



# The Registry of the Supreme Court Building, formerly Customs House Warehouse and Town Hall



The Customs House Warehouse and Town Hall Building in early 1905 (Gaisford Album, Bermuda Archives)

## **BUILT HERITAGE | OCTOBER 2021**

By Linda Abend and Margie Lloyd, Bermuda National Trust

*This is part of a series of architectural articles by the Bermuda National Trust that will highlight some of Bermuda's endangered historic buildings.*

The Customs House Warehouse and Town Hall was one of the first buildings erected in the newly-incorporated town of Hamilton. Located on the corner of the First Longitudinal and Fourth Cross streets (now Front and Court), it was completed by June 1794 and was the first of three public buildings. The two-storey building was designed for use as the Customs House Warehouse on the ground floor and the Town Hall on the upper level. On 8 January 1795 the first election was held for Hamilton's mayor, aldermen and councillors. From 1815, when the capital was moved from St George's, until 1821, when the Sessions House was built, the Town Hall was also used for meetings of the House of Assembly and Supreme Court. A few years later the Customs House section was altered when two large doors replaced the one small door so that bulky cargo could easily be brought in for inspection and storage. Around the same time a two-storey addition on the northwest side was built. This was later used to house the Hand Fire Engine and sleeping quarters for the Engine Keeper.



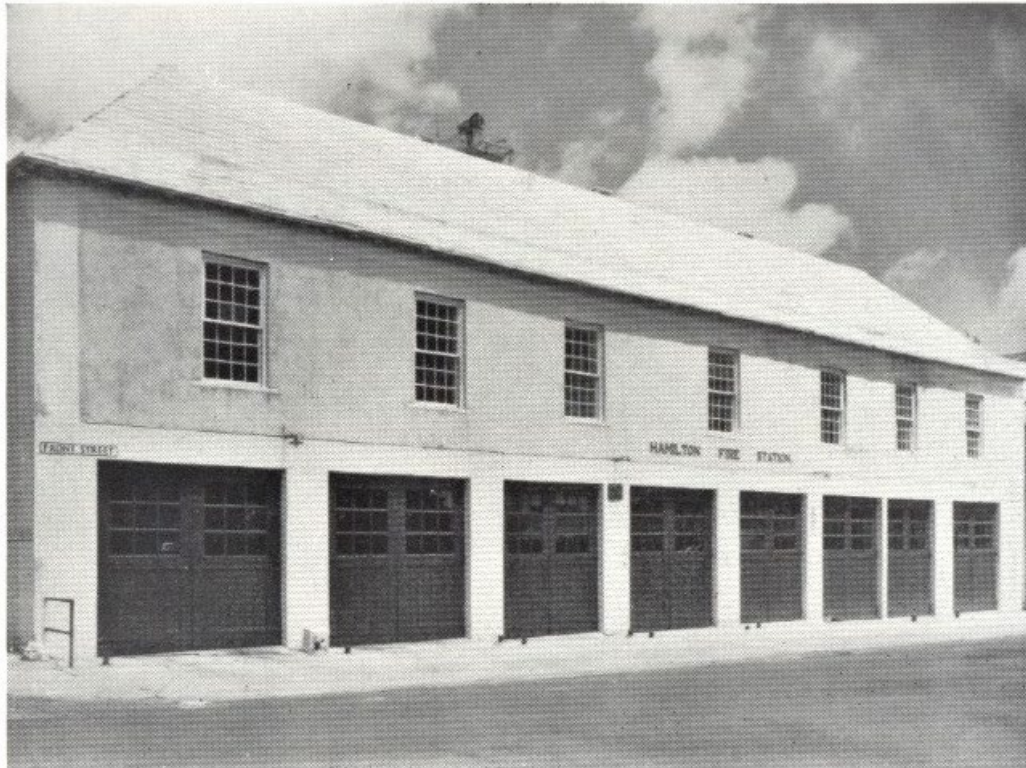
In 1841 the third public building now known as the Cabinet Building was completed and Customs moved into new quarters. They remained there until around 1850 when, for reasons unknown, they moved to warehouses further west on Front Street. The old Customs House premises became barracks for the 20<sup>th</sup> Regiment and grocery stores.

In 1851 a serious fire occurred on Front Street and was put out by the men of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Royal Highlanders who conveyed water from the sea. Ironically, just prior to this, the Corporation had imported a Hand Fire Engine from London and established the Hamilton Fire Brigade Act. A company of volunteers was formed under the management of Robert Brown who was appointed Inspector of Streets and Engine Keeper. In 1878 a second machine was purchased, a new and improved patent steam engine that could deliver 300 gallons of water per minute.

Meanwhile in September 1863 the Hamilton Market opened and took over the central section of the ground floor. It was hoped that this would stop the buying of stolen vegetables and poultry which caused distress among the small farmers and gardeners around Hamilton.

An entertaining stroll through Hamilton appeared in the newspaper in 1893. The Corporation's offices were still upstairs while harness maker Edward Robinson shared the ground floor with the Fire Brigade. In 1899 the old Market Room was given to the Bermuda Volunteer Rifle Corps to store a Maxim Machine Gun. The Corporation retained a small room for reserve stock for the street lamps while Hilton Gray Hill took over the harness making and upholstery business.

In his 1926 guidebook John J Bushell wrote that the building had an "old-time appearance" that bore no resemblance to a city hall. By then the ground floor was used exclusively by the fire brigade. It should be noted the fire engines were horse drawn and, in the event of a fire, these animals had to be brought to the station from stables elsewhere in Hamilton. Even though the upstairs continued to be used for Pembroke Parish Vestry meetings the building was becoming better known as the Hamilton Fire Station. In order to accommodate new equipment two new garage doors were added to the front of the building in 1959.



**The Hamilton Fire Station in 1961 (Biography of a Colonial Town)**

By 1962 fire trucks had increased in size and the inside parking had become inadequate. The 223 fire calls in 1961 were double that of 1960. Firemen were prevented from practicing in the rear courtyard because the space was shared with the garbage trucks. There was talk of tearing down the building and rebuilding. Luckily, although the location on the corner of Front and Court was considered the most satisfactory, the lot was simply not large enough and plans for a new building on lots already owned by the Corporation on King Street were approved. The fire station was moved in 1968 and the following year there was again noise to demolish the old building. In 1971 it was transferred by the Corporation of Hamilton to Bermuda Government. The Bermuda National Trust with the support of its members persuaded the government to restore the building while creating a functionally efficient interior layout and the Old Town Hall became the offices of the Department of Tourism.

In 1984 the Supreme Court moved into the building and by 1998 it was again threatened by government plans to build a new complex of buildings as a centre for the administration of justice. Then in 2016 “alarming traces of toxic mould” were discovered and several rooms were classified as uninhabitable. Decontamination efforts began however registry staff moved to the Dame Lois Browne-Evans building while Supreme Court 3 was closed down with cases having to be heard elsewhere.



**The Old Town Hall became the offices for the Department of Tourism in 1972**

The Old Town Hall remains closed. This is disturbing since it was given a Grade 2 listing in 2013 when the Bermuda Government and the Corporation of Hamilton agreed to list their city properties. The other buildings listed were Sessions House, Cabinet Office, Old Magistrates Court, City Hall, Perot's Post Office, Par-la-Ville and Victoria Park Bandstand. Until then the Anglican Cathedral was the only listed building in Hamilton.

The recurring problem of mould and the inability to remedy it seems to affect many buildings around the Island and was aptly summed up in a letter to the editor. "Most of these buildings are being used not more than eight hours in a day, so in effect, they are closed 16 hours a day. Get some good, old-fashioned fresh Bermuda air into these buildings and the problem will be solved. If there are documents that need to be kept in pristine condition, the air conditioning should be kept in operation 24/7. Surely, this is not rocket science."



**The Supreme Court Registry in 2021**

**Sources:** For more on the history of this building and others see *Bermuda's Architectural Heritage Series, Hamilton Town and City*. Also consulted were Sister Jean Kennedy's *Biography of a Colonial Town*, articles in *The Royal Gazette* from 1793 to 2021 and various almanacks and guidebooks. Thanks to Mr Antony Siese.