The Weston Public Library: Symbol of a Cultured Citizenry

prepared by the
Weston Historical Commission

for the
Board of Selectmen

February, 2010
Background
In November 2009, Town Meeting voters turned down a request for additional funds to complete a proposed master plan for the Josiah Smith Tavern and Old Library. The plan was for the tavern to be used as a restaurant and the Old Library to become the home for the Women’s Community League on the main level and a new Weston History Center and Town Archive on the lower level. With the defeat of this plan, the Board of Selectmen turned their attention first to the Old Library, because of its deteriorating condition. They asked the Josiah Smith Tavern/Old Library Committee to report on conditions, projected costs for various levels of repair or restoration, and options for ownership. The Selectmen tabled discussion of possible uses and put all possible disposition options on the table, including demolition and sale with or without preservation restrictions. The Selectmen asked the Weston Historical Commission to comment on the significance of the building and to give an opinion on its importance to the Town. This report was prepared in response to that request.
Executive Summary and Recommendations

The 1899 Weston Public Library is one of the three most important town-owned buildings. With the Josiah Smith Tavern and Town Hall, it forms an ensemble of remarkable architectural quality framing the Town Green in the heart of Weston. This report details the significance of the library as an intact architectural landmark designed by a noted architect. The style is rooted in the English Arts and Crafts movement, which emphasized local materials, quality craftsmanship, and design sympathetic to the landscape. The library is significant historically as a symbol of Weston’s civic pride as the town evolved from a rural backwater to a more sophisticated community that valued education, literacy, and culture.

The Weston Historical Commission recommends that the Town of Weston take the following actions:

• **Preserve and re-use the Old Library.** With proper restoration and a new use, the building will again contribute to the beauty and vibrancy of Weston. The Commission hopes that parts of the main level, including the vestibule and reading room, remain accessible to the public.

• **Place a preservation restriction on the exterior and parts of the interior.** A preservation restriction is the only way to protect the Old Library now and in the future.

• **Retain ownership of the Old Library.** This will ensure control of the building’s use and appearance and the integrity of the Town Green area for the future. A long-term lease to a commercial tenant would not be precluded.

• **Restore the exterior at the earliest opportunity, using Community Preservation Act (CPA) funds.** The Commission does not endorse the present plan to patch up the exterior with inappropriate materials, a marginally effective approach that will have to be undone.

• **Use CPA funds to bring the interior of the building up to code, once a use has been identified.** CPA funds are available to fund the restoration of the Old Library. Since 2003, the library and Josiah Smith Tavern have been identified as the two buildings most in need of historic preservation. Prospective tenants will not do the comprehensive restoration that the building deserves after years of neglect. It is more difficult to supervise the quality of a preservation project when the town is not in control.

• **Use the lower level as a Weston History Center and Town Archive.** This use has been thoroughly researched and endorsed by experts. Once restored, the area would be like a vault and could be easily climate-controlled, making it an ideal location for an archive. The town’s historical records and artifacts are scattered in several locations and continue to deteriorate because of improper storage. A Weston History Center and Town Archive would be in keeping with the original spirit and use of the building as a center of culture and learning and a manifestation of civic pride. This would be a low-impact use in terms of traffic, parking, and building maintenance. It would preserve public access and would not preclude commercial use of the upper level.
Why is the Old Library Significant?

The 1899 Weston Public Library is significant because of its history, architecture, and location facing the Town Green.

- It plays a vital role in framing the Town Green and serving as a gateway to the Town Center.
- Together with the Josiah Smith Tavern and First Parish Church, it forms an architectural ensemble of remarkable quality.
- It is located within the Boston Post Road Historic District, which has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places since 1983 and is considered “the best preserved section of the state’s major 18th century east-west connector.”
- It was the town’s first library building and served the community for nearly a century.
- Along with the construction of the 1888 fieldstone First Parish Church across the street, the library marked the transition of Weston from a rural backwater to a “country town of residences of the first class.”
- The library was a source of great civic pride and symbolized a growing emphasis on education, literacy, and culture.
- The architect, Alexander S. Jenney, was well-known in Boston architectural circles. He began his career in the office of the great 19th century architect H.H. Richardson and worked with another celebrated firm, McKim, Mead, and White, on the Boston Public Library before moving to Weston and taking on this commission.
- The design is an important example of the Jacobethan style, inspired by English late medieval architecture. It has its roots in the English Arts and Crafts tradition, which emphasized the importance of good design and quality craftsmanship.
- The library is one of only a few examples in Weston of the Jacobethan style.
- The library is a rare example in Massachusetts of a public library constructed in the Jacobethan or English Revival style. Of public libraries built in Massachusetts at the turn of the century, less than 10% were in this style.
- The building is solidly constructed and remains remarkably unchanged, particularly on the exterior, retaining its handsome detailing.
History

What we now call the Old Library was Weston’s first library building. The library itself was established in 1857 and originally occupied one room of the 1847 Town Hall across the street. After the Civil War, the Town Hall was expanded to provide additional library space and a memorial hall. But by the late 1880s, despite one more expansion, it was clear that the library was outgrowing its quarters.

In early 1894, the town purchased the George W. Cutting house as a library site, but plans for a new library were delayed by the need for a new high school. Rev. Charles Russell, minister at First Parish Church, was an eloquent advocate for a new library building separate from the Town Hall, writing as follows:

And yet the need is imminent. Already the present accommodations are crowded . . . But whatever happens, let us hope that the library will not be tucked into the rear of a new town hall. . . At any cost make it the great centre of intellectual life, the university of our town---free, accessible, beautiful.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, prominent libraries were the sign of a cultured citizenry. Weston was growing to be a desirable town in the late 19th century, and more and more wealthy and influential Boston businessmen and professionals were moving here. These men played a role in urging the Town to proceed despite concerns about cost. The following is one of many appeals to residents:

Finally, it seems impossible that the Town of Weston with all its culture, intelligence, and wealth, should remain longer content with the present crowded and unsatisfactory quarters for the Library. We urge that the time has come when the Town should erect a simple, dignified building that will rebound to its credit, and make the Library, as it should be, one of the leading features and most potent attractions of its civic life.

Finally, in 1899, the town voted to proceed and allocated $40,000 for construction. The building committee hired the Boston firm of Fox, Jenney, and Gale, in part because two of the three young principals, Thomas A. Fox and Alexander S. Jenney, had been associated with Charles McKim in the construction of the Boston Public Library. Work began in November 1899 and was completed exactly one year later.

This 1913 photo looking west at the Town Square from the steeple of First Parish Church was taken just before the Town Green was created. The old Town Hall at right was demolished soon after.
The pride of the town is evident in the ornamental stone plaque next to the door, reading “Weston Public Library, founded AD 1857, This building was built by the TOWN, 1899” The all-capital letters in the word Town emphasize the fact that all residents had contributed. A 1908 history of Middlesex County called it “a splendid monument to the culture and refinement of the citizens of Weston.”

On the first floor, the large reading room was lighted on three sides by mullioned windows and featured exposed oak beams and walls tinted green with bands of white and red. The original children’s alcove was to the right of the main entrance. Above the children’s room was a small office for the trustees. Basement space was allocated for future book storage and a fireproof storage room for town records. Weston has one of the earliest libraries to be fully electrified. The librarian could turn on and off almost all the lights from a single switch at her desk. The new library had a modern open stack system, and the Dewey decimal system was adopted to help patrons locate their own books.

The building of the library had an impact on literacy and cultural awareness. The librarian, Elizabeth S. White, noted a marked increase in circulation and increased use of books by the schools. In 1900, the library became a member of the Massachusetts Library Art Club, which circulated collections of pictures for exhibition at intervals during the year. Thus the cultural mission of the library was broadened.

The children’s alcove became so popular that in 1912 the trustees called for its enlargement. Space in the lower level became available when the town clerk moved to the new Town Hall. Encouraged by a gift of $5,000 from library trustee Miss Louisa Case, the space was remodeled in 1922 into a children’s room named for her niece, Rosamond Freeman. A handsome Tudor porch was added to mark the entrance to the children’s area.

The 1899 Library served the town for nearly a century, until 1996, when the present building was constructed. Since that time, the Old Library has been used sporadically, for town offices when Town Hall was renovated, for recreation offices and programs, and even for Halloween haunted houses, all the while awaiting a new use.
The Architect

Alexander S. Jenney received his architectural training at M.I.T. and began his professional career in the office of America’s great 19th century architect, H. H. Richardson. It was in Richardson’s office that he met Stanford White, who also worked there in his early professional life. When the prestigious New York firm of McKim, Mead, and White was hired to design the new Boston Public Library in the 1880’s, Alexander Jenney and another young Boston architect, Thomas A. Fox, joined the firm’s Boston office. For eight years they helped to oversee and implement the design and maintain the high standards of craftsmanship for one of Boston’s greatest buildings. Jenney even traveled in 1891 to Europe with Charles Follen McKim and Samuel A.B. Abbott, president of the Library Trustees, to further the design and craftsmen connections for the BPL. This trip to study architectural details and artistry may have been the basis of his predominantly English style for Weston’s library.

After the Boston Public Library opened in 1895, Fox and Jenney continued on as architects for the Library Trustees. Their fledgling firm got the job designing the Weston library based in part on the recommendation from Herbert Putnam, former librarian of the BPL, who strongly commended the Boston firm:

The very remarkable experience which as Librarian of the Boston Public Library I had with Messrs Fox, Jenney & Gale interests me, however, very considerably in the promotion of opportunities for them. They are a firm of young men. Both Jenney and Fox were associated with Mr. McKim in the construction of the Boston Public Library, and during the past four years they were the architects of the Trustees; they designed and superintended the alterations in the Old West Church for our branch public library, and they were in entire control of the alterations at the Central Library building upon which $100,000 has been spent during the past year. They are men of excellent taste, ample education, of extreme integrity and of sincerity and devotion.

In the late 1890s, Jenney purchased a lot in Horace Sears’s new subdivision on Pigeon Hill. He built a house at 44 Hilltop Road and became an active participant in town affairs, including serving as Inspector of Buildings. In 1911, he was appointed to the Committee on Improvement of the Center of the Town of Weston, which hired landscape architect Arthur Shurtleff (later Shurtleff) and set in motion the Village Improvement Plan creating the present Town Green. Jenney himself designed the 1913 central fire station that was part of the plan, using what was by then the prevailing Georgian/Colonial Revival style. He built another house on Pigeon Hill, at No. 46 Hilltop Road, before moving to Brookline.

Jenney spent much of his career teaching architecture, first at Harvard, in the early 1910s, and from about 1914 until 1929 at M.I.T. When he died in 1930, his obituary in the Boston Evening Transcript noted that he was “widely known in the architectural field.”
Architectural Style

The design for the 1899 Weston Public Library was born of the English Arts & Crafts tradition. The Arts & Crafts movement believed in architecture of good design based on traditional principles, respectful of the past while avoiding slavish imitation. Buildings were to be constructed using local materials and designed to fit into the landscape. The Arts and Crafts reformers emphasized the importance of the individual craftsman in the production of items both beautiful and useful.

The design vocabulary is drawn from English buildings constructed during the reigns of Elizabeth I (1558-1603) and James I (1603-25), the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras of English history. These styles were revived in late 19th century artistic and academic circles. Architectural historians coined the term “Jacobethan” to describe this English Revival style in America. The style can also be described as “Tudor,” a more general term used for buildings inspired by a variety of early English vernacular traditions.

The First Parish Church by architect Robert Peabody also traces its roots to English vernacular architecture. It was standard practice for late 19th and early 20th century architects to roam the English countryside looking for inspiration to bring back to their towns to connect New England to Old England. This “Olde England” Arts & Crafts style became synonymous with wealth, education, and culture.

While the design of the library is predominantly Jacobethan, the entrance and entry hall is curiously classical in the use of classical columns and demi-lune arches. This appears to be a nod to the front entrance of the Boston Public Library, which also has these features, albeit in a much more elaborate form.

*Keimscott Manor in England was built in 1600 during the reign of Elizabeth I and became well-known as the home of Arts and Crafts Movement founder William Morris. Notice the steep pitch of the gables, the ball finials at the peaks, the grouping of windows, the heavy mullions separating individual windows, and the corner quoins, all features found in Weston’s 1899 library.*

*The St. Savior’s vicarage in England, designed by William Butterfield and built in 1844-45, is an example of how Elizabethan and Jacobean architectural features reappeared in the 19th century, first in England and then in the U.S. The kinship with Weston’s 1899 library is clear, particularly in the use of brick with limestone trim to set off window and door openings.*
Design Analysis

Because of the sloping site, the lower level is below ground in the front and above ground at the rear. The fieldstone foundation is visible at the rear. The fieldstones are laid in a pattern called “random ashlar,” meaning that the stones can be square or rectangular and the sizes vary. The color of the stones ranges from gray to brown.

Above the foundation, the building is constructed of water-struck brick, manufactured using a technique that produces a subtle color and texture that mimics Colonial period bricks in its hand-made quality.

The brick is laid in Flemish bond, a pattern that alternates headers (the short side of the brick) with stretchers (the long side).

Brick is used for “dentils” along the cornice line.

Raised brick is used for the decorative “quoins” which rise up as blocks at the corners.
Craftsmanship is particularly notable in the brick ends. Each of the upper gable ends contains decorative brickwork consisting of stretcher bond patterns laid on diagonals. A corbelled brick pattern at the upper center forms a base for a recessed rectangular brick panel near the top. This is part of a two-tiered brick and stone-capped terminal that steps up above the gables themselves. Note also the symmetrical metal fleur-de-lis decorations.

The red brick contrasts with the light-colored Indiana limestone trim, which sets off the windows and doors.

Horizontal banding made of limestone is used at the base of the building, at the cornice line, and above and below the windows in the ell. The band along the base is called the “water table” because it protects the foundation from water running down the wall.

Limestone is used for the round ball finials, three at each gable end.

Sheltering the front door is a hood with a copper roof, supported by pairs of large carved wooden brackets.

Limestone is used for the paired Ionic columns that frame the front door. These are among the classical features that the architect has integrated into the design. The original front door has been replaced. This is one of the few exterior changes.
Copper is used for gutters, downspouts, and collection boxes. The copper has oxidized to a soft blue-green color.

A decorated copper covered chimney vent is located on the east side near the intersection of the front and back portions of the ell. Copper is also used for the ridge caps.

Jacobethan and Tudor buildings have steeply pitched roofs, which means that the roof material is very visible. The slate is a soft gray-green color.

The shape of the gable at each end is called a “parapeted gable.”

At the west gable end is a semi-hexagonal two-story bay.

As is typical of the Jacobethan style, windows are grouped together. The front and back facades each feature a group of seven tall leaded glass windows separated by banded limestone columns, capped by a continuous stone lintel, and seated on a continuous stone sill. At the east end is a group of five such windows.

At the back of the building (the south side) on the gable end, three tall leaded glass windows gridded in a diamond pattern are located in the center on the lower level. These are the centerpiece of a low window seat at the end of the former children’s room inside.
Above the windows on the east side is an embedded stone plaque that reads, “THE PUBLIC LIBRARY OF THE TOWN OF WESTON”

A more elaborate stone wall plaque embedded to the left of the main entry gives a brief history: “WESTON PUBLIC LIBRARY, FOUNDED AD 1857. THIS BUILDING WAS BUILT BY THE TOWN, 1899”

The side entrance was added in the 1920s when the lower level was converted into a children’s room. It is protected by an open timbered gable structure resting on heavy timber posts. This canopy has a slate roof, and beneath it is a concrete bench on the north side and a short “child-sized” wooden door. Engraved in the stone lintel above the entry are the words “IN MEMORY OF ROSAMOND FREEMAN 1893-1902”.

The proportions of the building follow the “Golden Mean,” a mathematical formula used by architects and artists for centuries because of its aesthetically pleasing proportions. An analysis of the building according to the Golden Mean ratios can be found in Appendix B.

On entering the library, the first space is a vestibule, leading to the reading room to the east, the original office to the west, and the stacks to the south. The decorative elements in the vestibule are classical rather than Jacobethan or Tudor. This space features a stone floor, dark wood columns, and demi-lunettes above.

Light streams through the blocks of windows on three sides of the reading room. The high ceiling features exposed heavy wood rafters and cross-ties.

The former office and cloak room on the main floor has a ceiling of exposed wood beams and plaster. The former stack space has a vaulted plaster ceiling.

On the lower level in the former children’s room, the ceiling is a system of vaults and arches.
The Town Green District

The intersection of Boston Post Road, Church Street, and School Street has been the religious and governmental heart of Weston for more than three centuries. In the days when Cutting’s store stood on what is now the Town Green, it was the commercial heart as well. Today, we can “read” the town’s history in the architectural landmarks that remain here in this one compact district. In the handful of buildings that frame our Town Green, we see the architectural manifestation of Weston’s increasing prominence and prosperity over three centuries.

In the 18th century, when Weston was one of the first stagecoach stops on the Boston Post Road going west, Josiah Smith operated a popular tavern. In singling out what he calls the “Town Green District” in his 2010 book Metropolitan Boston, architectural historian Keith Morgan writes: “The principal document of colonial commerce on the Town Green is the clapboard gambrel-roofed Josiah Smith Tavern. “

In the late 19th century, the town’s transformation from a rural farm town to the “Lenox of the East” is symbolized by two new buildings in the Town Square, the fieldstone First Parish Church (1888) and the red brick Weston Public Library (1899). In these two buildings, the inspiration came from England, in the form of English Revival, a style used in academic and other learned settings. These two buildings were a source of great pride and represented an increased cultural sophistication.

The next step in the evolution of the “Town Square” was the actual redesign of the town center and creation of the Town Green in the 1910s. This time, the goal was nothing less than to create “a village common or green, always found in the best types of old New England villages.” While only a decade or so later, the inspiration was not England but rather American Colonial Revival. The landscape architect, Arthur Shurtleff (later Shurcliff), wrote in the 1912 Town Report:
In my opinion, the execution of this scheme would give Weston a Town Common of remarkable individuality and in many respects the finest open space of its kind in the Commonwealth.

The Town Improvement Plan also included construction of a new fire station (1913) and monumental Town Hall (1917), both designed in the Georgian/Colonial Revival style, as appropriate to the new colonial-style town common. The fire station was designed by Alexander S. Jenney, who had designed the nearby library fifteen years earlier. In 1919, the Gothic Revival St. Julia Church took its place facing the Town Green. Weston gained regional and even national attention for its new “civic center.”

Surrounding this early 20th century Town Green is an ensemble of important buildings representing each of these phases in the town’s growth and development. Each is more ambitious than the example from the previous century, as Weston attracted more and more well-to-do residents. But the common thread is the pride of the citizenry in their town center and the institutions—the church, library, and town hall, standing along with the colonial tavern.

Since the creation of the Town Green a century ago, town leaders have carefully protected this centerpiece of the town. Lamson Park was taken by eminent domain to protect the visual integrity of the Green and Town Hall. A recent addition to the Town Hall was carefully designed to preserve the character of the building. The exterior of the Josiah Smith Tavern was restored in 2006 with Community Preservation Act funds. First Parish Church has carefully guarded the integrity of its handsome stone building, which has several additions in compatible style. Constraints on the library site meant that the 1899 building was never expanded and it maintains its architectural integrity. As a result, the Town Green area looks much like it did a century ago, when town leaders completed their visionary Town Improvement Plan. Now, it is up to us to preserve this legacy.
Expert Opinions

The Weston Historical Commission has requested and received the letters from the following state agencies, regional preservation organizations, and prominent architectural historians familiar with the Old Library. Their letters, included in Appendix A, call for the town to properly protect, preserve, and reuse the building.

1) Betsy Friedberg, National Register Director, Massachusetts Historical Commission

2) Wendy Price, Team Leader in Historic Preservation, Historic New England

3) James O’Gorman, Grace Slack McNeil Professor Emeritus of the History of American Art, Wellesley College; former Regular Visiting Professor of Architectural History at MIT, and current Chairman, Maine Historic Preservation Commission

4) Keith N. Morgan, Professor of Art History and Director of Architectural Studies, Boston University, and editor of Buildings of Massachusetts: Metropolitan Boston, published in April 2009 by the University of Virginia Press for the Society of Architectural Historians

5) Timothy Orwig, Preservation Chair of the Society of Architectural Historians, New England Chapter and Lecturer and Ph.D. Candidate, American and New England Studies Program, Boston University
Bibliography


Massachusetts Historical Society, Francis Blake Collection, 65.931. Includes letter from Herbert Putnam to Francis Blake, June 9, 1899; and letter from Francis Blake to Professor Chandler, June 19, 1899. Copies in Pam Fox’s files.

“New Public Library Buiding, Weston,” newspaper article, undated, unknown newspaper, Coburn Scrapbook #2, 158, at Weston Historical Society

*Waltham Free Press*, Friday March 28, 1890, report of Weston Town Meeting

*Weston Town Library History*, 1857-1957, published for the library’s 100th Anniversary

Weston, Town of, *Town Reports*, 1892 (97-99, discussion of new library site); 1897 (112-113); 1898 (52-57); 1899 (58-63); 1900 (58-66).
February 4, 2010

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts

Michael H. Harrity, Chair
Weston Board of Selectmen
11 Town House Road
Weston, MA 02493

Dear Mr. Harrity:

At the request of the Weston Historical Commission, I am writing regarding the old Weston Public Library. The old Weston Public Library was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1983 as a contributing building in the Boston Post Road Historic District. As you may know, the National Register is the nation’s official list of historic resources deemed worthy of preservation.

The old Weston Public Library anchors a prominent corner site at the junction of Boston Post Road, School Street and Church Street. The building serves as a gateway to the town green, and it stands among a number of other historic buildings that have defined the town center for generations of Weston residents. Completed in 1900, the building served as Weston’s public library for nearly a century. While it can no longer serve its original purpose, it stands as a tangible reminder of Weston’s commitment to the free public library system.

According to the National Register nomination for the Boston Post Road Historic District, most of the center’s institutional buildings, including the town hall and four churches as well as the library, were constructed in the late-19th and early 20th centuries, a period in Weston’s history that was characterized by a steady population increase that led to the need for new library with all the modern amenities. The Weston Public Library is historically significant as the town’s first public library built specifically for and dedicated to that purpose. At the time of its construction, there were many competing needs for municipal funds, but the Weston’s residents nevertheless supported the library project with their tax dollars, demonstrating an outstanding commitment to their community. (This was in marked contrast to most communities, in which benefactors provided the funds for construction. Among the most notable of these benefactors was Andrew Carnegie, who funded the construction of 44 libraries in Massachusetts between 1886 and 1919, a period of intense local and nationwide library development.) The plaque on the side of the building proclaims, “Weston Public Library, Founded 1857. This Building Built By The TOWN, A.D. 1899.” That the word “town” is in all capital letters suggests that Weston residents were extremely proud of this accomplishment.

The masonry building with Indiana limestone trim is architecturally significant as an excellent and relatively rare example of a library designed in the Jacobethan style. Among its many notable features are its mullioned windows, projecting side bays, and the massive bracketed door hood. The Boston firm of Fox, Jenney and Gale was the building’s architect. Alexander Jenney, the partner who is credited with the Jacobethan design, lived in Weston. He is known to be the architect of the Weston Central Fire Station, the Kendal Green Fire Station, the Brooks School, and two houses on Hill Top Road.

Given the historical and architectural significance of the old Weston Public Library, we strongly encourage the Town of Weston to consider protecting and preserving the building, which will in turn preserve the historic streetscape surrounding the town green.

220 Morrissey Boulevard, Boston, Massachusetts 02125
(617) 727-8470 • Fax: (617) 727-5128
www.sec.state.ma.us/mhc
Please note that this letter is for informational purposes only. You should be aware that projects carried out by state or federal agencies, or other projects that involve any funds, licenses, or permits from state or federal agencies, are subject to review by the MHC in accordance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended (36 CFR 800) and/or Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 9, Sec. 26-27c, as amended by Chapter 254 of the Acts of 1988 (950 CMR 71.00). In order to request MHC’s review under either of these regulations, it is necessary to provide the MHC with a completed Project Notification Form (PNF). For your reference, the MHC’s Project Notification Form (PNF) is available online at www.state.ma.us/sec/mhctpdf/pnf.pdf or upon request from this office.

Sincerely,

Betsy Friedberg
National Register Director
Massachusetts Historical Commission

cc. Gloria Cole, Co-Chairperson, Weston Historical Commission, 663 Boston Post Road, Weston, 02493
February 1, 2010

Weston Historical Commission
Gloria Cole, co-chair
Town Hall
11 Town House Road
P. O. Box 378
Weston, MA 02493

Re: Old Weston Public Library

Dear Weston Historical Commission:

At your request, Historic New England submits this comment letter addressing the significance of the Old Weston Public Library. This building, constructed in 1899-1900 and located adjacent to the Josiah Smith Tavern, plays a vital role in the composition of the Weston Town Green. Its civic role as the first permanent home of the Weston Public Library and its position on the town green adjacent to other civic and municipal buildings speaks volumes about the importance of the Old Library in the day-to-day activity of the Weston town center in the twentieth-century. This significance is also reflected in the inclusion of the Old Library as a contributing building in the Boston Post Road National Register Historic District under the category of community planning.

In addition to its location, the Old Weston Public Library is also significant for its architectural and historic associations. Designed by the Boston architectural firm of Fox, Jenney and Gale, the English Revival style library building reflects a statewide practice of library building in Massachusetts. The Massachusetts Cultural Resource Information System (MACRIS) database, maintained by the Massachusetts Historical Commission, lists some 138 municipal library buildings built in Massachusetts between 1890-1910. Of that list, ten (10) historic libraries, in addition to Weston's library, were constructed between 1893-1907 in the English Revival style. The two libraries that bear the closest stylistic resemblance to the Old Library were also completed in 1900 in Sunderland and Swansea. Further, eight of the ten historic English Revival libraries are also part of a village or town center historic district. More locally, the Old Library building played a prominent role in the founding and growth of the Weston Public Library as well as the town planning efforts in 1892 and 1912 for the growth of the Weston town center.

The Old Weston Public Library is clearly a significant historic resource for the town of Weston. Like the Josiah Smith Tavern, the Old Library should continue to contribute to Weston's town center while accommodating a new use. The two buildings are important components of the Weston Town Green and belong to a larger contextual setting that also requires consideration in future planning.

Historic New England greatly appreciates being given the opportunity to comment on the Old Weston Public Library and strongly encourages the Town of Weston to preserve and protect this valuable historic building.

Sincerely,

Wendy L. Price

Wendy L. Price, Team Leader
Historic Preservation
February 2010

Board of Selectman
Weston, Massachusetts

At the request of the Weston Historical Commission, I am writing to give my opinion as an historian of American architecture on the fate of the old Weston Library. Simply put, it would be a grave mistake to remove this most important element in the architectural fabric of your community.

The library was the design of a Weston resident, Alexander S. Jenney (associated with the firm of Fox and Gale), a distinguished local architect who had worked with two of the great masters of American architecture, Henry Hobson Richardson, designer of Trinity Church on Copley Square, and Charles Follen McKim, designer of the Boston Public Library, and taught at both Harvard and MIT. It is characteristic of the many small town libraries designed by Richardson and others and erected in the post-Civil War period in recognition of the increased literacy of the population. They stand as landmarks of the social history of the area. The library’s plan was characteristic of the type, T-shaped, with open reading area and stacks lit by large windows and an off-center entrance. The style might be called Tudor or “Jacobethan” revival, modes characteristic of the period, but it also strikes me as New England Frugal. The building appears at first glance simple, but it is solidly constructed and subtly detailed within given budgetary limits. Of water-struck brick laid in Flemish bond with Indiana limestone trim, brick corner quoins, and handsome decorative terminals to the steep gable ends, it adds its own quiet dignity to its neighborhood.

This representative achievement of New England architecture is too important to the community to be demolished. Its removal would leave a gaping hole in the accumulated village scene that is its neighborhood. It would have the effect of a missing tooth in a smiling face. This country has for too long been guided by a “throw-away” mentality, please do not let that short-sighted, destructive attitude prevail here.

Sincerely,


jogorman@wellesley.edu
February 6, 2010

Ms. Gloria Cole  
Weston Historical Commission  
Weston Town Hall  
Weston, MA  02493

At the request of the Weston Historical Commission, I write to encourage an appropriate preservation treatment of the Old Weston Library, which I understand is concurrently being debated.

As the editor of *Buildings of Massachusetts: Metropolitan Boston*, published in April 2009 by the University of Virginia Press for the Society of Architectural Historians, I am an admirer of the Old Weston Library as an excellent example of its type in the Greater Boston area and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. As you know, after town halls, Public Libraries are the chief symbols of the civic life and cultural significance of a community. Having been the birthplace of the American public library movement in the mid-nineteenth century, Massachusetts is endowed with a rich collection of local public libraries, which have been loved and nurtured for decades.

Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the Old Weston Public Library was built in 1898-99 to the designs of Fox, Jenney and Gale. Jenney was a Weston resident, and his firm also designed the nearby Weston Fire Station. Sited behind the Josiah Smith Tavern, the library reinforced the historic core of the community. It is a handsome brick Tudor composition of domestic scale that could and should be preserved for future use, either by the town or private interests under a protective covenant. I strongly urge the Weston Historical Commission to work for the preservation and re-use of this fine building. You will find a further discussion of the Weston Town Center on page 460 of the above-referenced book.

Thank you for allowing me to participate in your discussion of the future of this important building.

Sincerely yours,

Keith N. Morgan  
Professor of Art History and  
Director of Architectural Studies  
Boston University
Dear Ms. Cole:

I am writing to you in my capacity as Preservation Officer of the Society of Architectural Historians, New England Chapter (SAH-NE). We have recently learned that the Selectmen of the Town of Weston are considering demolishing or selling without preservation restrictions a very important town building, the old Weston Public Library (1899-1900). We would strongly ask you all to reconsider these actions.

The Old Weston Public Library is important as a representative of educational innovation. Massachusetts was a leader in the construction of public libraries. Franklin, MA, established the nation’s first free lending library in 1790. In 1852 Boston was the first large city in America to build a free public libraries, and three decades later its Renaissance Revival-style replacement (1887-95) by McKim, Mead, and White, forever linked libraries with the ideals of Renaissance art and humanism. By 1894, Massachusetts had 179 public libraries, more than any other state (44% of the 400 nationwide). Most of these public libraries were the result of a bequest or donation; relatively fewer were actually built by the town, as was Weston’s library.

Weston’s library is also significant architecturally, for its designers and its style. In the wake of the Boston Public Library and the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, Italian Renaissance Revival and Beaux-Arts derived styles predominated in library design. Theodore Jones surveyed a thousand Carnegie libraries and found that these classically derived styles accounted for 79% of those built. Relatively few were built in the Tudor Revival/Jacobethan style, as was Weston’s library. Alexander S. Jenney, the lead architect of Fox, Jenney, and Gale, was associated with Charles McKim in the construction of the Boston Public Library. He was a Weston resident who also designed the town’s second fire station, in 1914.

I visited the building in 2009. It appears to be in quite good shape. It is built soundly of high-quality materials and shows a level of craftsmanship that is, frankly, beyond most municipal budgets today. It is an important element of a distinctive collection of civic buildings surrounding the Town Green. That status has been given state and national confirmation by its inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places as a significant element in the Boston Post Road Historic District.

I realize that these are difficult times for town budgets, and elected officials have many demands on town services or priorities. But I would ask you to think long-term, just the way that Weston did 110 years ago when the town leaders decided to build the library, and the citizens voted to fund that construction. This is a significant town asset, not currently endangered, which has been entrusted to your care. I hope you will honor that trust and ensure the continuation of this building for at least another generation.

Sincerely,

Timothy Orwig, Preservation Chair of the SAH-NE, and
Lecturer and Ph.D. Candidate
American and New England Studies Program
226 Bay State Road, Room 106
Boston University
Boston, MA 02215
Appendix B: The Golden Mean

Preliminary proportional analysis of the exterior elevations indicates that the entire building is designed to the Golden Mean, the system used in Greek and Roman architecture.