

Remembering Lebanon's first modern City Hall building (1873-1963)

by *Randy Jaye*

In 1873, the Church of the Brethren's United Brethren Mutual Aid Society of Pennsylvania built an impressive brick and sandstone commercial building in the Italianate architectural style at Ninth and Skull Streets in Lebanon. The organization used the building for their local operations for approximately 20 years.

Afterward, in the early 1890s, the building became a shoe factory. Then, in 1897, the City of Lebanon purchased it for \$15,000 (in what was considered by city officials to be "an excellent deal") to house its city offices. The structure served as Lebanon's City Hall Building for the next 65 years.

The city abandoned it in 1962, after moving all of its offices into the newly constructed Lebanon County-City Municipal Building at 400 South 8th Street. Finally, in 1963, after standing for ninety years, the Lebanon City Hall Building was demolished.

The roots of the Church of the Brethren had begun in Europe in 1708, during a time of powerful governmental control of the church and a low tolerance for religious freedom. Starting in 1719, increasing persecution and economic issues forced members to emigrate to North America. In 1723, the first North American Brethren congregation formed in Germantown,

Pennsylvania. By 1740, most Brethren members had fled from Europe and began settling throughout North America. Mutual Aid Societies, including the United Brethren Mutual Aid Society of Pennsylvania, were organized to assist Brethren members in meeting physical and economic needs with financial assistance, loans, and the distribution of working capital.

On Sept. 6, 1897, the City of Lebanon passed an ordinance to provide for the issuance of bonds and the appropriation of funds totaling \$20,000 to pay for the City Hall Building and to remodel and retrofit the structure for use by the city. Then, on September 9, 1898, the Lebanon City Council held its first meeting in the recently renovated City Hall Building. It was described in a September 14, 1898 edition of the Lebanon Courier newspaper as "new, eloquent, convenient, fairly centrally located and able to fulfil all the needs of the city."

Brief history of Italianate architecture

Italianate architecture first appeared in England in 1802 with the distinctive design of a villa by architect John Nash. It is a category of Victorian-era architecture inspired by sixteenth-century Italian Renaissance architecture, and influences from pictur-

esque farmhouses in the Tuscany region of Italy. In its 1840-to-1885 heyday, Italianate architecture became fashionable, and was the most popular style in the United States from the 1850s through the 1880s.

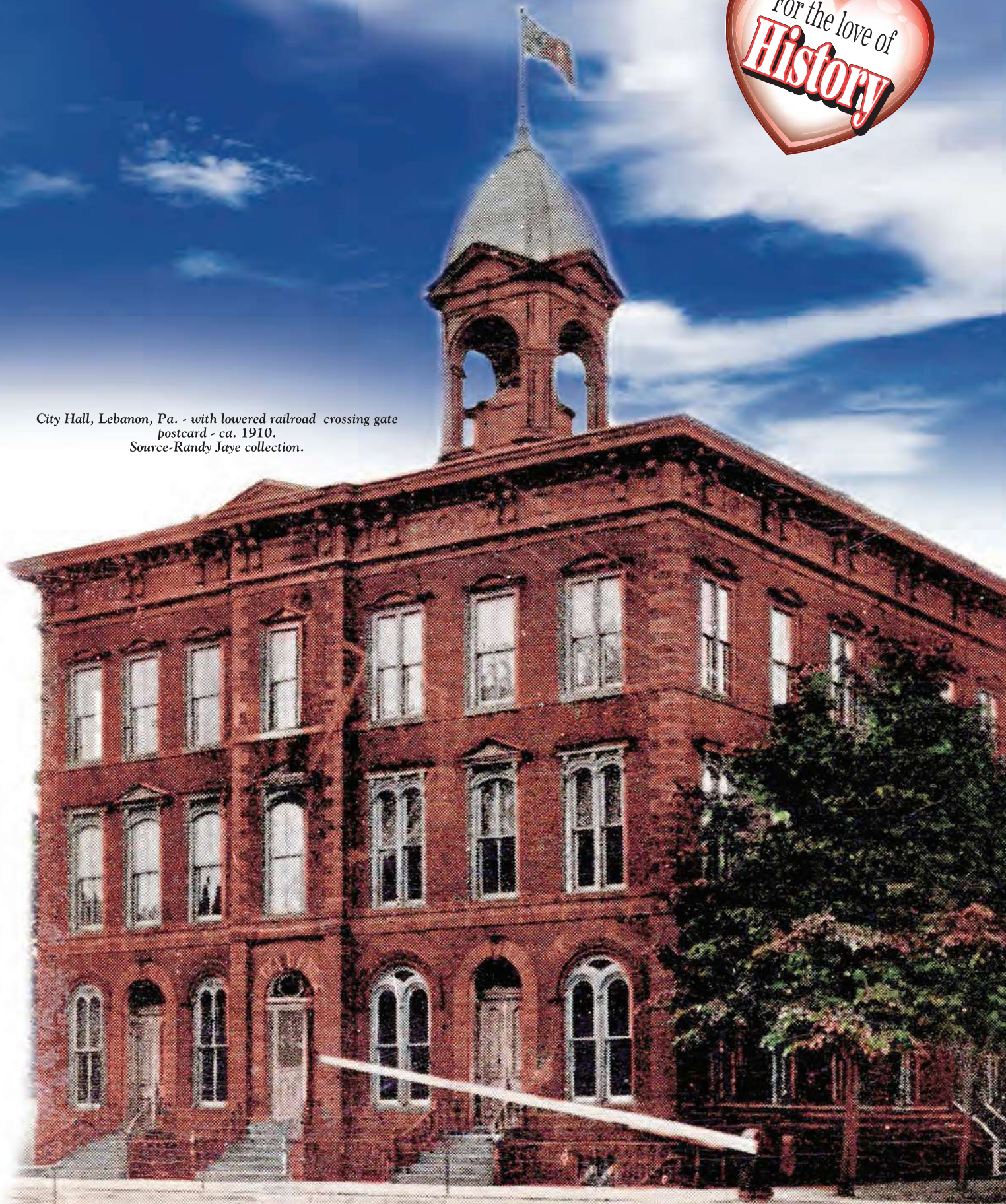
It appealed to the growing and prosperous middle class of the mid-nineteenth century as it offered flexible floor plans that were more family-oriented than most others.

A wide range of building types including row houses, commercial and government buildings, mansions and modest homes were constructed in the Italianate architectural style, with elements such as pronounced square towers, which made a regular symmetrical building appear to have an irregular shape with eye-catching appeal.

The style includes several distinct key elements: bay windows, belvederes, cupolas, or towers, low-pitched or flat roofs, deep overhanging eaves with prominent decorative brackets and wide cornices, corbels (a projection which juts out from a wall to support a structure above it), entrances that feature decorative details such as columns and brackets, raised one-story porches, single or double doors, tall narrow rectangular or arched windows with decorative trim, pediments, quoins,



City Hall, Lebanon, Pa. - with lowered railroad crossing gate
postcard - ca. 1910.
Source-Randy Jaye collection.





Lebanon City Hall Building with a raised railroad crossing gate – postcard - ca. 1912. Source-Randy Jaye collection.

balustrades that conceal the roof-scape, between two and four stories and visually tall in appearance.

The buildings' internal features

Beginning in 1898, the basement of the City Hall Building housed the city's police station with rooms for the chief, night sergeant and other officers of the police force. There were six single holding cells and one large cell for the confinement of prisoners.

The south side of the first floor housed the offices of the City Treasurer and Controller, and the magnificently furnished Mayor's office and Mayor's Court Room were located on the north side. A large vault was embedded in the north wall that safeguarded the city's financial records.

An impressive and detailed wood staircase led from the first to the second floor. The north side of the second floor housed the Council Chambers and several rooms separated by folding doors, allowing for multi-purpose use. Chairs

and tables for reporters were also provided. The south side of the second floor and all of the third floor housed the offices of the law department, city engineer, fire alarm superintendent and fire alarm apparatus, as well as a small chemical laboratory and several committee rooms. All of the offices and rooms were spacious and included fine desks, chairs, tables and other furnishings which provided convenient working conditions.

All offices and rooms, as well as the police station, were equipped with an excellent telephone system, adequate electric lighting and even bell service, which was considered thoroughly modern for its time.

The buildings' external features

The red brick facade of the three-story structure was accented by sandstone quoins, door and window trim, overhanging roof eaves, decorative brackets and wide cornices. The front of the building included three staircases leading to entrance



Souvenir of Lebanon, PA - Collectible Wheelock Plate – View of the City Hall Building - ca. 1930s. Source-Randy Jaye collection.

doors. The windows were tall and narrow (arched on the first floor and rectangular on the second and third floors) with decorative sandstone casing at the top sections.

The most distinctive feature was its centrally located cupola (small, dome-topped rectangular structure) on the roof. The cupola also housed the building's water storage tank and a large bronze bell. A tall flagpole attached to its crown typically flew the United States flag.

Gypsies camp at city hall

It was not always business as usual for the city offices and the police department within the Lebanon City Hall Building. One of the more intriguing incidents to occur in the building involved a group of traveling Gypsy performers.

On April 18, 1927, Lebanon Police Officer Herman Anspach took 47 Gypsies into custody who had been traveling to a carnival in Pittsburgh in a caravan of five cars and one truck loaded with camping equipment. They were "wanted" by the West Reading Police Department.

Of the 47 people, some 32 were children, ranging in age from five weeks to 14 years. While waiting inside the Lebanon City Hall Building to be escorted back to Berks County, several of the children volunteered to put on a dance show. Dance performances included the Charleston, Gypsy and Black Bottom (a national Jazz-Age craze of the 1920s), which thrilled Lebanon police officers, city workers and other local spectators.

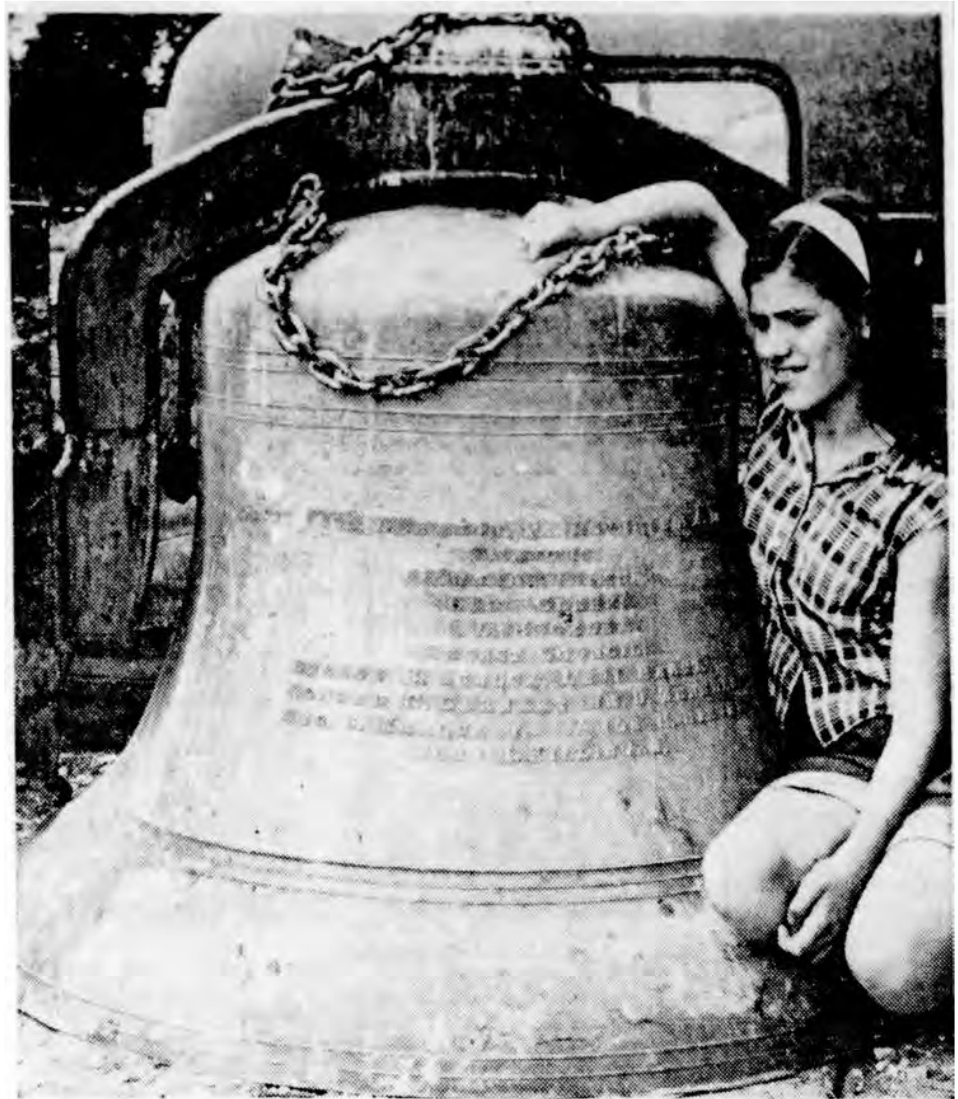
It was reported that the Gypsies displayed very poor table manners and had extremely offensive body odor, which prompted Lebanon Chief of Police Harry Sealer to call the West Reading Police three times to expedite their extradition.

The people working in the Lebanon City Hall Building breathed a sigh of relief when the Gypsies were finally escorted out of Lebanon by West Reading police officers.

Demolition and legacy of the building

In March 1963, the Moody Salvage Company was awarded a demolition contract and paid \$2,960.50 to demolish the structure and haul its debris away from the site.

The only artifact salvaged from the building by the City of Lebanon was the 2,000-pound bronze bell that hung inside the cupola. The bell had been cast in 1898 by the Meneely Bell Company of



Daily NEWS Photo.
DETHRONED—Verda Moody, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Harold Moody of the Moody Salvage Co., looks over the bell which was dethroned from its tower at old City Hall. Because of its historical value, the bell is the only article which has been salvaged by the city. The former City Hall at Ninth and Scull Streets has finally been demolished.

*65-year old bell taken from former Lebanon City Hall Building once was fire alarm.
Source-Lebanon Daily News, June 21, 1963.*

Troy, New York. The city had purchased the bell for \$80 and paid an additional \$100 in November 1898 to have it installed in the cupola. The bell was operated by electricity and fitted with a backup battery. It served as a fire alarm for a few years before a standard fire alarm system was installed in the building. A June 21, 1963 Lebanon Daily News article reported that the bell was to be moved into the Lebanon County-City Municipal Building and mounted at the northwest corner of the structure.

Since the City Hall Building was razed over fifty years ago, clear memories of it

are fading. However, artifacts including pictures, postcards, collector plates and newspaper articles survive to help keep one of the most architecturally interesting buildings in the history of Lebanon alive in local folklore.

If the building were still standing, it would surely be a candidate for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.