

# History of Albion<sup>1</sup>'s former town hall

*By Bob Gagen - Jan 18, 2007 Updated Oct 3, 2019*

Since removal of the former Albion police station at the corner of South Orange and East Hazel streets and the establishment of a parking lot in its place, the former town hall building to the north is much more noticeable.

Little more than an unpainted brick wall is revealed by the corner building's removal. But its absence does provide a fuller view of the one-story brick building with a tower and its unique (in Albion) Art Deco architectural style.

Most Art Deco structures in Indiana were built between 1920 and 1940. Its distinctive characteristics were simple building forms and flat roofs, abstract traditional details, and geometrical and stylized floral motives. It was intended to reflect the needs and aspirations of 20th-century society without using past styles, while exhibiting a decorative tendency.

Perhaps the most outstanding example of Art Deco style in northeast Indiana is the Auburn Automotive Co.'s administration building built in 1930 on that city's South Wayne Street.

Although it has no cornerstone and I have yet to find any positive evidence as to the time it was constructed, the old town hall's appearance and some documentation uncovered in an Albion newspaper seem to offer strong indication of its Art Deco qualifications.

While fairly straightforward in its appearance, the building's west facade facing South Orange Street contains definite Art Deco characteristics. In all my years of examining Albion's two weekly newspapers for the 1930s, I have never come upon any reference to the building's actual construction.

I heard contradictory information from two of Albion's town elders. One, a World War II veteran, declared it was built sometime in the late 1930s. The other, somewhat younger, said he recalls that German prisoners of war from Camp Scott in Fort Wayne assisted with the construction. If true, this would have had to have been between June 1944, when POWs first arrived at Scott, and the end of World War II the following year.

I did come upon one piece of solid information regarding construction of "a Fire Station and Town Building" in the form of a Notice to Contractor dated May 5, 1930. Significantly this was just a few months after the November 1929 Wall Street "crash" and all unknowingly, at the time, the start of the country's decade-long Great Depression.

This information was contained in a lengthy notice for bids of such construction which would be accepted by the town's board of trustees, made up at that time by Dr. Walter Carver, John F. Gatwood and Fred B. Moore, by May 29, 1930. It stated that this building

would be constructed on South Orange Street in “strict accordance with plans and specifications prepared by and under the direction of Architect Alvin M. Strauss,” 415 Cal-Wayne Building, Fort Wayne. Strauss (with a double S, unlike the single S of Ligonier’s Strauses), a 1912 graduate of Kendallville High School, was involved in the design of a number of notable Fort Wayne buildings. Among these were the landmark 22-story Lincoln National Bank Tower built in 1930 just south of the Allen County Courthouse, the Emboyd - now the Embassy Theatre; in 1928, the Fort Wayne V.A. Hospital, City-County Building on Main Street, and Fort Wayne’s Forest Park residential development in the 1920s.

With this information my search began to look more promising. Surely an examination of town board minutes of that time would reveal just when the Albion Town Building was constructed. But so far, that has not been the case.

With the kind permission of Albion town manager Beth Shellman, I was given access to the board’s minute book of 1930. What I found in it proved to be somewhat confusing.

On May 29, 1930, the minutes reported that the low bidder

I.E. Peck at \$7,750

did not include a certified check with his bid and the matter was table until May 31. Peck did not appear at that date, as had been requested, and “as his financial statement accompanying his bid was false and his reputation on other work was very unsatisfactory” it was moved that the contract be awarded to the next lowest bidder

Hiatt Brothers of Albion at \$8,498.60

Actual letting of the various contracts took place at the first board meeting in June

Hiatt Brothers for the building, P&H Co. of Albion, plumbing, and the Albion Hardware Co. the heating.

This newspaper announcement concluded by saying that “construction will be started as soon as the old building is removed. Ernest Weeks has purchased the old building and will move it to his farm west of town.”

But a search of board minutes for the rest of that year revealed nothing about any construction taking place during that time. Somewhat cryptically, the minutes of July 7, 1930, briefly mentioned that “the petition for a second story on the new Town Building was read and placed on file.”

It seems that the town board’s minutes for 1931 and perhaps beyond will need to be examined to satisfy my curiosity. I may report further on the matter in this space

and, then again, I may not.

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