

THE OLD TOWN HALL

The Old Town Hall, on the northwest corner of Delaware and Second Streets, is a square brick building, three stories high, built in 1823 and continuously owned and maintained by The Trustees of The New Castle Common.

The Trustees of New Castle Common was founded by William Penn in 1701 and incorporated by Charter from the Proprietaries, Thomas and Richard Penn, sons of William Penn. On January 25, 1792, the “Trustees of New Castle Common” was re-incorporated by a special act of the Delaware Assembly and still operates under this charter for the benefit of the citizens of the City of New Castle. The charter also calls for yielding and paying the same body of 13 Trustees with one ear of corn yearly.

The Trustees’ vision is to maintain Town Hall to accommodate its original historic planned use as a place for public meetings while incorporating current code issues such as life safety, handicap accessibility and building codes.

From front to back, through the base of the structure, runs a high arcade. The tunnel-like arcade was formerly the entrance to the wooden market house, adjoining the rear of Town Hall, which was torn away in about 1880. Behind Town Hall, one can still see the roof outline and brick floor of the shed where farm produce from miles around could be sold. A public market was ordered established in New Castle as early as 1682; at one period, on market days, the people were allowed to buy no food elsewhere in town, except fish, milk and bread.

On either side of the large central arcade are small rooms with arched doorways. Though the original purpose of these rooms is not definitely known, the town’s primitive fire apparatus was kept in them for years. An antique shop, a butcher shop, the town’s tax office and the Board of Trade Office have at one time been in these spaces. Today, the west wing houses the offices of the *New Castle Weekly*, and the east wing is the Trustees of The New Castle Common Office.

The second floor is used as the City Council room. The three restored gas lamps, called “gasoliers”, were found in the attic and probably date to the 1860’s, shortly after a coal gas generating plant was built on the riverbank near the present site of the New Castle Sailing Club. Made of cast metal with brass decorative elements, they illustrate a “bronze and bright” finish, typical of the period and feature gold leaf detailing. These gasoliers probably replaced two original oil-burning fixtures, which would have hung from each of the two plaster ceiling medallions. Still visible in the ceiling, at one end of the room, is an iron hook over which a rope was strung to permit the lowering of the oil lamp for refilling and cleaning. The etched glass shades on the gasoliers are original to the period, although not to these particular fixtures. The New Castle Presbyterian Church along with two other chandeliers, which will be mentioned below, donated them. Other noteworthy features in the City Council room include the wooden benches, original to the building, and the paint colors. These colors, verified by analysis, are the colors first applied in this room circa 1823.

The third floor is the Board Room of the Trustees of The New Castle Common. The windows are unusual, having three panes in each upper sash and six panes below. (The sharp architectural eye can find other examples of this “three-over-six” style around New Castle.) The matching chandeliers hanging here are restored originals, dating from the period of transition from gas to electric lighting. They were donated by the New Castle Presbyterian Church where they are believed to have hung in the living room and dining room of the “Manse”, the pastor’s home at 22 The Strand. Like the gasoliers in the City Council Room below, they represent the earliest period of gas lighting in New Castle and exhibit the original “bronze and bright finish” in vogue at that time.

Outside, above the eaves, the roof slants steeply on all four sides to a white-railed deck. From this deck rises a square white tower with an octagonal cupola and a weathervane. The building as a whole is well preserved in almost exactly its original form.