done a great deal of the woodwork originally, and thus was able to match the finish so closely it looks now as though all the work had been done at one time. Bro. William Suters was also one of the founders of crystal Chapter and Patron for many years. The shutters at each window were a gift of Bro. Wilson Roberts.

They also are believed to be the work of Brother William Suters.

This room was Reuben Tower's living room, bedroom, and office. A year after its completion, about 1887, Mr. Tower went to Philadelphia, then the home of his family. While there he found this rug which pleased him so much he purchased it for something over \$1000 and brought it home with him. To his chagrin, he found that the rug was far too large for the floor of his room. He had so set his heart upon having the soft oriental mat under his feet, however, that he tore off the East end of the building and built on a six foot addition to accommodate the rug. (See line in ceiling)

The mosaic hearth of the immense fireplace bears the inscription "SALVE" which means, "Hail", "Hello" or a general greeting of welcome to this fireside.

The beautiful and expensive vases on the mantle were a surprise gift from Bro. R. Wilson Roberts. On the evening of the District Deputy's official visit to Sanger Lodge in 1915 the Brothers were pleasingly surprised to find these ornamental vases upon the mantle.

When Sanger Lodge was officially closed in 1829 following the Morgan incident in Masonry, the furniture of the room was stored in the old American Hotel. It is believed to have been from there that the Master's chair disappeared and was not located again until many years later when it was located in the neighboring village of Sauquoit. It was again stored for a time, then repaired and returned to its place in the East of the Lodge room, where it now stands. The chair was made by E.D. Buckingham who ran a furniture factory on the second floor of what is now W.J. Bissells' Son's store. It is not known definitely when the remaining pieces of furniture were purchased for the Lodge room as Sanger Lodge has purchased them at different times.

The Altar was reupholstered recently in blue velvet, a gift of W.B. Edward S. Barton.

The Moose head was shot by Brother A. Osborne Mayer, uncle of our Worthy Matron, on a hunting trip in Quebec in 1923. It was loaned to Sanger Lodge in 1941.

The paintings in the room were a gift to Sanger Lodge by Brother A.R. Eastman and Brother A. Osborne Mayer.

Our electric star in the northeast corner of the room was given in memory of Sister Mary L. Risley by her Son Clayton E., and daughter, Sarah C. Risley Hitt. Sister Hitt is now a life member of Crystal Chapter.

Our beautiful white Bible, so impressive on the altar of blue, was presented to the Chapter in a beautiful and appropriate ceremonial by the 1946 Officers on the evening of installation January 14, 1947. Worthy Sister Ruth V. Jones was then Matron.

The Signet hanging in the East was presented to Crystal Chapter in memory of Emily White Suters, February 27, 1923.

The latest acquisition is the silk American Flag and staff purchased for the Chapter by the Trustees in 1949.

It should also be noted in this record that on this occasion, the fiftieth anniversary of our Chapter, a gift of two gold-plated door knockers, each engraved with the dates 1900-1950 were presented as a

gift of the 1950 officers. Also presented at this time by the Past Matrons of Crystal Chapter was a Rosewood gavel inscribed with the dates to be used in the East.

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