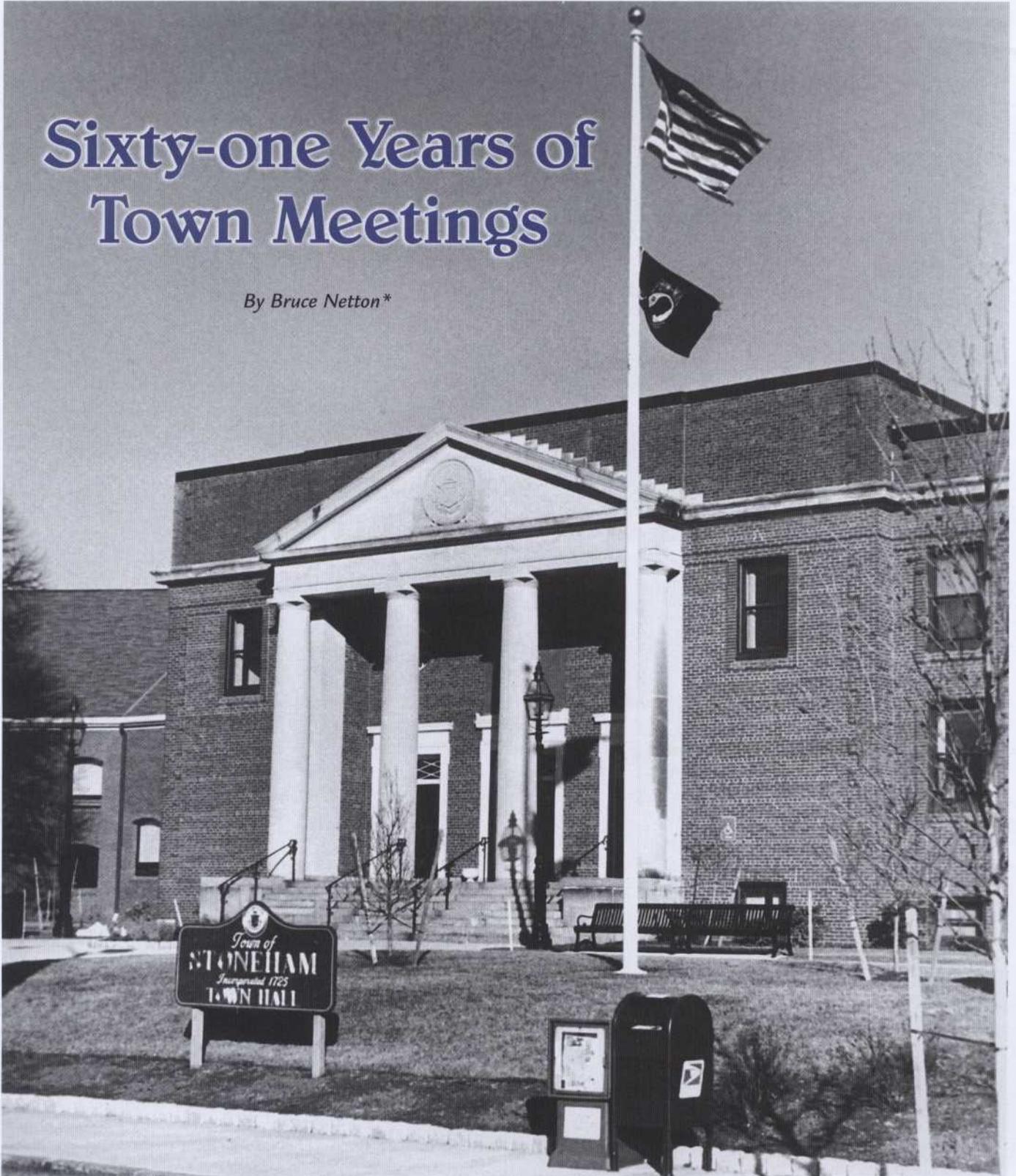


# Sixty-one Years of Town Meetings

*By Bruce Netton\**



*Entrance to Stoneham Town Hall auditorium.*

**T**he Town of Stoneham, Massachusetts, is a quiet suburb just north of Boston. As do most New England towns, Stoneham has a town meeting form of government. Town budgets, major unbudgeted expenditures, and changes in town bylaws



*Town organist  
Bruce Netten  
prepares to  
play before a  
town meeting.*

and zoning regulations must be debated and passed by voters at town meetings. There are an average of three meetings a year. Meetings sometimes run for several evenings. Unlike in any other town, Stoneham voters are entertained before the meetings and during intermissions by a theatre pipe organ.

The organ is a 2/14 Wurlitzer. It was rebuilt by Wurlitzer in 1930 out of two organs that they had previously repossessed, and installed in the WNAC Radio Studio in the Buckminster Hotel, near Fenway Park in Boston. One of the original organs was Opus 1602, a Style B, originally installed in the Windsor Theatre in Brooklyn, New York. The other was originally Opus 1742, a Style 190, from the Empire Theatre, also in Brooklyn.

On July 28, 1941, WNAC organist Francis Cronin announced on the radio that the organ was for sale at a low price on condition that it "be installed in a public place where people could enjoy it." Ralph Patch, owner of the E. L. Patch Cod Liver Oil Company in Stoneham, immediately called, arranged for its purchase, and offered it to the town.

The 1941 Annual Report for the town describes how the chambers were being built. The town meeting of March 16, 1942, voted to establish the Town Organ Committee, giving it full charge of the maintenance and use of the organ.

The town accepted the organ at a dedication program on March 19. Francis Cronin, last organist at WNAC, was the first organist to play it in Stoneham. The review of this concert, filling the entire front page of the March 20, 1942 edition of the *Stoneham Independent*, stated that "the occasion marked what may well be a turning point in musical appreciation in the town as this magnificent instrument began its new life of service, which will inspire future generations for years to come." The organ's donors had remained

anonymous until this night, when Ralph and Christine Patch were so honored.

The organ has been played before town meetings ever since. During World War II and into the early 1950s, monthly free concerts were played on this organ. From the 1950s into the 1970s, Stoneham Town Hall was home to the ATOS Eastern Massachusetts Chapter (EMCATOS), who maintained the organ and presented concerts. This stopped when EMCATOS installed their own larger organ at Babson College.

From then until his death in 1995, Stoneham resident and past EMCATOS Chapter President, Royal Schweiger, maintained the organ and played it before the town meetings. For several years during the mid-1990s the organ was used for a summer series of noontime concerts featuring local organists.

The current Chairman of the Town Organ Committee and Town Organist is Bruce Netten. Also a Past President of EMCATOS, he was previously House Organist at the Jane Pickens Theatre in Newport, Rhode Island. Before each town meeting the organ is played from 7:00 until the meeting is about to be called to order. Because only voters are allowed into the meetings, it is rarely heard by anyone not living in town. The largest crowd ever heard the organ at a special town meeting in March 2002, when the hall was filled beyond capacity to decide school funding. The organ was played for over an hour while they determined how to fit all the voters in.

Stoneham Town Hall was built in 1938. The pipe chambers were added in 1941 to accommodate the organ. They are suspended from the ceiling so they would not "injure the appearance of the hall or freedom of the stage." The main chamber is reached by a stairway. Climbing a 20-foot ladder

Town Hall Auditorium before a town meeting.



and swinging across into a door gains access to the solo chamber. The blower and relay room is below the stage. While the combinations for each manual are set in the rear of the console, the organ also has ten general combinations, whose setter board is in the relay room. The console is normally located on the floor to the left of the stage, below the main chamber. It can be rolled to the center for concerts.

Seating in the balcony is original with the building, fixed and uncomfortable. Main floor seating is comfortable and flexible. The auditorium's maximum capacity is about 1,000. It is very live acoustically, giving the organ a unique sound and making it sound as though the hall were much larger than it is. As voters come in they absorb sound, changing the sound of the organ, and the echo of their voices is quite noticeable to the organist.

The town has recently provided funding for major maintenance of the organ. Those who came early to the last town meeting noted a significant improvement in the sound of the organ. The console has been refinished to look better than ever. Plans are to continue improvements as money becomes available, and to expand the usage of this magnificent instrument. Public concerts have been resumed, beginning with John Cook playing a benefit for the Stoneham Theatre. Anyone who is coming to the Boston area may contact the Town Organist at 781/438-2466 to gain access to the organ.

The original donor would have been pleased to know that 61 years later the organ is still being used and appreciated.

\*Chairman, Town *Organ Committee*  
Town of Stoneham, Massachusetts



## ORGAN SPECIFICATIONS

### MAIN CHAMBER

Flute 16'-2'	97 pipes
Tibia 8'	61 pipes
Vox Humana 16'-4'	85 pipes
Salicional 8'	61 pipes
Violin 16'-4'	85 pipes
Celeste 8'-4'	73 pipes
Posthorn 8'	61 pipes

### SOLO CHAMBER

Clarinet 8'	61 pipes
Diapason 16'-4'	85 pipes
Krumet 8'	61 pipes
Oboe 8'	61 pipes
Tibia 16'-4'	85 pipes
Trumpet 8'	61 pipes
Tuba 16'-8'	73 pipes
Percussions	

*2/14 Wurlitzer in Stoneham Town Hall, Stoneham, Massachusetts*

**MAIN CHAMBER**

Post Horn 8'	61 pipes
Tibia Clausa Minor 8'-4'	73 pipes
Salicional 8'	61 pipes
Violin 8'-4'	73 pipes
Violin Celeste 8'-4'	73 pipes
Concert Flute 16'-2'	97 pipes
Vox Humana 8'	61 pipes

**TREMULANTS**

Main  
Solo  
Tuba  
Vox Humana

**SOLO CHAMBER**

Brass Trumpet 8'	61 pipes
Harmonic Tuba 16'-4'	85 pipes
Diaphonic Diapason 16'-4'	85 pipes
Tibia Clausa Major 8'-4'	73 pipes
Clarinet 8'	61 pipes
Krumet 8'	61 pipes
Oboe Horn 8'	61 pipes
Cathedral Chimes	
Glockenspiel	
Xylophone	
Chrysoglott	
Traps and Effects	