

## **Waterbury Green: a Case Study by James Sexton, Architectural history consultant.**

In the summer of 1999 Waterbury was adorned with banners which declared it the “Renaissance City” and were decorated with an image of the former train station’s Renaissance Revival *campanile* to underscore the point.<sup>1</sup> It was an apt description and an appropriate symbol. Waterbury has had many rebirths. The town was reborn in a new location after the original settlement site proved untenable. It grew into a city. Then the city re-emerged after a devastating fire destroyed much of its center. And it was remade at the hands of an architect inspired by the City Beautiful movement. The former train station is the perfect symbol of rebirth -- while it is no longer used as a depot, it has been re-used as the offices of the Waterbury Republican-American.

One cost of all of these various restructurings of the city is that traces of earlier incarnations are covered over. So little remains of the town’s earliest days that a former director of the Mattatuck Museum published a pamphlet, in response to repeated questions, entitled “What! No Old Houses?”<sup>2</sup> The scarcity of buildings from the town’s early years even prompted the local paper to sponsor a recent contest to find the town’s oldest house.<sup>3</sup> The one constant from Waterbury’s earliest days up to the present is its Green. Where the rest of the town has behaved like a phoenix, rising repeatedly from its own ashes (in one case literally) the green has been more tortoise-like, plodding along, changing slowly, but always moving forward.

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<sup>1</sup> The architects of the building, McKim, Mead, and White, were inspired by the bell tower in Sienna.

<sup>2</sup> Mattatuck Historical Society, "What! No Old Houses?," May, 1955 (Occasional Publications, New Series no. 22).

<sup>3</sup> Conversation with Ann Smith Finn.

*In a State of Nature*

In 1857 Charles U.C. Burton described the Waterbury green in The National Magazine:

“Stately churches and elegant private mansions surround the square. The residences present, for the most part extensive grounds tastefully laid out, with fountains sparkling here and there.... [Waterbury] with its beautiful Centre [sic] square and its quiet shaded streets lined with handsome residences, presents an appearance quite unique for a manufacturing town.<sup>4</sup>

Burton describes Waterbury at a turning point in its history. It still had many of the attributes of the small 18th century town it had been, such as its green, but it had also assumed a new role, that of manufacturing town.

As in most colonial towns in Connecticut, Waterbury’s green did not begin as a well-maintained greensward. The development from boggy common in the 17th century to the Centre Square of Burton’s description was a long, but not unusual process. As with so many other towns the process involved subduing the land, filling it with buildings (like the meetinghouse) and then a gradual removal of the buildings to replace them with trees, walks, and eventually monuments.

The green started as a muddy open space at the intersection of two roads. A nineteenth century historian described the area as “the marshy result of a former swamp;” it was similar to greens throughout the colony. The land was so boggy that it was necessary to build a corduroy road across the green and two bridges over rivers that crossed Main Street. The Congregational meetinghouse (in fact, the first three Congregational meetinghouses), as well as a dwelling house, a schoolhouse, and many muddy paths all sat on the green.<sup>5</sup> As with most greens in the state it was surrounded by the homelots of the early settlers.

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<sup>4</sup>Charles U.C. Burton, The National Magazine (September, 1857).

<sup>5</sup>Joseph Anderson locates the first three buildings “just at the east line of the present Green, on the west line of North Main Street.” The Town and City of Waterbury, Connecticut, from the Aboriginal

Local historian Joseph Anderson describes the first part of the process of changing the green:

From time to time the roads were improved, and some spasmodic and superficial work was done on the surface of the ground; some rocks were blasted and some holes were filled. But prior to 1825 the Green remained mostly in a state of nature. It was the cow pasture, the playground, the place for military parades and for travelling menageries. Its surface, especially the southwestern part, was dotted all over with huge rocks, sometimes cropping out in the form of ledges, with inequalities, holding water after a rain or in the wet season, where boys could sail boats after summer showers and skate on winter evenings to their hearts' content.<sup>6</sup>

It was still quite a rustic place through the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

#### *The Improvement of the Green*

The improvement of the green began around 1825 with the first large-scale efforts to remove rock. Combining “Fourth of July patriotism” (and commemorative fireworks) with a “carting-bee” the townspeople blasted many of the boulders on the green and hauled them away on Independence Day 1825.<sup>7</sup> Anderson reports that the rocks were “thoroughly demoralized.”<sup>8</sup> Efforts were made to drain the green in subsequent years, in part by using money raised from a charge for allowing cows to graze there. These fees also allowed for the replacement of the corduroy causeway with a gravel road around 1828.<sup>9</sup> In 1835 the meetinghouse was removed from the green to a location on its eastern edge. The work of leveling the green continued after the removal of the buildings. While the area was flatter,

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Period to the Year Eighteen Hundred and Ninety-Five, (New Haven: The Price and Lee Company, 1896) II: 55-57.

<sup>6</sup>Anderson, II:58

<sup>7</sup>Anderson, II:60

<sup>8</sup>Anderson, II:60

<sup>9</sup>Anderson, II:59

cleared of most rocks, and “perhaps a few trees planted” by the early 1840s, the green was still not the pristine site described by Burton. A road diagonally traversed it, there was a large dip on the south side which continued to fill with water after heavy rains, and the town’s whipping post and stocks were located at the southwestern corner (near the present day Exchange Place).

### *Enclosure and the Centre Square*

The Green was to change dramatically beginning in 1842. The alterations began with a vote to enclose the green. This was only one of the improvements that the town chose to undertake. In addition to erecting a fence, the ground was further graded, the courses of the roads were altered, and the plot was planted with grass and trees.<sup>10</sup> In 1849 the name was changed at a public meeting to the “Centre Square.”<sup>11</sup> Gone was the green about which Anderson reminisced in the 1890s:

I can recall the old Green as it appeared on a summer afternoon sixty years ago: A few cows nipping the short grass, a few children playing on the meeting house steps; three or four clerks from the three or four stores enjoying a game of drive ball on the Green; the doors of the stores standing wide open.... Late in the afternoon the sweet smelling loads of hay would come up from the river meadows...<sup>12</sup>

While Anderson wrote wistfully about the lost Green of his childhood, the enclosing of the green was a mild change compared to the other changes which were to occur in ensuing years in Waterbury.

The placing of commemorative objects on the Green began in the 1851 with the erection of the flagstaff or “liberty pole.”<sup>13</sup> This remained in place until 1870, when it blew

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<sup>10</sup>Anderson, II: 63.

<sup>11</sup>Anderson, II:81

<sup>12</sup>Anderson, II: 63.

<sup>13</sup>Anderson, II: 64.

down in a storm. It was replaced by another flagpole, but the demise of the first liberty pole also sparked the popular sentiment that led to the distinctive Soldier's Monument that still sits at the western end of the green. The 1850s also saw the first planned paths in the new Center Square. These rectilinear dirt paths were replaced by curving concrete paths in 1873. A bandstand was also erected on the green during the second half of the 19th century.

### *The Turn of the Century*

The end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were major turning points for Waterbury and its green. The green began to change with the removal of the Silas Bronson library to Grand Street in 1894. While this did not have a major effect on the green, it did presage events to come. The first major event of the new century was the fire of 1902. This conflagration burned 42 buildings over almost three acres. It touched the edge of the green, burning Scovill House, and led to a good deal of rebuilding in the center of the city. In 1912 the newly renovated City Hall, located on the southern edge of the green, was burned by an arsonist.<sup>14</sup> This event led to a shift in the civic center of the city away from the green to Grand Street to the south.

Waterbury's new civic center is a prime example of the City Beautiful movement that was popular in the early decades of this century. A comprehensive plan, formulated by a design professional and relying on broad boulevards and visual links between important elements, was undertaken. Grand Street was widened, creating a broad boulevard running from the eye-catching train station, past the Bronson Library, through a plaza focusing on the new City Hall and several other buildings designed by architect Cass Gilbert. While these changes created a striking centerpiece for Waterbury's civic life, they also left the green out of the picture. While all parts of the city had previously been represented on the green, with private houses,

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<sup>14</sup> William J. Pape, History of Waterbury and the Naugatuck Valley Connecticut (Chicago: The S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1918) I:43.

government buildings, hotels, churches, and charitable and fraternal organizations ranged around its perimeter, the green was now changing. The private houses were no longer to be found, and the government buildings were moved off the green when the new city hall was completed. What was left were hotels, churches, charitable and fraternal organizations, and commercial buildings.

### *Between the Wars*

World War One provided a boost to the economy of Waterbury. Its factories ran at full capacity to provide munitions for the war effort. As Frederick Chesson wrote:

...Waterbury's brass industry played a large part role in World War I. America's entry into "The Great War" did not explode upon the city without warning. Almost as soon as the Imperial Austro-Hungarian forces marched into Serbia, following the Arch Duke's assassination in Sarajevo on June 28, 1914, orders for munitions began to pour in from the Allies. Demands for cartridge and shell cases from Britain, France, and Russia soon found the "Big Three" brass-makers expanding operations. When war declared on Germany on April 15, 1917, production skyrocketed, even as manpower was being drafted into the army.<sup>15</sup>

The same was true for World War II. The city was called "An Arsenal for Democracy" and many of its factories received "E for Excellency" banners for their full-time production of munitions.<sup>16</sup> As with the rest of the country, the years between the wars in Waterbury went from the highs of the 20s to the lows of the Depression 30s.

All of these events were played out, in one way or another, on the Green. There were musters of troops on the green, as their had been in previous conflicts. During the Second

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<sup>15</sup> Chesson, Images of America: Waterbury (Dover, NH: Arcadia, 1996) 85.

<sup>16</sup> Chesson, 85.

World War the green served as the site of many Victory Bond drives, including one in which a Navy Wildcat fighter was placed on the green. "Bond buyers were allowed to stick their names on the fuselage as a reward for continuing patriotism."<sup>17</sup> The green was even the home for a Victory Bond house during the war. And the end of each World War was celebrated on the green.<sup>18</sup> The Green was also the community's center during bad times. As they had during the financial collapse of 1893, Waterbury's unemployed and frustrated citizens demonstrated in the Town Square during the Great Depression. Although many of the official functions had been removed from around the green, it remained the town's emotional center, the place where Waterbury's citizens celebrated good fortune and railed against bad.

#### *After the Era of Brass*

While the brass mills worked 24 hours a day, seven days a week during World War II this was their swan song. After the breakneck production of the war years, several things happened which were to change the make-up of Waterbury forever. New materials, such as plastics, began to replace brass in manufacturing. While brass was still used in many applications its production would never match that of the war years. As demand dwindled so did jobs at the mills. Ultimately the "Brass City" could no longer claim its title.<sup>19</sup> In addition to the decline of brass production in the post-war years Waterbury, like many industrial cities in

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<sup>17</sup> Chesson.

<sup>18</sup> Mattatuck Museum, Waterbury: A Pictorial History (Waterbury: Mattatuck Museum, 1974) 116, 119, 121.

<sup>19</sup> Pictorial History, 183.

the northeast, was subjected to the double-barreled threat of cars and suburbanization. Veterans returning from the war sought a new lifestyle: one that included a private house and a piece of property. Inner-city living, even in a small city like Waterbury, couldn't offer much in the way of new houses with modern conveniences. Its returning sons looked elsewhere for a place to live. And to get from their new suburban houses to their place of work they needed cars. Cities like Waterbury, planned for a pre-automobile population, had to adapt. Drivers not only needed new roads, but places to park when they got to their destination. For Waterbury this meant twenty years of construction, as new highways were woven into the fabric of the city, destroying much of what was in their path.<sup>20</sup>

Remarkably, through all of the post-War upheaval the Green has remained intact. Although it was discussed as a potential place for parking as early as 1945, these plans never progressed far.<sup>21</sup> The green has remained a focal point for the community of Waterbury. During the 1960s it was a favorite rallying point for politicians, including visits from all three Kennedy brothers during campaigns.<sup>22</sup> And during the Viet Nam war protesters chose to rally on the green, again demonstrating its emotional potency for the community.<sup>23</sup> In recent years the Green has seen revitalization, as banks have clustered around it. In addition to these buildings, there are a new government office building and the expanded YMCA and newly

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<sup>20</sup> Pictorial History.

<sup>21</sup> City of Waterbury City Plan Commission, Six Year Plan of Public Improvement for the City of Waterbury (1945), 20.

<sup>22</sup> Pictorial History, 63.

<sup>23</sup> Pictorial History.



expanded Mattatuck Museum. While the rest of Waterbury still seems to be struggling to reinvent itself after the collapse of its industrial core, the green continues to move forward. Instead of completely reinventing itself it changes slowly over time, retaining its place in the heart of the community while adding new functions all the time. While it began as a crossroad green and meetinghouse lot, it has grown into a well-used public park. Although the houses and government buildings which originally marked the green as the town's center have long since moved away, the Centre Square remains a social and cultural oasis at the core of the city.

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