

The Guilford Green: An Ever-Changing Landscape

by James Sexton, Ph.D.

The Guilford Green has gone through many changes since it was first laid out some time not long after the town was settled in 1639. In the more than 350 years since this date, it has been used in a variety of ways. The green started as a town common filled with grazing animals, paths, and buildings, and has changed slowly until it reached its present form of pleasure ground and memorial park. This change has had three basic phases: a clearing of the land and the assertion of control over the wilderness; a removal of the man-made additions to the green and a return to a pastoral landscape; and the reintroduction of nature, albeit in a controlled manner. Along with the different appearances and uses of the green went a shifting symbolism: each period seems to have had a different understanding of what the green meant. While the three periods overlap, the general ways in which the green is used and thought about over the years since it was laid out have generally followed this pattern.

The Common or Green (1639-1793)

In 1800 Timothy Dwight traveled through Guilford on his way to Provincetown. His description of the green captures some of the many uses to which this parcel was put in its early days:

In the center [of Guilford] is an open square. Two churches, a Presbyterian and an Episcopal, stand on it, together with four schoolhouses, in which are kept four very good schools...This square, like that in New Haven, is deformed by a burying ground, and to add to the deformity is unenclosed. The graves are therefore trampled upon and the monument injured by both men and cattle.¹

In its first incarnation Guilford's green was a public space with many uses. It was grazing land, a training field for the town's militia, a burial ground, and the location of at least six, and perhaps more, buildings.²

The green³ or the common⁴ (both names are used in the town's early records) was originally the geographic, spiritual, and social center of the community, but as Dwight's description shows it was not the cleared park that many in the twentieth century have come to expect greens to be. Instead, it was a busy, crowded space. It was laid out in the "great plain"

¹Timothy Dwight, *Travels in New England and New York*, (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969) Vol. II, 360.

²Bernard Christian Steiner, *A history of the Plantation of Mununkatuck and of the original town of Guilford, Connecticut, comprising the present town of Guilford and Madison, written largely from the manuscripts of the Hon. Ralph Dunning Smith*, (Baltimore: the Author, 1897); Elizabeth Mills Brown, *Guilford, Connecticut: its green and its historic buildings* (Guilford: Guilford Bicentennial Committee, 1975); Nona Bloomer *The Guilford Green*, The Guilford Papers Series, no. 3. (Guilford: Guilford Free Library, 1996).

³*Guilford Town Records*, January 8, 1645-6.

⁴*Guilford Town Records*, Book B, 14, Jan. 8, 1658.

surrounded by the early settlers' home lots, emphasizing the importance of the common to all of the town's inhabitants.⁵ Two ponds dominated the western side, gravel and stones were mined throughout, and trees were cut for lumber and fuel.⁶ Paths, as indicated in the 1729 survey of the land, crisscrossed the green.⁷ It was also used for grazing cattle and sheep, and swine and geese ran loose there as well.⁸ It was not the inviolate, fenced parcel that one sees today. Instead, it was a visible demonstration of the settlers' attempts to subdue the wilderness by clearing the area and harvesting usable materials from it.⁹

The green was originally laid out to be 16 acres, but this was not to last for long. The town offered a portion of the southern end of the green as an inducement to lure Nicolas Hughes into serving as the town's blacksmith;¹⁰ this change can be seen in the dogleg in Water Street as one enters the green.¹¹ The land was not enough to keep Hughes in town, and a similar lure, this time using a portion of the eastern side of the green, was offered to a second blacksmith, Samuel Baldwin of Fairfield.¹² This accounts for State Street not lining up with the eastern edge of the green.¹³

The possibility of this sort of paring down of the green was effectively put to rest in 1728/9 when the green was surveyed¹⁴ and the proprietors voted that the green "shall hold the width & length they now have."¹⁵ Several months later they also "Set out & Stated the Whole of Sd. green for highways."¹⁶ The green was a long way from achieving its present day appearance.

The early green was not only treated as the source of potential community capital for luring necessary craftsmen away from other communities, and as a nexus for the communities roads, but also as a location for building. This was the second part of the early settlers' attempt to civilize the wilderness. By building upon the green, and especially by constructing a meetinghouse, the settlers could begin to demonstrate the presence of God in their wild new

⁵Ruggles reported in 1763 that the early "...planters were Chiefly Confind to the Lands Cleard by the Indians near the Sea..."(Rev. Thomas Ruggles, Jr., "History of Guilford, Conn., A Fragment," *The Historical Magazine* Vol. V., Second Series. No. 4 (1869): 231.)

⁶Although there was an early prohibition on cutting trees "around the meeting house" (1646) it is unclear whether this covered the whole green (Steiner, 259).

⁷*GLR* 4, 129 (1729).

⁸Steiner refers to laws of the Borough limiting the "running at large" of these animals (258). Bloomer also comments on this (17). The early town records include earmarks for swine.

⁹St. George, "Set Thine House in Order," *New England Begins*, (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1982) II: 159-186.

¹⁰Steiner, 249; Bloomer, 9.

¹¹Brown, 35.

¹²Steiner, [249] or Bloomer, 9.

¹³Brown, 35.

¹⁴*GLR*, IV, 120.

¹⁵*GTR*, Feb 1728/9. quoted in Bloomer, 12.

¹⁶*GLR* 1729, 4:120.

world. In 1643, not long after settlement, the town constructed its first meetinghouse, a small stone building in the northeastern quadrant of the green.¹⁷ This building was the first of several to be built on the green in its early years. A school in the northwest corner of the green soon followed it.¹⁸ On December 13, 1673, Ephraim Darwin, another blacksmith, was granted the right to build a shop on the green, "provided that if the town did not buy it and he should cease using it, he must remove it."¹⁹ Whether Darwin built his shop, and if so what happened to it, are unknown. In 1713 the small stone meetinghouse of the First Society was replaced by a much larger wooden structure.

These buildings seem to have remained alone on the green until sometime after a disagreement over the naming of a minister for the town's First Ecclesiastical Society in 1730. This division ultimately led to the formation of the town's Fourth Ecclesiastical society, which shared boundaries with the First, and the construction of a new meetinghouse just north of the green. The dissenting parish also had its own schoolhouse, which Dwight's description indicates was on the green.²⁰

The town's probate records also mention a Sabbath Day house owned by Captain Nathaniel Stevens as being located "in the green."²¹ Whether this was a mistranscription of the probate inventory is unclear, but it is the only record of a Sabbath Day house in the Guilford Green (although this did happen in other communities).²² In 1750 the town's Anglicans built a small wooden church in the southeastern corner of the green; this was also accompanied by a school building. Finally in 1774 or 75 the community built a Town House for the conducting of public business.²³

This addition coincided with the first references to the green as "the Marketplace."²⁴ The name change is significant because Guilford's citizens had traditionally viewed themselves as farmers.²⁵ The references to the green as a marketplace, and the building of the Townhouse, the

¹⁷Bloomer, 6.

¹⁸William C.H. Moe, *History of Education in Guilford and Allied Educational Interests* (Guilford, CT: Shore Line Times, 1936) 5.

¹⁹Steiner, 249, nt. 3.

²⁰Bloomer, n. 16, 31.

²¹*GPR* 3, 390 (6 Oct 1747).

²² William Butler provides a concise definition of a Sabbath Day house:

"Sabba-day," or nooning, houses, common in the eighteenth century, were extinct by the early nineteenth. These buildings were small one- or two-room impermanent structures that farmers who lived on the outskirts of town used for warmth and noonday meals between religious services on the Sabbath.

"Another City upon a Hill: Litchfield, Connecticut, and the Colonial Revival," *The Colonial Revival in America* (Winterthur, Delaware: The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, 1985)25-26.

²³Brown, 37 (1774); Bloomer 15 (1775).

²⁴*Guilford Land Records*, vol. 10, 49. Land transfer from Robert Griffing to Jasper Griffing "...Butted & bounded ... Easterly on s^d green or Marketplace..." Dated 30 March, 1771 (recorded 22 June, 1772).

²⁵ Steiner draws a distinction between New Haven, which was settled by merchants, and Guilford, settled by farmers (231).

first floor of which was often rented as a shop,²⁶ showed both a new, secular vision of the green (it was no longer filled just with buildings dedicated to spirituality and learning) and new interest in mercantile activities. Guilford's citizens were now acknowledging a new role for themselves -- they were no longer just subduers of the wilderness. By 1775 the green held all of the buildings that Dwight recorded on his visit of 1800.²⁷ (Medad Stone was authorized to build hay scales on the green in 1814.²⁸)

The Public Square ²⁹

In 1793, not long after the construction of the Townhouse -- and seven years prior to Dwight's visit (and 28 years prior to the publication of his remarks about the town) -- the town's Selectmen were directed to clear the green of "all incumbrances."³⁰ This was the official beginning of the second phase of the green's development. While concern about maintaining the green had been demonstrated as early as the 1646 ordinance forbidding the removal of trees from around the meetinghouse,³¹ and continued with other laws limiting the removal of stones and gravel,³² these laws were aimed at limiting the affect of the settlers on the green, not reversing them. The 1793 directive began the process of removing the evidence of the settlers from the green. Little seems to have been done to clear the green until 1817 when two cemeteries were laid out in other parts of the town. These burial grounds became, in 1824, the new resting-places for the dead who had been buried on the green.³³ In 1830 the Congregational church, Town house, and one of the school buildings, called the Academy, were moved to land just north of the green. The movement of the Congregational meetinghouse off of the green was an especially potent action because it heralded the disestablishment of the link between the church and state. The other buildings were also razed, with the Episcopal church being the last, by 1838. The planting of Elm trees around 1827 and the enclosure of the space by a white railing in 1837 also aided in the transformation of the green.³⁴

Although the green now had many of the elements we associate with greens in the modern era, it still had not reached its modern form. While the buildings had been removed, the area planted with decorative trees, and enclosed by a fence, it was still used as pasture for the cattle of those living nearby. And while the town government referred to the "Publick Walks" and the "Publick Square," indicating a hope for a new type of public space, this seems to have taken a while to be accepted. The residents of the Borough seemed to be unwilling to give up their cow pasture, and so grazing continued on the green until the 1860s. After the cattle were

²⁶Bloomer, 15.

²⁷Bloomer hypothesizes that the fourth schoolhouse mentioned was the town house (Bloomer, 31, nt. 16).

²⁸Steiner, 259, nt. 2.

²⁹Guilford Borough Records, 1815-47; Joel E. Helander, *Guilford Long Ago* (Guilford, CT: 1970) 1: 82-83.

³⁰Dwight's *Travels in New England*.

³¹Steiner, 259, nt. 4.

³²Steiner, 259.

³³Steiner, 259.

³⁴Steiner, 260.

removed from the green, the area still looked more like a pasture or field than a park. The grass was allowed to grow to so that it could be harvested for hay, and the green was still bisected by the Post Road, which ran from the northwest corner to the eastern side of the green.

The Town Park

In the late 1860s the green appears with another new name, "Town Park."³⁵ This signals a new role for the green: a recreation space. In 1859 the green was the site of the town's first fair, sponsored by the Farmers' and Mechanics' Association (the name was later changed to the Guilford Agricultural Society).³⁶ The fair gave the town a chance to celebrate its agricultural heritage, and signaled the beginning of the green as the town's playground. The annual fair was followed by band concerts in a bandstand built on the green,³⁷ football games (including one between the proprietors and clerks of the town's stores),³⁸ baseball,³⁹ and even tennis on courts laid out on the green.⁴⁰ In the winter, part of the green was flooded so that skating could take place.⁴¹

The United Workers for Public Improvement

The next step in the beautification of the green came when the "The United Workers for Public Improvement" was formed by a group of Guilford's women. The group's formation signaled Guilford's joining of the national Village Improvement Society movement that had begun in Stockbridge, Massachusetts in 1853.⁴² George Waring articulated the aims of these groups in a set of model by-laws published in *Scribner's*.

...to improve and ornament the streets and public grounds of the village by planting and cultivating trees, establishing and maintaining walks ... lighting the streets... and generally doing whatever may tend to the improvement of the village as a place of residence.⁴³

The women of Guilford took their mission to heart. They raised money to illuminate the town's streets and the walks across the green, supervised the planting of trees and "beautification" of the green, and participated in their most famous exhibition of civic care, the raking of the green. The ringing of bells, the firing of the town cannon, and the playing of the local band heralded this event. "The United Workers for Public Improvement" cared for the green until 1931.

³⁵*Beers Atlas of New Haven County*, 1868 and Guilford Fair Programs.

³⁶*SLS*, 8/15/1878, 2:4.

³⁷*SLT*, 8/15/1878, 2:4.

³⁸*SLT*, 10/23/1897, 1:1.

³⁹*SLT*, 7/13/1894, 5:2.

⁴⁰*SLT*, 6/5/1896, 2:4.

⁴¹*SLT*, 2/6/1879, 3:1.

⁴²J.B. Jackson, *American Space*, 102.

⁴³Quoted in Jackson, 103.

The Monuments

In 1877, just three years after the founding of "The United Workers for Public Improvement," another phase of the green's development began: its use as a place to commemorate the town's dead. The granite foundation for a monument to the Civil War dead was laid on Memorial Day of that year. This was the first of many reminders of the town's fallen that were to appear on the green.⁴⁴ After the civil war monument was completed, each war led to a new monument. In addition to the Civil War Statue, there are memorial trees,⁴⁵ memorial placed on boulders,⁴⁶ and a flagpole.⁴⁷ Even the paved walks that now crisscross the green are dedicated in the memory of Guilford citizens.⁴⁸

The third phase of the green's history, as both a recreational and memorial park for the town, is intriguing because the work that went into shaping these roles reversed much of the work that had been done in the town's early history. Trees were planted, stones (in the form of memorial boulders) were returned to the site, and ponds were recreated for skating. Where the early settlers had sought to demonstrate their control over the land by clearing and leveling it, the post-Civil War citizens of Guilford sought to recreate a parcel of natural beauty in the middle of their town. With the land for miles in all directions around Guilford settled and cultivated the Green was no longer needed as a symbol the 17th century imperative to "civilize." Instead, it now provided a romantic respite from the increasingly mechanized world of the late 19th century. While the early green had provided an antidote to the wilderness, the Green at the end of the 19th century worked in opposition to the industrial world.

The Green in the 20th Century

One final change led to the green assuming its present-day appearance: the re-routing of Route 1. This change, undertaken to straighten the road and speed traffic on it, moved the commercial center from its traditional location on the Green to a new shopping corridor created along Route 1. This move also paralleled a geographic change. The green, which had been located at the heart of most of the 17th and 18th century development, was no longer centrally located and was not easily accessible by car. The new shopping district better met the needs of modern consumers, and the green was saved from destruction at the hands of the automobile. (One need only look at the neighboring communities of Madison and Branford to see how Route 1 has cut their greens off from easy pedestrian access.)

While commerce is still transacted around the green, it is no longer the economic center of the community. It remains, however, the symbolic heart of the town. Announcements of upcoming community events, such as blood drives, antique shows, or house tours, are posted at one end of the green. And protests -- for peace, against nuclear arms, in support of the

⁴⁴SLT, 5/31/1877, 3:3.

⁴⁵ SLT, 4/29/1920 1:6.

⁴⁶SLT,10/10/1940 1:4; 9/18/1941.

⁴⁷SLT, 6/1/1961 1:3.

⁴⁸SLT, 2/9/1928 1:3.

hostages in Iran -- have all taken place, and continue to take place, on the green.⁴⁹ While Guilford is no longer an agricultural community it still has an annual fair. While this has outgrown the green, the opening parade still circles the site where the fair was first held. Finally, Guilford High School graduation is still held on the green, recalling the days when the town's schools occupied a position of prominence in the town's central space.

In the more than 350 years that the Guilford Green has been in existence it has had a variety of uses and roles. It was the site of the town's first meetinghouses, and demonstrated that community could, and would, civilize the wilderness. In the middle of the 19th century, when the countryside had bowed to the cultivating hand of man, the green provided a Romantic respite from mechanization and a place to honor one's fellow citizens. It also provides a spot for recreation, away from the community's commercial activity. And in the 20th century, when the town's business center moved away from the green, it remained the emotional heart of the community providing a forum for expressing one's opinions, a place for nourishing the community through charitable events, and a spot for enjoying the company of one's neighbors.

⁴⁹ The *Shore Line Times* is filled with reports of events on the green. See 9/14/61, 9:4; 9/2/65, 1:4; 11/21/79, 2:1; 5/26/83, 1:1.

Resources

Bibliography

Bloomer, Nona, Compiler. *A Guilford Bibliography*. Vol. No. 2 of *The Guilford Papers*. Guilford: Guilford Free Library, 1990.

The Librarian of the Local History room in the Guilford Free Library has compiled a bibliography that supplements the Parks bibliography. This was used in conjunction with the other, general bibliographies.

Local Histories

Helander, Joel E. *Guilford Long Ago*. Guilford, Conn.: 1970.

Moe, William C.H. *History of Education in Guilford and Allied Educational Interests*. Guilford, Conn.: Shore Line Times, 1936.

Ruggles, Rev. Thomas, Jr. "A Sketch of a History of Guilford, In Connecticut, from a Manuscript of the Rev. Thomas Ruggles." *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society* (1795): 182-188.

Ruggles, Rev. Thomas, Jr. "Extracts from Ruggles' Ms. History." *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society* Vol. X (1809): 90-101.

Ruggles, Rev. Thomas, Jr. "History of Guilford, Conn., A Fragment." *The Historical Magazine* Vol. V., Second Series, No. 4 (1869): 225-233.

Steiner, Bernard Christian. *A history of the Plantation of Mununkatuck and of the original town of Guilford, Connecticut, comprising the present town of Guilford and Madison, written largely from the manuscripts of the Hon. Ralph Dunning Smith*. Baltimore: the Author, 1897.

These town histories provide a complete description of the evolution of the town and its green. In February of 1769 Rev. Thomas Ruggles wrote a brief history of the town in response to a request from Ezra Stiles. As it was written in the 18th century this material provides a insight into the early settlement of the town from someone who was not far removed from these events. The Steiner history is a typical 19th century town history with a great deal of information, but not always well-substantiated or supported with definite references. Helander's book provides an interesting anecdotal description of the town's past written by a passionate antiquarian with a love for old documents.

Green Specific

Bloomer, Nona. "The Guilford Green." *Places* Vol. 9.Number 1 (Winter, 1994) (1994): 56-65.

Bloomer, Nona. *The Guilford Green*. The Guilford Papers Series, No. 3 Guilford: Guilford Public Library, 1996.

Brown, Elizabeth Mills. *Guilford, Connecticut: its green and its historic buildings*. Guilford: Guilford Bicentennial Committee, 1975.

The Guilford green has been the subject of two studies. Brown's work on the green is part of a larger historical survey of the built landscape of the community. Bloomer writes a complete history of the green and its uses based on extensive research in local documents. These two works provide a comprehensive view of the green and its place in the community.

Contemporary Views

Dwight, Timothy. *Travels in New England and New York*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969.

Dwight includes a brief description of the town in his travelogue.

Ideology -- 17th and 18th Centuries

Field, Jonathan Beecher. "'Peculiar Manuerance': Puritans, Indians, and the Rhetoric of Agriculture, 1629-1654." *Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife* 20 (1995) (1995): 12-24.

St. George, Robert Blair. "'Set Thine House in Order': The Domestication of the Yeomanry in Seventeenth-Century New England." *New England Begins: The Seventeenth Century*. Ed. Jonathan L. and Robert F. Trent Fairbanks. Boston: The Museum of Fine Arts, 1982. Vol. II: 159-187.

The colonial attitude toward uncleared land seems especially appropriate to the story of the Guilford green.

Photographs

The Guilford Keeping Society has an extensive photograph collection with many (several hundred) photographs of the green.

Primary Documents

Guilford Land Records. Located in the Town Clerk's Office, Guilford Town Hall.

Guilford Probate Records. Located in the Judge of Probate's Office, Guilford Town Hall and the Connecticut State Library.

Guilford Town Record. Located in the Town Clerk's Office, Guilford Town Hall.

Guilford Tax Records. Located in: the Town Clerk's Office, Guilford Town Hall; the Local History Room, Guilford Free Library; The New-York Historical Society; the Manuscripts and Archives Collection at Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University; the Connecticut State Library.

The early records of Guilford have survived virtually intact, although somewhat scattered. These provide contemporary evidence and examples of the way in which the green was used for the researcher who is willing to spend the time to read the sometimes difficult handwriting and extraneous material.

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