

The Tolland Green: a case study by James Sexton, Architectural history consultant.

Loren P. Waldo began his 1861 address on the history of Tolland with an apology for the lack of exciting events in the town's past:

In looking back through the long vista of years since this town was first known, we can discover no incident of thrilling interest connected with its history. We can point to no spot where the white and the red man have met in mortal combat; nor where hostile armies have sought for vengeance in the bloody encounter. We know not that the barbarian war-fire has ever shone upon these hills; or that the savage war-whoop was ever heard in these valleys. We have no legend of the Indian's stealthy tread -- of his merciless attack upon the innocent and defenceless; or of our soil ever reeking with human blood. Nor can we find the footsteps of any distinguished personage upon its territory who has attracted the gaze of the world by his deeds of daring or acts of self-devotion. The history of Tolland, in short, is not calculated to interest the marvelous, nor produce wonder in and astonishment in the reflecting; but like a gentle current, bears upon its quiet bosom facts worthy of our notice, and which may afford us both instruction and amusement.¹

Waldo's self-effacing attitude repeated that of an anonymous correspondent in the beginning of the 19th century. That author ended his reply to the query of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences for information about Tolland by writing, "There are no natural or artificial Curiosities, [sic] worth noticing -- [sic]".² These two comments were made at an interesting time in Tolland's history -- when it was serving as the shire town for Tolland county. Even at this time of great importance in eastern Connecticut, Tolland was a quiet, unassuming community. This understated attitude is reflected in the town's green. The Tolland green is characterized by two elements: it is a remnant of the 18th century town, and it has received very

¹Loren P. Waldo, "The Early History of Tolland: An Address Delivered before the Tolland County Historical Society at Tolland, Conn., on the 22d day of August and the 27th day of September, 1861" Hartford: Press of Case, Lockwood & Company, 1861, 4.

²Anon., "Tolland in 1804" Publications of the Acorn Club of Connecticut 31 (1961), 7.

few of the late 19th and 20th century “improvements” which characterize so many of the greens in Connecticut.

Traditionally Tolland’s green is thought to have grown out of the laying out of the first houselots and streets in town. Recent scholarship has confirmed the work of Waldo in the 1860’s that showed that this was inaccurate. The town’s first street was established to the south of the present day green.³ The first lots in town were laid out before the town’s southern boundary with Coventry was established. When this line was drawn farther north than the early residents had expected in 1722, the town center was moved further north, closer to the geographic center of the community. This second center is the location of the present day green. So while it appears that a broad thoroughfare became the town green, as tradition suggests, it was not a road laid out in 1713, but rather one planned after 1722.

This sort of genesis is not unusual -- Sharon’s green shows a similar beginning, as do Willington, Woodbury, and Lebanon, among others.⁴ Each of these appears to have been a broad roadway, with the paths migrating to the edges, leaving a green space in the middle. This type of linear green presents a very different experience to observers than does a more rectangular town square as was planned in New Haven, Guilford, or Waterbury. It is also a plan that may be more suited to the geography of the ridge on which it sits.

While Tolland’s green was laid out in the early 18th century, it assumed its present form in the 19th. The major factor in this change was choice of the Tolland as the shiretown for the county of the same name in 1785. Part of the agreement that lead to this selection was that Tolland would build a courthouse and jail:

³Waldo, and Peter Palmer, “Early Tolland” in Art and Design in Community Planning (Arts Center of Tolland, 1999) n.p.

⁴ Christopher Collier Notes on CT Trust Greens Survey, “Greens originating in highways.” I’m not sure whether this is based on plan or the actual origin of the greens.

...nevertheless that this act nor anything contained therein shall have any effect until a proper and suitable courthouse and gaol, to be approved by this assembly shall by voluntary subscription or otherwise, without taxing said county, be erected or provided in said town of Tolland⁵

The Courthouse was erected on the green by the town.

The town, especially the area around the green, began to change in the years after the construction of the courthouse and jail. The number of taverns began to increase, perhaps due to the increased number of visitors brought to town by the judicial system. When Elijah Smith began his tavern, later known as the Mansion House, it was one of six in town. Several of these also operated livery stables.⁶ The presence of the court and jail also demanded better transportation to and news for the community. In 1807 a daily Hartford to Boston stage traveled through the town.⁷ This was joined in 1816 by the Center Turnpike, running from the courthouse to Worcester⁸ and by a Springfield-Norwich stage three times a week.⁹

The prosperity of the community can also be seen in the replacement of buildings as they became outdated. In 1805 the jail was replaced for the first time. In 1822 the county courthouse was rebuilt. The jail was rebuilt again in 1824 and again in 1856. Parts of the 1856 building remain today, constituting the oldest remains in the present building, which was renovated several more times over the course of its use, which lasted until 1968.¹⁰

The town remained prosperous in the second quarter of the 19th century. In 1829 Tolland County Bank building was built, emphasizing the town's important role as county

⁵"The History of the Courthouse," typescript in the collection of the Tolland Historical Society, n.p. and Barbara Cook, "Early Public Buildings," Art and Design, n.p.

⁶"The History of the Courthouse," typescript in the collection of the Tolland Historical Society, n.p. and Barbara Cook, "The Town Green," Art and Design, n.p. The town also saw a contemporary, but most likely unrelated, growth in the houses of worship. In 1793 a Methodist Church was built; a Baptist Church joined this in 1807. ⁶

⁷Barbara Cook, "The Town Green," Art and Design, n.p.

⁸Mark Danforth, "Skungamaug Village," Art and Design, n.p.

⁹Barbara Cook, "The Town Green," Art and Design, n.p.

¹⁰Barbara Cook, "Early Public Buildings," Art and Design, n.p.

seat.¹¹ The town's population for the 19th century peaked in the census of 1830 at 1,698.¹² At the end of the 1830s the Congregational meeting house was replaced.

While the town was to remain the site of the county court for another fifty years, the 1840 census foreshadowed the decline of the community. The town sustained its greatest loss in population in all the years since 1756. 142 people moved out of the community, a loss of just under 10 percent. This blow to the community was followed in the 1850s by the closing of the Center Turnpike.¹³

This closing occurred at a time when it also became apparent that Tolland's rivers could not support the large-scale industrial activity that characterized so many of the state's prosperous towns and cities. The Industrial Census of Tolland, taken in 1850, showed 23 industries in the town. Only one employed as many as 10 workers, the rest were small shops using only a few workers.¹⁴ Adding to the impact of these events was the bypassing of the town by the railroad.¹⁵ Starting in 1863 with a railroad link to Rockville in Vernon, the neighboring communities received the modernizing affect of the railroad. Following Rockville's rail line, Stafford to the north, Willington to the east, and Coventry to the south all received rail connections. Tolland was surrounded by modernizing towns and left out of the process.¹⁶ While the town remained the legal center for the county, it was falling behind as far as the commercial activity in the area.

¹¹Barbara Cook, "Town Green," Art and Design, n.p.

¹²Waldo, "The Early History of Tolland," 136 and Cook, "The Growth of Town Services," Art and Design, n.p.

¹³Peter Palmer, "Skungamaug Village" Art and Design, n.p.

¹⁴Barbara Palmer, "Industry in Tolland," Art and Design, n.p.

¹⁵Peter Palmer, "Skungamaug Village" Art and Design, n.p.

¹⁶"The History of the Courthouse," typescript in the collection of the Tolland Historical Society, n.p.

The green was briefly the site for the Tolland County Fair. From 1852 to 1859 the celebration was held in Tolland, and the events centered on the green.¹⁷ Produce was exhibited in the courthouse on the green, trotting races were held on the road around the green, and “drawing” competitions for oxen were held on the green.

Young cattle, colts, swine, and sheep were also exhibited. Carriages with fine spans of horse came up to be judged. Flags flying drums bearing, flutes, fifes and all the old time musical instruments were brought into use.¹⁸

In 1860 the fair was moved to more permanent grounds in the neighboring town of Vernon.

The 1870s and 1880s saw a renewal of activity around the green. At some point during the 1870s The Tolland Improvement Society was founded. Like other Village Improvement Societies throughout the state, Tolland’s had many different goals and projects. Their work on the green was minimal compared to changes made to greens elsewhere in the state. They removed subterranean rocks, improved the streets around the green, and added a small park at the north end of the green. The society did not last more than 10 years.¹⁹ In 1879 the first town hall was added to the green’s perimeter. In 1880 the second Methodist Church, now used as the Grange Hall, was also added.²⁰

In 1890 the county court moved to Vernon. This marked the end of the town's prominence, and highlights the point at which growth and change around the green began to slow dramatically. While changes occurred after this date, the present green is in many ways a product of the town’s 95 years as the legal center of the county. After the courts left town,

¹⁷Cole, History, 62-64.

¹⁸Alice Webster Steele, “Ms. description of agricultural society fairs held on the green,” in the collection of the Tolland Historical Society, n.p.

¹⁹Harold Weigold, “The Tolland Improvement Society,” in Tolland: An Old Post Road Town, 195-6.

²⁰Cook, “Early Public Buildings,” Art and Design, n.p.

several changes happened around the green. In 1893 the County House burned; this was followed in 1896 by a fire at the Mansion House. Each of these hotels catered mainly to the legal professionals who attended the court in town. Without these clients, the hotels were not rebuilt. Instead, a house for the jailer replaced the County house.²¹ Like the County House site, the County Court was re-used. The town library occupied it from 1899 to 1985.²²

In 1900 the town's population reached a low of 1,036. While this number would rebound and grow slowly until after World War II, at which point it would grow dramatically, the green would not reflect these changes.²³ It has remained as a product of the first half of the 19th century. While the beginning of the 20th century introduced changes to the town, these have not dramatically altered the green. As the introduction to Life in Tolland Village in the 1880s recounts:

One by one the homes around the green became summer retreats,
unoccupied for much of the year, and Tolland Village fell asleep.

The green is just now rising from this slumber.

The Green Today

In 1999 the residents of Tolland face a great challenge: how to adapt their green to the needs and demands of 21st century life without destroying its 19th century character. The lack of excitement that Loren Waldo commented on, and the sleep described in Life in Tolland Village in the 1880s, has left the community with a green that is in many ways frozen at the end of the 19th century. It has received few of the "modernizations" that appear on most other

²¹Communication from Barbara Cook to the author excerpting the Introduction to the Revised Edition of Edgar M. Hawkins Life in Tolland Village in the 1880s, Tolland Historical Society, 1998 and Cook, "Early Public Buildings," Art and Design, n.p.

²²Cook, "Early Public Buildings," Art and Design, n.p.

Connecticut greens. It is not crisscrossed by paved paths, surrounded by fencing and curbing, or home to many monuments. Instead, it is a fine example of what a 19th century green would have looked like. This presents problems in our modern society -- there is fear of injury on the green's paths, problems with parking along its edges, and concern that modern life will encroach on the town's centerpiece. In order to find a compromise that pleases all and meets as many of the needs of community as possible the town has embarked on an extensive program of discussion and planning. We will have to wait for a future history to tell how well this strategy works.

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²³Cook, "The Growth of Town Services" Art and Design, n.p.