

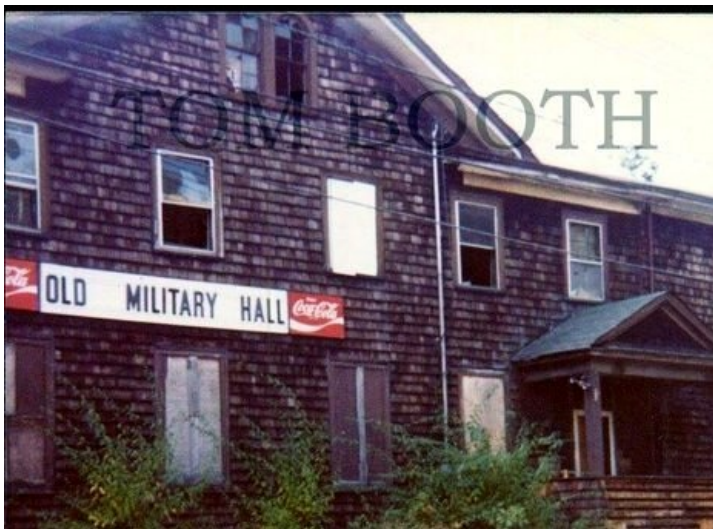
Old Military Hall, Nutley, NJ

Do you know its connections to the Booth and Kingsland families, pro boxing and burlesque, booze and brawls, and North Belleville?



NUTLEY SUN July 3rd 1974 - Today, Nutley's Old Military Hall is still opened for business. The old shingled tavern, which stands on New Street across from Nutley High School, has had a busy and quite lengthy career into which much of the early history of this town has been woven.

Earlier generations used the building as a voting hall, lodge-room, school and meeting hall. Boxing champions Tom Sharkey and Bob Fitzsimmons used to train at the old hall and showgirls in tights danced on its stage as New Jersey saw its first burlesque.



OLD MILITARY HALL, has a divergent past filled with carousing as well as electioneering and troop drilling. First opened as a church called the Blue Meeting Hall, the building has also served as a dance hall, school, hotel, tax collector's office, roller skating rink, toting ball and meeting place. (Text, Nutley Sun; photo, Tom Booth)

Old Military Hall was constructed around 1790 by Richard Booth, a block printer from England. The building was made from hand-hewn oak timbers which dovetailed in the eaves and were held together with wooden pins. Iron nails were used throughout the three-story structure and are the square-cut variety characteristic of the eighteenth century. Even the building's shingles were hung with small hand-cut nails.

A unique suspension system was used to hold the building up by its roof beams. Builders hung the floors by long wrought-iron suspension rods which dropped from the oak girders to the given double support and remains sturdy to this day

Surprisingly, the old tavern was first known as "The Blue Meeting House." Richard Booth was a pillar of The Dutch

Reformed Church opened building for religious worship

In the beginning, two separate buildings occupied the site — the main building and detached house. In 1835. The two were joined with a long building which later became a bar when the front room was turned into a theater.

The building remained in the Booth family until Civil War days. No one is sure when the building came to be known as Old Military Hall, but records show that local troops drilled there before departing for Union Army camps. This, most likely, started the tradition in which local troops mustered at Old Military Hall before marching off to war. This tradition was continued until World War II.

When Enoch Booth joined the 39th New Jersey Volunteer Infantry and left for Civil War battlefields, his wife, Mary Magdeline Stager Booth, opened a grog shop selling rum in the building. Since that time, there has been some sort of tavern associated with the old hall.

When Enoch died, Mary Magdeline leased the building to Jack Dooley who later turned it over to Buff Stager. During this town's bustling quarry days, Italian and Irish quarrymen used to meet in the upstairs lodge room of the old hall each Sunday morning.

Inevitably, tempers would flare and brawls would erupt. Old Military Hall became known for these weekly battles. In 1868, when the Erie Railroad was being constructed through town, construction gangs joined in the quarrymen's Sunday morning brawls.

The situation got so bad that vigilante groups were organized to protect Old Military Hall from the destruction of these battling workers. The worst fighting took place on paydays. On these days, men from the quarries, railroad and mills would converge upon the old hall and drink until blood-spilling battles broke out.

Mr. Duncan, owner of the Essex Mill just down the street from Old Military Hall, contrived a plan for the quarries, the railroad and the mills to stagger their payday so that all the workmen in town couldn't afford to carouse on the same night.

While Buff Stager ran Old Military Hall, he obtained a license to operate a transient's hotel in the building. The third-floor was sectioned into sleeping quarters and a stable and shed were erected near the premises. Stager's license required that he provide lodging for travelers and their horses directed to the old hall by the local postmaster.

In those days, horse auctions were held in the tavern yard. One horse, Pytsy, became a local legend when she boldly cantered into the ball and up to the bar where she quaffed a-pail of [-iKtr.]-supposedly without losing any of her ladylike poise.

When Nutley was still a part of North Belleville, Old Military Hall served as headquarters for the local tax collector. Town elections were held in the hall's "Lecture Room" and, according to traditional accounts, the various candidates stood at the door passing out pre-marked ballots to all who entered. Voters only had to drop these into the ballot box. If a voter was reluctant to take a marked ballot, he was steered into the bar room where free "refreshments" worked a change of heart.

Eventually, Old Military Hall became the first building in town to be lighted by electricity. On election days, however, the hall was lit by oil lamps. This practice supposedly began after supporters of an "opposition" candidate raided the hall one night just before the polls closed down. These raiders cut off the electricity and stuffed the ballot box, before someone could borrow an oil lamp from next-door.

In the early 1890's, Buff Stager sold the old hall to Charlie Jones who ran the tavern only briefly before selling it to Fred Carislc. A New York theatrical figure named Levinski bought the building from Carislc and converted it into a music hall featuring the first tights-wearing showgirls in all New Jersey.

William Wallace owned the old hall after Levinski and leased it to Mattie Woodland-in 1900. Ed Schnieder took over the business in 1904 and ran the hall until his death in 1940.

In its heyday as a music hall, Old Military Hall featured a sad-faced clown who alternated performances with a Floradora Sexttt. The hall's management offered to give \$10,000 to anyone who could make the clown laugh. Though many people tried, no one ever collected the money.

In 1941, Lester and Leonard Vought, twin brothers from Belleville, purchased the old hall. Lester Vought and his nephew, Lenny, continue to operate a tavern in the building today.



The highlight of Lester Vought's 33-years at proprietor of the old hall occurred in 1930 when the Board of Commissioners announced plans to raze the building and several near-by homes to make way for a new elementary school. Neighbors protested the plan and fought to save Old Military Hall from destruction.

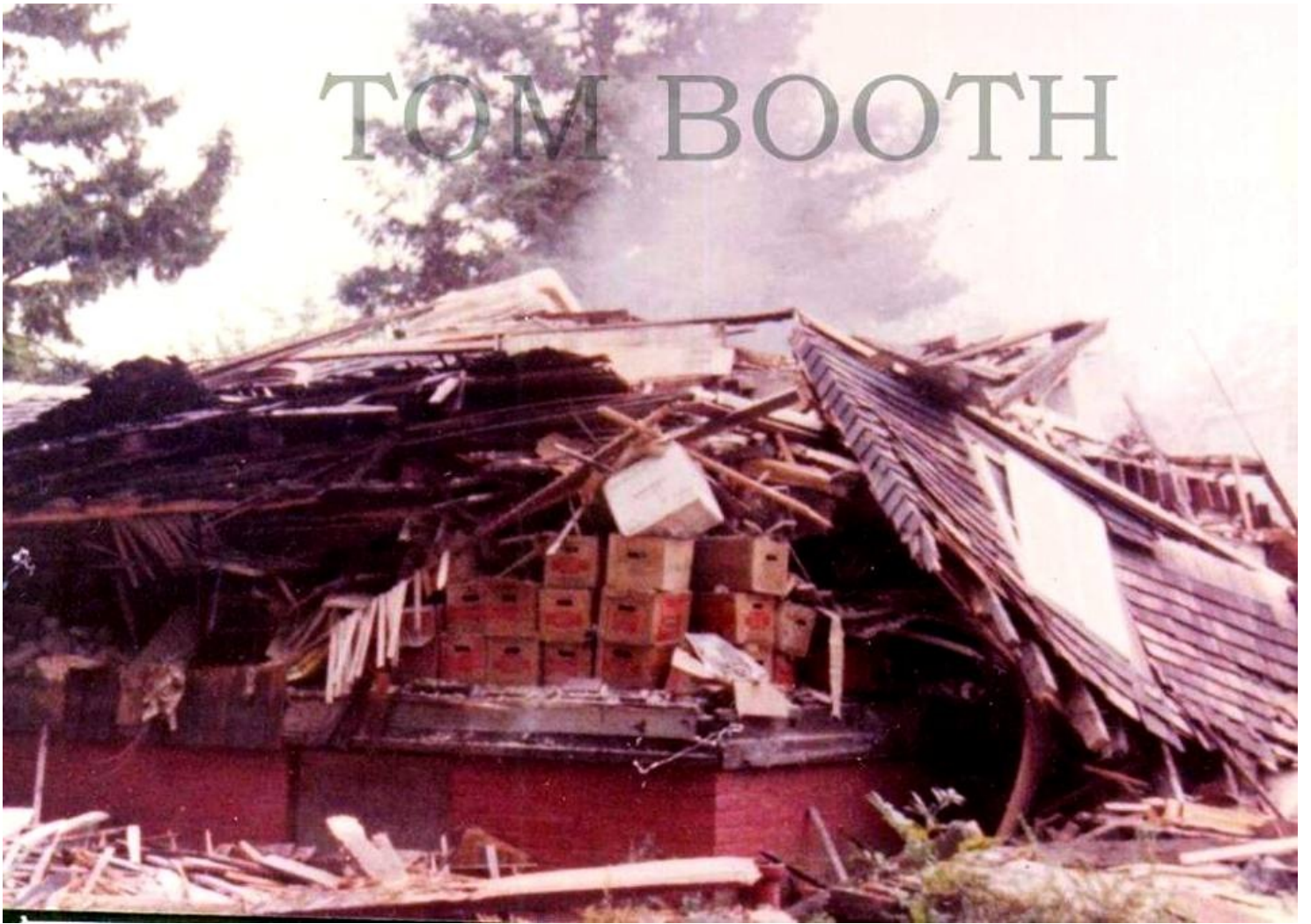
Several persons suggested that the building be move to a new site or converted into a town museum. However, the board abandoned its plan and the old hall remained intact.

Lester Vought admits that Old Military Hall passed its prime some time ago and that "nothing much" goes on there now. Transformed from the lively place it once was, the old hall now sits quietly, far-removed from the mainstream of life in modern Nutley.

The Old Military Hall was destroyed by fire in 1979.

(Photos, Tom Booth)

TOM BOOTH





Connection to Kingsland Manor

Richard Booth's grandson was Jonathan Booth who served in the Civil War and mustered out just before Gettysburg. Jonathan's daughter, Annabelle Booth, married William Henry Kingsland in 1892. William Henry's grandson, Robert Steven Kingsland, visited Kingsland Manor in Nutley and donated tools from his grandfather to the Kingsland Manor.

Jonathan Booth's Civil War mementos, Annabelle Booth's autograph book and William Henry's tools can all be viewed in the Artifacts/Museum room upstairs in the Manor.

Boxing champion Bob Fitzsimmons lived for four years in the Kingsland Manor when it was owned by "Diamond" Dan McGinnity during the time Fitzsimmons was training at the old hall.

- Leon J. Kish/Kingsland Manor

Sources

Tom Booth, photos, Nutley Historical Society archives

Bobby Cole collection

Leon J. Kish, Kingsland Manor

Tom Lepree

Fred Scalera, former Nutley Fire Dept.

The Nutley Sun, July 3, 1974, Old Military Hall - Still Open Today

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