

Town hall ceiling tumbles

Building was empty when it happened

By CLINT SCHEMMER
Potomac News Staff Writer

Gravity felled the ceiling in Haymarket's historic town hall this weekend, squashing plans for two Monday night conferences, including a meeting between the town council and Gainesville District Supervisor Tony Guiffre.

No one was hurt in the mishap, which some town residents attribute to vandals.

But Haymarket Police Chief Donn Fasick, who was first to discover the wrecked ceiling, today said he believes faulty workmanship is probably responsible for the fallen ceiling tiles, dangling lights and twisted metal straps littering the meeting hall.

Thomas Queen, the Nokesville carpenter who installed the suspended ceiling during remodeling in 1980, could not be reached for comment this morning.

Fasick encountered the wreckage Monday about 7 p.m. when he stopped by the two-story structure, built of white clapboard in 1883, to file a routine report.

Thirty minutes later, a local litter-control group was to have met, followed by Guiffre, Town Attorney Turner Smith and council at 8 p.m.

"It would have been ghastly if the thing had come down with a room full of people, what with all those metal parts," Mayor Muriel Gilbertson said. "It's quite a sight, one big mess. The whole ceiling is lying on the floor; you just can't believe it."

Immediately upon discovering the wreckage, Fasick telephoned Mrs. Gilbertson, who canceled the meeting. The council session already had been postponed once on Dec. 19, when winter's first snowfall clogged town streets.

Fasick said he realized something was amiss Monday night when the door leading upstairs to his second-floor office wouldn't budge.

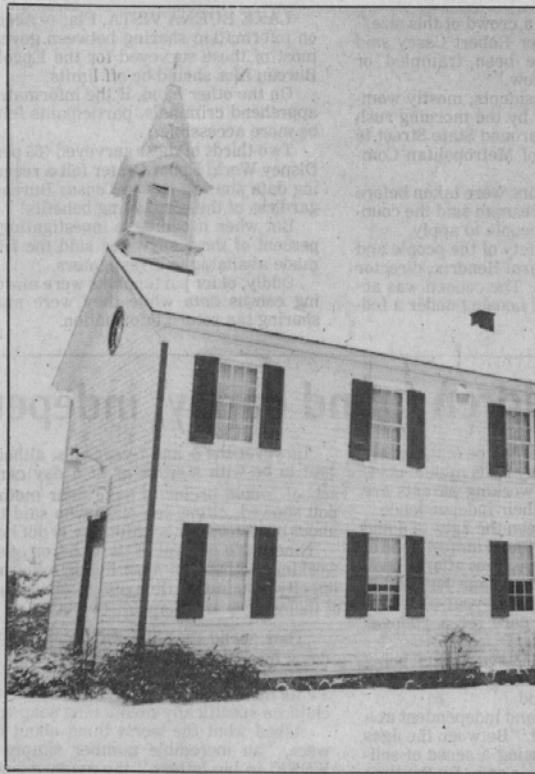
The fallen ceiling had blocked the way, burying the meeting hall's wooden pews, tables, chairs and mayoral bench, he soon learned.

"All the ceiling panels are down," Fasick said this morning, standing amidst the wreckage. "A couple of the metal runner strips are still attached but they're bent and hanging down."

"I'm almost positive it wasn't vandalism," the chief concluded. "I think the staples weren't put in all the way. Over the years, vibrations from people closing doors and walking on the floors probably worked loose the nails holding the lights."

The heavy fluorescent lights likely collapsed the center of the ceiling, bringing everything else down with

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them, said Fasick, clearing wreckage from town hall.

The ceiling probably fell Sunday night or Monday, said Fasick, who last visited the building on Saturday.

Mayor Gilbertson, Fasick and other town officials declined to estimate the cost of replacing the ceiling but said they will soon request informal bids.

Unless the damage was wrought by vandals, Haymarket's insurance

policy will not cover repairs to the building, said Wilmer Hutchinson, the town's insurance agent.

If town firemen will loan their conference room, just up the street from town hall, council probably will meet soon, the mayor said. If not, council will meet Feb. 20 in town hall, as is its regular custom.

Council had been scheduled to discuss a zoning permit requested in

August 1983, Town Clerk Dorothy Keller said Monday night.

Haymarket residents held an oyster supper in fall 1883 to raise the \$561 needed to build the steepled town hall, which also served for a time as a school house.

The town had incorporated the year before, though Haymarket gained its charter from the General Assembly in 1799.