

Life In West Hartford

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Preface

These chapters help tell the story of the West Hartford, Connecticut community from first settlement to the present day. How does the identity of a community grow? Who are the people whose voices have not been heard? And how did the powerful use their voices? Who spoke and worked for equality, democracy, justice, rights and rebellion, all ideals delineated in our Declaration of Independence? Local history gives us a window into how life in a democracy works.

Introduction

Who tells our stories? And what do these stories tell about what we value?

For 15 years, I wrote local history essays for the magazine, West Hartford Life. I'm not sure how I wrote more than 130 essays, each at least 1,000 words, while I was raising a family and teaching high school history full time. These monthly articles continually put me in the position of my Conard High School history students - a deadline, a topic, establishing a context, evidence, and ferreting out cause and effect. This work helped make me a better teacher and community member. I was able use my historian skills at the local level to help community members examine who we are as a town.

As I wrote these articles, and as you read them, individually, and as a whole, think about how they define what we value as a community. What events included all types of people? Which events excluded people? Which reinforced who had power and which gave power to those who didn't have it before? Whose voices were heard? What documents can give us a window into the past? Is the story about an individual or is it more about the context in which this individual lived? How do present day issues help to define what we want to know about the past?

My love for this town comes from the involvement of so many citizens in striving to build a better community: a place based on justice, equal opportunity, a desire to join together to attack problems, and a love for those who live here. That is not to say that our actions in this town are always just, or that there is equal opportunity for all. Not everyone is a joiner, and not everyone is loved. But I dare say that many in this town make it their work to move toward those noble goals. You will read here about equality and differences. For example, you'll read about our first meeting house, Lemuel Haynes, Amos Beman, Thomas Barrows, when we became our own town, Edith Beach, Susie Butler Andrews, Dr. Caroline Hamilton, the League of Women Voters, attempts to build affordable housing, Korczak Ziolkowski, Soviet Jewish emigres, school Superintendents, people who died in the many wars, and about pioneer Olivia Shelton.

Former Connecticut State Historian Chris Collier argued that he could teach United States History by teaching Connecticut history. There is much to be said for that sentiment. For the stories here about West Hartford teach us about equality, democracy, justice, rights and rebellion. Local history, too, can teach U.S. History.



Figure 1: Author Tracey Wilson. Photo by Jack Dougherty

Acknowledgements

So many people have helped me become the historian and community member that led to this book. I think of my high school history teacher, Pete Lynch from Granby Memorial High School, college professors Jim Miller, Kim Steele, and Joan Hedrick from Trinity College. Graduate school professors Mari Jo Buhle and Joan Scott each helped me find my voice.

As a teacher, my department supervisors at Conard encouraged and supported me in teaching a Local History course, and did so for over 20 years. My students taught me much about what mattered and what stories had staying power. Thanks too, to the Town of West Hartford, and Mayor Jonathan Harris for naming me Town Historian in 2004.

West Hartford Life provided a motivation and venue for my work. Thanks to Mark Jahne and others who encouraged me. And thanks to TurleyCT Community Publications for permission to publish the over 140 articles that first appeared in their magazine.

I especially want to thank Prof. Jack Dougherty, who, when I was at a very low point, came to me asking if I would be interested in making the articles into an online book. Jack made things happen. His intern and my former Trinity student Vianna Iorio did much of the legwork to help me get the articles in order and provide searchable words, a short synopsis and a means to organize them. What a treat to have them both help me through a difficult time and keep me motivated. Thanks for their friendship and professional help, especially when I needed it most.

Thank you to the Noah Webster House and West Hartford Historical Society, especially Jenn DiCola Matos and Sheila Daley. Sheila had the knowledge and the skills to help me find the primary sources which appear throughout the book. And she helped me find the illustrations and embedded them in the text, no small task. Thanks to the West Hartford Public Library, and especially to Martha Church who always encouraged me in my study of Local History. Her knowledge of the town is vast and she has documents at her fingertips. Their Local History Room keeps the power of local history alive.

Thanks on a personal level to Liz Devine. We taught together for 37 years at opposite ends of town, for most of it, and then we retired together. We continue to talk history and teaching as we write curriculum and train young teachers. She is as good a friend as you'd ever find!

And finally, my family - Peter, Adam, Brittany, Caroline and Billie - who delight in my love of history and find ways to keep me guessing. And, to Beth, who is the best partner a person could ever have and my best editor. She is supportive, fun, and curious, and she knows what I love.

– Tracey Wilson, June 2018

Chapter 1

Colonial Life

Equality and Difference in Colonial West Hartford

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“All men are created equal.” This grand statement appears in the Declaration of Independence written in 1776. Since the writing of the Declaration, Americans have thought a lot about the issue of equality in political, economic and social terms.

Was there equality in the West Division of Hartford (as West Hartford was called before independence in 1854) by 1776? And, did colonial residents recognize economic and social differences?

Landholding is one place to look for differences in wealth. When the proprietors divided the West Division land into long lots in 1671, they distributed it according to how much land each man owned in Hartford. Those who had large lots in Hartford received large ones here. There was no attempt in the move west to equalize fortunes; instead this land division reinforced the economic hierarchy that existed.

At the same time, more Americans had the chance to own land than in England. Proprietors divided the abundant land among all sons in the New World, as opposed to only the first son in England.

A look at colonial homes still standing in town gives a glimpse at the range of house sizes and thus the resources of individual families. A middling farmer built the Noah Webster House at 227 South Main. Built around 1748, the house originally had four rooms built around a center chimney. The Benjamin Colton House (c. 1770) at 25 Sedgwick Road and the John Wells Jr. House (c. 1766) at 505 Mountain Road both are substantially larger than the Webster House. They have five windows in front and two on each side, while the Webster House has three windows across the front and one on each side.

This comparison tells us only so much, however. The houses of the poorest residents did not survive. Those who had not reached the middle-class status of the Websters might have lived in a cellar with a roof, or in a shack that did not withstand more than a few winters. Archaeologists in other New England towns have found the remains of such buildings. We have no sites or artifacts here because larger homes were built over these original, simpler structures. But we can hypothesize that the difference between rich and poor housing was greater than the examples left standing.

Inventories taken at the time of a man’s death, are another way to assess the difference in wealth among West Division residents. Designated townspeople went into the deceased person’s home and listed everything found in each room. Today these inventories can be found at the Connecticut State Library. In the 1770s , the total value of the inventories of eight different West Division families (featured in Noah Webster House educational programs) ranged from about 300 pounds to 1,300 pounds.

The types of goods owned by these farmers did not vary greatly. Most families had a Bible and perhaps one other book in their inventory. Wealthier families had more clothing, more looking glasses and more books.



Figure 1.1: The Gillet house, at 202 South Main Street is one of 18 remaining colonial homes in town. It was built by Asa Gillet, a grandson of Joseph Gillett, one of the first proprietors of the town in 1694. Asa Gillett farmed both sides of Main Street in the late 18th century and he traded with the merchant Joseph Webb in Wethersfield. Source: Noah Webster House & West Hartford Historical Society.

The biggest difference in wealth was the amount of land an individual owned.

The Rev. Nathaniel Hooker, the second minister in town (1738-1770) who died at the early age of 32, had a list of books and drugs appended to his inventory, showing his educational background as both a minister and doctor. Though his estate was worth only about 550 pounds, Reverend Hooker had the most social prestige in the town because of his education and his position as minister.

The presence of slavery in the West Division was a clear sign of inequality. At least 15 families owned people of African heritage between 1738 and 1827. We have the names of more than 40 people who were owned. Some bought their freedom, some were freed by the 1784 gradual emancipation law, and some died in slavery. Reverend Benjamin Colton owned what he named a “negro servant,” and Reverend Nathanael Hooker owned a man, a woman, and a child.

Finally, the use of church records can tell something of the social structure within the town. In the late 18th century, there was but one church in town: the Fourth Congregational Church of Hartford. All townspeople had to belong to the church and paid taxes for its upkeep and the upkeep of the town. These records reside in the John P. Webster Library in the First Church (so-called after West Hartford became an independent town in 1854).

In a First Congregational Church booklet from 1913 commemorating the 200th anniversary of the church, there is a description from the 1760s about how people were seated in the church. A church committee assigned those with the highest social, political and economic standing to the pews in the front. Church leaders designated a pew for “old maids” in the back of the church. African-Americans like Page and Lew and the widow of Jude (listed as Negro) were members in full communion of the church. They also sat in the back.

People knew where they ranked by their seating in church.

In a list of “Members in Full Communion” in December of 1764 from the Fourth Church, the only church in town, there is a clear differentiation between people by sex, race, marital status and social status. Titles such as captain, lieutenant and colonel distinguished military men. Leaders of the church were denoted as deacons. That Page and Lew were considered members in full communion at the church, however, is evidence that everyone could be full members of the church.

Gender defined social status as well. Married women, like “Stephen Sedgwick’s wife” were listed as wives, not by their own names. Women considered “old maids,” such as Lydia Smith, were listed with their given name and surname, but many widows were noted as Widow Gillet, without the use of a given name. Where you sat in the pews each Sunday reminded those church goers of the social and economic hierarchy of the church members.

In the 1770s, West Division residents saw the difference between rich and poor all around them. But the gap, in a small town like the West Division, was nowhere near as wide as it is today, where multi-million-dollar homes exist not too far from one-bedroom apartments. Yet the abundance of land gave more people the chance to be independent farmers and the chance at a higher standard of living than they would have in England.

And, even with the distinctions between classes, there was a sense of equality of access. All residents had to attend the Fourth Church. All of them traded with John Whitman and Zaccheus Butler. While they were reminded of their social standing in church every Sunday, they all shared the right to vote on church matters, and those who owned land voted on town matters. All West Division residents had certain basic inalienable rights, but they clearly knew their place within the established hierarchy of their small New England town.

America Exposed as a Divided Society

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Run-away from the subscriber
of Hartford West-Division, on the night following
6th instant, a Molatto servant man named JUDS,
about 21 years old, about 5 feet 8 inches high, had
on a claret colour'd coat and waistcoat, and a light
colour'd waistcoat, one pair of check'd linen trow-
fers; two pair tow ditto; a pair good leather bree-
ches, one white shirt; two check'd ditto; and is
supposed to have a forged pass. **TWENTY DOL-**
LARS Reward and all necessary charges will be paid
to any person who shall take up and return said Fel-
low to
STEPHEN SEDGWICK.
N. B. All Masters of vessels are forbid carrying
off said fellow.

Figure 1.2: This Connecticut Courant runaway ad, August 9, 1774, is typical in describing what the runaway Jude was wearing and carrying. Note that Jude had a forged pass, indicating that either he was literate or he knew someone who would forge a pass. The owner, Stephen Sedgwick (1731-1792) married three times and had 10 children by his second wife, between 1762 and 1781. When Jude ran, Sedgwick was 43 years old and had 7 children. Source: The Connecticut Courant and Hartford Weekly Intelligencer (1774-1778); Hartford, Conn. 09 Aug 1774: 3.

Hurricane Katrina washing away the veneer of New Orleans, bearing the economic reality of American life, led me to reflect on our own community. How clear were the class, race and gender differences in the West Division at the time of the American Revolution? How did people separate and include one another in this community?

Economically, there was a clear difference in wealth in town by the second half of the 18th century. In 1766, Colonel John Whiting, former Treasurer of the Connecticut Colony, died at age 73. He was cited as the wealthiest man in the West Division. He lived north of Albany Avenue. In April 1768, Timothy Goodman's house burned to the ground. The Connecticut Courant reported that the house "was entirely consumed, together with all his household furniture, clothes, &c. which were very rich and costly, about 200 bushels of grain, and a considerable sum of money."

These same men who were amassing wealth may also have had indentured servants and enslaved people and/or apprentices in town. Jude, enslaved by Stephen Sedgwick, ran away in 1774. Bristow bought his freedom from Thomas Hart and Sarah Whitman Hooker in 1775. Once the gradual emancipation act passed in 1784, a number of African Americans appeared in the church records dying in a pauper status.

A number of indentured servants and apprentices were part of the West Division community as well. In 1768, an apprentice about 19 years of age named Moses Cook ran away from Ashbel Wells. Cook "carried away a great coat, a good suit of brown cloth, yellow buttons and sundry other articles of cloathing." By law, anyone who found him was forbidden from hiding or employing the runaway. Wells did not offer a reward for his return.

September 1784, an 18 year old named Truman Merrill ran away from Samuel Stanley. The advertisement in the Connecticut Courant said Merrill was about five foot ten and was well built with "short curl'd hair." He worked Stanley's clothier's shop and Stanley believed Merrill would try to get work at this trade again. Stanley offered a reward of one shilling and sixpence.

In 1793, Charles Stedman, a lad of 18 ran away from West Division resident Francis F. Olmsted. A reward of two dollars was offered to the person who returned him. Olmsted described him wearing a London smoke coat, a stitched vest and brown trousers.

As early as 1791, there were ads in the paper about Charles Webster's store where he had just received a fresh supply of European Indian goods, cloth and crockery ware. A customer could pay with "cash, country produce, tow cloth, linen check, clean cotton and linen rags," all items produced in the West Division. In 1797, an ad for Webster's store advertised that he had received goods from New York including broad cloths, plain and figured cashmere, flannels, vest shapes, chintzes, calicoes, satins, Persians, plain silk, and many other types of cloth. He also offered crockery, hardware and groceries.

The ability to trade for goods in the store is a sign that farmers could produce more than they could consume. Their production depended to a great degree on the amount of land they farmed and whether they also had a trade. Still, all 1,000 residents must have felt like they were part of the community.

The availability of land made life in America different than it was in England and spread opportunity around. Yet by the 1750s, land in the Connecticut colony was almost all being farmed. In 1754, Noah Webster, Sr. subscribed to land in Susquehannah County in the northern part of Pennsylvania. A man in Windham organized the subscribers. All the subscribers in the West Division lived near Webster on Main Street. Webster believed this land was controlled by the Connecticut colony because the charter gave the colony a right to all land westward.

The French and Indian War broke out in 1756 and fighting continued to 1761. In 1762, settlement began in the Susquehannah. In 1763, as a result of the Treaty of Paris ending the French and Indian War, the King in Council banned settlement on the Susquehannah land. There was concern among Connecticut's political leaders about this land. Connecticut had an elected governor and by the late 18th century the citizens feared that this right would be taken away if they caused any trouble and the British in turn would appoint a royal governor like in Massachusetts. In 1769, opponents of the Susquehannah land felt settlement there jeopardized Connecticut's Charter which allowed for the citizens to elect their own governor.

The General Assembly replied in 1774, by extending Connecticut's jurisdiction over the Susquehannah Company's claim in the Wyoming Valley in Pennsylvania. Thus, those who had the means could speculate in land out west, increasing their wealth in relationship to those who could not invest.

Religion provided a sense of community in New England, but it was clearly a hierarchical community. The Congregational Church was the established church; all had to pay a tax for the support of the minister, and it was the only church in town until 1859. The first two ministers of the West Division were Benjamin Colton and Nathaniel Hooker. Both men graduated from Yale College. Colton graduated just 13 years after it was founded and became a minister in the West Division in 1714. He served for 46 years until 1759 and earned his fame as a solid preacher.

Nathanael Hooker graduated from Yale in the late 1750s and was hired straight away; he was known to be a brilliant man. He died young at age 33 in 1770. A 1764 list of members in full communion at the Fourth Church of Christ Congregational revealed all levels of people who belonged to the church including a colonel, a lieutenant, several captains, deacons, "negroes," widows, wives, and single women listed by their own names. Anyone could be part of this church, though within it, people's ranks were clear by the seating arrangement, decided upon by the deacons. Women could be members in full communion, but widows sat in the back and wives were known by their husband's names.

The Reverend Nathaniel Hooker understood that for women's education, his community could not offer all he wanted for his daughter. For her, he felt, it was necessary to leave the community to get a good education. In his will he wrote that,

my said Daughter Ruth have a better and more polite Education than she can possibly have in the parish of West Division where she was born, and that for this purpose, She be sent to Boston or elsewhere as her circumstances will allow and prudence dictates, and thereby empower her Uncles James and Horace Hooker and her Aunt Eunice Ellery... [to carry out this desire].

For Ruth Hooker, the mores and services of the community would not allow her to develop in a way that her father envisioned so she had to leave.

The community in which she lived did delineate between people by gender, race and class. Clearly many of those divides could be considered even deeper in the late 18th century than they are today.

The Rev. Benjamin Colton and the Great Awakening

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, February 2009

The story of the Rev. Benjamin Colton, the first minister in the West Division, is a story of stability and tradition. He served the Fourth Congregational Church of Hartford here in the West Division for 46 years.

Settlers traveled to attend the First or Second Congregational Church on Main Street in Hartford when the West Division of Hartford was settled in the 1690s. By 1711, local residents wanted to have their own church.

When the settlers applied for a separate parish, there were 27 families with 164 family members here. According to their petition, seven houses had just recently been built, a sign that the area was growing. The petitioners claimed that there was enough land to support 90 families as they tried to make their case for their own church.

Connecticut's General Court (now known as the General Assembly) granted the West Division the ability to have its own church, the Fourth Congregational Church of Hartford. On February 24, 1713, ministers in the Hartford area ordained Benjamin Colton to become the pastor of the new church.

Colton took on his ministry in the first meetinghouse. It was a plain building, built in 1712, at the site of the Veterans Memorial on the corner of North Main Street and Farmington Avenue. It was a square wooden, unheated building, with a pyramid roof, small windows, small galleries, a wooden pulpit and rough-hewn benches. This building served the church and the town for 30 years.

The new congregation had 29 members. To become a member of any Puritan congregational church, parishioners publicly confessed their faith. There were 12 husband-wife couples that belonged to the church as well as five men, one wife without her husband and a widow. This group was Colton's first congregation.

Benjamin Colton studied for the ministry and graduated from Yale College in 1710. He was 21 when he took the pulpit. He was from a family of 18 children and grew up in Longmeadow, Mass. His grandfather emigrated from England.

Colton started as a trial candidate in his position until in October 1713, at age 23, when he was hired for a series of years. He married Ruth Taylor two months later. They had four children and in 1725 at age 32, she died. Colton was a widower for about one year. He then married Elizabeth Pitkin and they had five children. Elizabeth had her fifth child at age 47. This growing family became an integral part of the town.

Colton's church grew in its early years, as did the population of the town. Not much is known about his preaching, as he only published two sermons. But he was clearly an effective leader, as the congregation kept him on and the church kept growing. The First Great Awakening in the 1730s increased his attendance even more, but led to controversy because Colton was not a supporter of this Great Awakening.

Colton was a religious leader in Connecticut. In 1737, he was selected to deliver a sermon to the newly elected representatives in the new state house that was built in 1719. In his "election sermon" he urged the legislators to get back to God by cleaning up their moral lives. He felt as though there were too many sins including "uncleanness," pre-marital sex and the enormous amount of rum consumption, particularly among legislators. If, according to Colton, legislators were more moral, they could be more successful. Colton stood up for traditional values.

Even with his colony-wide stature, an outside authority had to come to settle things down at Colton's church due to the intrusion of the Great Awakening. This religious revival tested the authority of Congregational ministers, their education and their message.

In 1734, Northampton's Jonathan Edwards began the "awakening" revival, encouraging his parishioners to be more emotional in their faith and put their lives in the hands of God. Conversions were personal, but not public confessions.

George Whitefield's revival tour in 1740 and 1741 caused a stir. The young English Episcopalian evangelist was emotional, enthusiastic and convincing at his first stop in Boston, where churches seemed unable to contain the crowds that came to hear him. He preached up to 16 times per week. Converts cried out, wailed and jerked their bodies and made the settled ministers uneasy. Whitefield preached in nearby Suffield, East Windsor, Hartford and Wethersfield. Colton and other settled preachers were upset with Whitefield's invective against settled ministers who had not been taken up by the revival. He denounced their education at Yale and their lack of emotion in the pulpit.

Whitefield's message was taken even further by the Rev. James Davenport of Southold, Long Island, who in 1742 vehemently denounced the Congregational ministry and in New London arranged for lay converts to burn the symbols of what he thought was wrong with material goods and symbols of learning, including their clothing, ornaments and books.

The Great Awakening moved many of Colton's parishioners and Colton and Reverend Wadsworth in Hartford were both worried. But Colton remained in the pulpit, as officials from outside parishes came and settled things down.

The fact that Colton continued his ministry until 1759 showed that there was at least some victory for what were known as the "Old Lights." His church remained the only one in the West Division until the Episcopal Church in the 1840s. However, it seems clear that he had to change his message to adapt to the ideas of the Great Awakening, even if he didn't like it.

Colton's tenure of 46 years at the First Church was a testimony to the importance of his traditional role of the ministry that he learned at Yale. There is no doubt that the Great Awakening jarred him and his fellow ministers, but with their mutual assistance, they sustained the monopoly that the Congregational Church had on religion in Connecticut for at least another 70 years.

African-Americans in the 18th Century West Division

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, April 2001. The author thanks Sally Whipple, who collected these documents when she was director of the Noah Webster House.

In 1893, Bernard Christian Steiner wrote the following in *A History of Slavery in Connecticut*:

In general, Connecticut has little to be ashamed of in her treatment of the Negroes. She treated them kindly as slaves and freed them gradually, thus avoiding any violent convulsion... Her treatment of the slaves was almost always kind and generous. A master, in true patriarchal style, regarded them as in truth a part of his family. With the coming of the revolution and the struggle of the Colonists for freedom, a feeling arose that it was not just to hold other men in bondage and as a result, importation of slaves was forbidden in 1774.

How much truth is there to Steiner's assessment of the treatment of enslaved people in Connecticut? Were they treated kindly? Were the slave masters generous? Were enslaved people treated as part of the family and was the slave trade ended because of the ideology of freedom, which was so prevalent during the years leading up to the American Revolution? How did Steiner come to his conclusions?

The Public Records for the Colony of Connecticut, October 1774 reveal a far different reason for ending the slave trade in Connecticut than Steiner offers. "An Act for prohibiting the Importation of Indian, Negro, or Molatto Slaves" starts with the phrase, "Whereas the increase of slaves in this colony is injurious to the poor and inconvenient"... The legislators of the General Court in Connecticut were moved more by economic and political or moral reasons.

From the point of view of lawmakers, enslaved people took work away from the poor. Each town was responsible for taking care of the poor and the more enslaved Africans there were, it seemed, the more white poor there were. When legislators ended the slave trade, they acted out of their own self interest more than out of their commitment to liberty for all.

"Run-away" advertisements from the Connecticut Courant reveal that many enslaved people chose to flee rather than serve as a slave. In August 1774, Jude ran away from Stephen Sedgwick, a resident of the West Division of Hartford, now known as West Hartford. Jude was described as a "molatto servant man . . . about 21 years old, about five feet, eight inches high."

In the West Division, enslaved people were sometimes called servants. Stephen Sedgwick's probate record confirms that Jude was owned; he is listed in the record as "my Negro Boy Jude" on the line just above "all my sheep and all my swine."

Perhaps one could argue that Sedgwick was generous to Jude. Jude ran away with a claret-colored coat, two waistcoats, three pair of trousers, a pair of leather breeches and three shirts. He traveled with a forged pass.

Whether Jude wrote the pass, we do not know. Masters describe their property carefully and knew their clothing down to the type of buttons. His wardrobe leads one to believe that Jude was not destitute, but despite Sedgwick's generosity, Jude reacted in a way that questions whether he was being "kindly," and "as a member of the family." The owner offered a \$20 reward.

There is some evidence of good treatment in the church. John Whiting owned Page, who was listed in the Congregational Church records as a member of the church. Page also had economic power. During the winter of 1740-41, he bought cloth, thread and stockings from merchant John Whitman as recorded in his account book. These transactions lead us to believe that Page actually earned wages and had some economic autonomy. Perhaps this is an example of the master-slave relationship Steiner was describing.

Steiner's definition of a stable system based on family loyalty was put to the test in the 1790s. With the African uprising and revolution in Haiti between 1791 and 1794, Connecticut residents grew more nervous about the possibility of a slave revolt.

A newspaper article from the Connecticut Courant on September 19, 1791 reported on the "Insurrection of Negroes" in which the Negroes "destroyed all the plantations by fire; that they massacred without distinction every white man in their power; that Negroes are in immense bodies; that they have cut off all communication with any part of the country."

The newspaper reported that the U.S. sent boats to Haiti to rescue the white women and children and to send them to Jamaica or Cuba. Seemingly the fear of slave revolt had to be stronger in the South, where in a state like South Carolina, there were counties with more than 75% African slave population. Connecticut's slave population made up only about 3% of the total population.

However, in an alarming run-away ad in the Courant in 1794, Charles Churchill, a Wethersfield resident and owner of Jack, "a yellowish Negro who speaks French, Spanish and broken English" declared that Jack was a "cunning, wicked, blood-thirsty fellow who drew his knife and cut a gentleman."

Churchill went on to lambaste the legislature's gradual emancipation act of 1783 because he believed freedom would only encourage freed men to cut the throats of the white people, "which would shortly be the consequence as hath been the case in the French islands, where thousands of white people have been cruelly murdered by the same act of liberality."

This reaction does not seem like the actions of a slave or slave master who had a generous paternal relationship with the slaves as Steiner argues. Joanne Pope Melish in her book, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and Race in New England* (1998), argues that before the Civil War, New England's leaders were pushed to establish an ideology in opposition to that of the South which requires them to forget about their oppression and exploitation of African-Americans.

Bernard Steiner must have used sources of slaveowners, not the enslaved to write his history; diaries of whites, not run-away ads, to establish what seemed like a beneficial relationship for both slave and slaveholder.

A look at 18th-century primary documents reveals a world of tension between owner and owned. Personal rebellion on the part of the enslaved instilled fear in the slaveholders trying to uphold this economic, political and social institution. The West Division was not immune to these tensions.

While all people understood the concept of freedom, not all experienced it.

Whitman on Slavery

June 2018

This list was written on the back of a note about a mortgage deed sent to West Hartford's Town Clerk, Henry C. Whitman (1864-1952), sometime between 1901 and 1914. This is just part of the document penned, most

likely by Whitman, which lists all “negro” Baptisms, Owners of the Covenant, Members of the Church, and Deaths, gleaned from the pages of the First Church of Christ West Hartford’s vital records.

Whitman found that between 1738 and 1827, as many as 50 people of African descent lived in the West Division of Hartford (now West Hartford) and most of them were enslaved. Bristow Middle School (2005) commemorates one of those men. Bristow was part of a larger community of what were denoted in Church Records as “negro servants.”

At the Noah Webster House archives, in the Whitman Collection, you can find this 7 inch wide by 6 inch long legal letter, folded once. The letter has no date and fewer than 50 words. The letter reads:

Town Clerk, West Hartford, Conn.

Dear Sir:- Enclosed find a mortgage deed from Henry A. B. Day to this Company of certain property on Westland Avenue, which kindly record and return to us, together with your bill for recording. Yours Very Truly ,

C?? P. Day Secretary

Enclosure

When Town Clerk Whitman received the letter, probably in the early 1900s when Westland Avenue was being developed by Henry Day and his father’s construction company, he filed the mortgage deed and kept the note on his desk.

Then Whitman used the piece of paper to record what had been lost from memory, and possibly what he thought was lost from the story of the town’s past. Whitman not only copied them all out, he analyzed what he recorded.

Many West Hartford residents are surprised to learn that so many people of African descent in the West Division of Hartford were owned by town leaders, ministers, and the wealthier sorts and that so many enslaved people lived here. In 1790, at the time of the first census, there were close to 1,000 people who lived here, in about 150 families. Of those, at least 25 of these families – as many as 15% – owned people of African descent at some point in their family’s history.

On the back of this letter, under the heading “Slaves in West Hartford - from church records,” Whitman wrote out the names and made these categories:

- Baptisms
- Owned the Covenant
- Admitted to Membership
- Deaths

He listed the names from the church records under each of these headings, documenting men, women and children who were enslaved between 1738 and 1827. In all, Whitman wrote,

Record is found of some 30 or more actual slaves, or freed slaves 1738-1827. At least one saw war service, or something approaching it, “Prot.” who died in camp at Ticonderoga.

“Prot.” is listed under Deaths with the following note: “1776 Sep – Prot. servant of John Whitman, Jr. in ye Camp Ticonderoga.” Here Henry must have stopped when he wrote his own surname, Whitman, realizing that John was his ancestor.

The first in the list is Hannibal, negro servant to Thomas Hosmer, baptised in 1738. Thomas Hosmer was the grandson of one of the first proprietors, also Thomas Hosmer, who owned at least 300 acres north of the center. Just north of where the American School for the Deaf is today, his father, Stephen Hosmer, built the first mill in town. Stephen, according to Town Historian Nelson Burr, “became one of the richest landlords, farmers and traders in the Connecticut Valley.” He became a communicant of the Fourth Church of Hartford in 1725 under Pastor Nathaniel Hooker. He married Susanna Steel in 1734. According to Whitman’s notes, his “negro servant Hannibal” was baptized on November 5, 1738. Five months later, in April 1739,

Thomas and Susanna had their first child Thomas who was baptised. In 1742, Thomas bought a second man, “Hercules (Negro serv’t of Thomas Hosmer),” who was baptised in that year.

In 1742, Thomas was chosen Moderator of the church and re-elected through the 1760s. He was one of the citizens voted to take care of the schools, and to help build a new school house. In 1757, he took on the label Esq. In 1761, Whitman catalogued under “Deaths,” Feb. 24 Hercules (Negro Serv. to Thos Hosmer), age 32.

In January 1777, Thomas Hosmer wrote his will and died in that same month. In his will, he freed Hannibal:

I have given my negro Hannibal his home and yet by the law he may be chargeable to my Estate if he shall be impotent and unable to provide for himself, if such a thing should happen I order my six sons to provide for his prosperity in equal proportion, but if he be lazie and idle and spend his time foolishly I desire that they will take care that the selectmen will bind him out.

The church records reflect his status as a free man by listing Hannibal’s death as transcribed by Whitman:

1779 July 13 Hannibal A Negro Man Old Age

We don’t know if Whitman actually saw that Hannibal had been freed in copying out these records, if he hadn’t seen the will. But one piece of his analysis leads us to believe he did:

If Thos. H. Hooker was 1st to free his slaves Capt. Keyes seems [to] have been last. The negro slaves were apparently generally set free in West Hfd Parish at end after the time of the Revolution 1775-1791. In support of this conclusion is the term “negro man” instead of “servant” first recorded in 1778 + appears commonly after that.

Why did Whitman transcribe these records? Did he want to know that his ancestors owned Prot. and Rubin, a Black Boy? I wonder if he ever showed the list to anyone or if he shared the information with his wife, his children, or the leaders of the town? Was it only for his own edification, for his own understanding of the colonial world? We do know he kept the sheet and it made it from the church records to the Whitman Collection at the Noah Webster House.

Now the Witness Stones project will shine a brighter light on these women, men, and children who have mostly been forgotten. These men and women helped build our community and our churches through their work, yet, for so long we only recognized them as property here. Acknowledging the existence of this inhumane system of slavery is a first step in addressing issues of race in our community today. It must have been a jarring step for Whitman as well.

The Sarah Whitman Hooker House

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, January 2005

A house can tell a story. Take the Sarah Whitman Hooker house on the south side of New Britain Avenue east of Main Street. With its beginnings in 1720, it survives today as the oldest structure in the town. The house is owned by the town, but limited access to the house has not allowed its story to be heard by very many people.

The structure was built about 50 years after lots were first divided in the West Division. Split in the late 17th century, people started to move here after the fear of the Indians died away with the end of King Philip’s War (1676). By the 1680s, Stephen Hosmer built a mill on Trout Brook where it crosses North Main and owned 310 acres of land. In 1710 and then again in 1711, citizens of the West Division, 27 families and 164 people, petitioned and got its own church which became the Fourth Church of Hartford.

Ten years later, John Seymour purchased the land on which the house stands from Stephen Steel. In Seymour’s 1747 will, he mentions his “mansion house on Four Mile Hill in the West Division.” In colonial days this location was called Four Mile Hill – four miles west of the Old State House on the South Road to Farmington.

The structure began as one room with a chamber above and was probably first used as a tavern. Soon after, Seymour added onto it, making it a seven room house by 1747, at the time of Seymour’s will. Seymour’s son



Figure 1.3: The Sarah Whitman Hooker House, 1237 New Britain Avenue, was built pre-1740 around a tavern room, probably the oldest section of a building in West Hartford. The home has been used as a tavern, a one family home, a prison during the Revolution, a boarding house, a restaurant and inn, and since 1976, a museum owned by the Town of West Hartford. Source: Noah Webster House & West Hartford Historical Society. Date: 1882

Timothy held a license for a tavern in 1733. Next to the meeting houses, the taverns were the most important centers of village life in colonial America.

In the mid-1770s, Sarah and Thomas Hooker moved into the house on the South Road. Sarah Whitman Hooker was the daughter of John Whitman, a prominent town merchant and political leader in the 18th century. The extensive list of household furnishings and goods which her father gave her on her marriage are enumerated in his account book and thus provide a glimpse into the material nature of her life. This account book can be found at the Connecticut Historical Society.

Thomas Hart Hooker went off to war in May 1775, right after the first battle at Lexington and Concord, leaving his wife and two children ages three and five. He died of pneumonia six months later during the siege of Boston.

Hooker's slave Bristow bought his freedom before his master left to fight. It seems that Hooker also had a slave named Amboy, and according to an 1882 photograph American Revolution, the house was home to a slave named Amboy who planted an Elm tree on the property in 1769 (cthistoryonline.org). I question the date recorded on the photograph, because it wasn't until 1777 with the first American victory over the British at Saratoga, that there was a systematic planting of Elms in the center of Elmwood by Capt. Ebenezer Faxon.

There is no evidence of slave quarters at the house, but it is clear that Hooker owned slaves. Eighteenth century inventories seem to reveal that not more than one black lived on the premises at one time.

During the American Revolution, after she was widowed, Sarah Whitman Hooker was asked to "keep" Philip and his son Andrew Skene, Tories who were taken as prisoners. Hartford had a "Committee Appointed to Take Care of Prisoners" that received their orders from Governor Jonathan Trumbull. Hooker was charged to "confine him on his parole of Honor not to go out of the bounds of Hartford . . . And provide. . . [him] with suitable lodgings and entertainment in some remote part of the town of Hartford." Philip Skene was the Loyalist Governor of both Forts Ticonderoga and Crown Point in upstate New York. The Skenes were native born, not English soldiers. A report in January of 1776 claimed that over 20 people gathered outside the Hooker homestead to harm the prisoners. Purportedly, Hooker calmed them down and they dispersed.

In the early 1800s, Sarah Whitman Hooker added on to the house. She had the central chimney removed and in turn built twin chimneys on the east and west sides of the house. It is a typical five bay center hall Georgian style home, with clapboard siding and 12 over 12 double hung windows. One chimney has been rebuilt after it was destroyed by fire in the 20th century.

A man named Jedediah Mills lived there in 1807 while Hooker owned the house. He had a taverner's license for several years in the early 1800s. Still, again in the mid-19th century it became a tavern under the name the Sheaf of Wheat.

In the 19th century, West Hartford remained a farming town. By the mid-19th century, farming became more specialized, particularly in dairy. Just to the north of the house, Charles Beach built his Vine Hill Farm and by 1900, the farm was famous for "baby's milk." The Hooker house, by then owned by the Beach dairy farm, was used as a boarding house for workers from the Vine Hill Farm.

By the early 20th century, West Hartford transformed into a suburb and the Beach family sold its farm in the 1920s. They donated a good portion of their land to the town in the form of Beachland Park in the early 1930s. Once the farm stopped producing, the Hooker house changed from the boarding house, to a restaurant and inn and that was known as the Sarah Whitman Hooker House.

By 1976, the town of West Hartford owned the house and leased it to the West Hartford Bicentennial Trust to be open to the public as a museum. It was renovated through the efforts of the Fran Fransson. Her recent death has left the house in the same trust under the behest of her children. The house is on the National Historical Register.

To interpret an historical home, usually the trust decides on a time period, and certainly this house has rich ties to the Revolutionary War period. At the same time, the changes in its structure and use tell much about

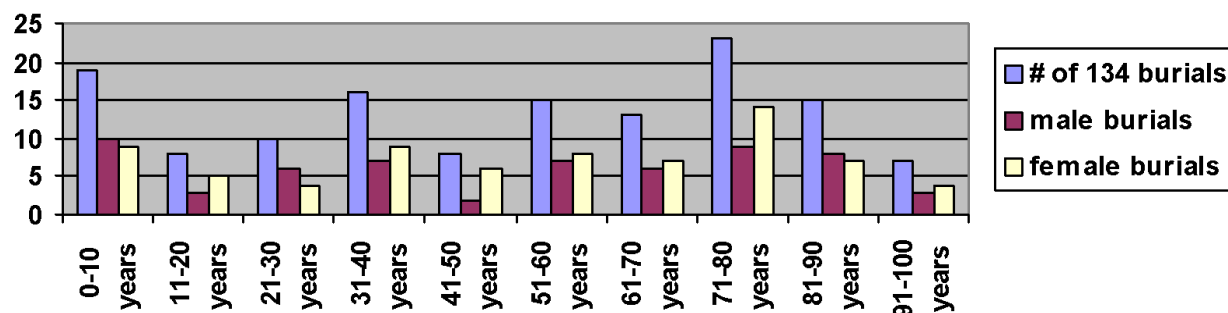


Figure 1.4: Old Burying Ground Burials, by age and gender

the history of the town in the 19th and 20th centuries as well. If the house was open more, the citizens who own it could learn more of the richness of the story in three dimensions.

Ye Olde Burying Ground

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, January 2002

Historians have several motives when they analyze artifacts and documents. We try to get a good story from them, have them make connections among people, make them capture a moment, and show how they reflect change. A visit on an afternoon in West Hartford's Old Burying Ground on 30 North Main Street will provide you with the best light to read the stones and a way to understand the connections and tensions between people in a colonial community.

In West Hartford's Old Center Burying Yard, whose first burial was in 1725 and whose last was in 1868, there are differences in how the dead were memorialized, depending on wealth and status, gender, race, and era in which they were buried.

During the Great Depression (in 1934), workers for the federal government's Works Progress Administration surveyed the 137 graves and recorded their findings. With today's data base computer capacity, it is easy to make a demographic study of those 137 people (though there are only dates for 134). There are 64 women and 73 men recorded.

The statistics show that life was good in the West Division of Hartford, especially in comparison to what some had left in England, and what some of the first settlers had suffered in the early 17th century. Taken by decade, the most people died in their 70s. Once people lived to be 10, their chances of survival, and even living into their 80s and 90s, were quite high. Thomas Merrell, born in 1714, the year after the first church was erected in the West Division, died at age 100.

Today, more women live into their later years, but in colonial times, this seemed not to be the case, with more men than women living into their 80s and 90s. Many women died in childbirth. Rachel Webster, first wife of Abraham, (the oldest brother of Noah Jr.) died at age 21, in childbirth. Her infant was never named and died after 7 days. While more men than women died in their 20s, more women than men died in their 30s and 40s, perhaps showing that childbirth became more dangerous, the older the woman.

When you walk into the burial ground, you walk into the "new" section, which has burials from the 19th century. The old section, which is about two-thirds of the acreage, fills the northern section of the yard. You can immediately see a difference in the size of the stones. None in the old section are more than three feet high. The new section has two large obelisks that commemorate the Talcott (of Talcott Junior High and Talcott Mountain fame) and Stanley families. By the 19th century, the idea of individualism had made its way into American society and the large size of the tombstones shows that wealthy families wanted to distinguish themselves from others.

In the colonial section distinctions between the rich and poor are evident, but the difference is not as pronounced. Differences can be noted in the size of stones, the existence of a footstone and elaborate carving.

The largest stone, though, is not based on wealth, but on status in the community. It commemorates the death of Reverend Nathaniel Hooker who passed away in 1770 at age 32 after serving the Congregational Church for 12 years. His stone is the only tablestone in the burial ground, but is in a sad state of disrepair. The four pedestals collapsed a long time ago and are stored at the Noah Webster House. The bottom slab and the top of the table can be viewed in the burial ground. The full inscription on the “table” details Hooker’s contributions to the town and champions his role as the best-educated man in the community. He was known as a brilliant man who ministered well. His role as doctor, however, did not serve him well in that he treated himself with mercury, leading to his demise. This tablestone can be found in the center of the east side of the burial ground.

Men’s graves tended to be larger than women’s and more elaborate. Samuel Stanley, who died at age 38 in 1787, had both a headstone and a footstone and his stone is much larger than that of his wife, Anna, who died at age 33 in 1780. Anna had no footstone. This reflected women’s partnership with men, for they are buried next to one another, but also represents the patriarchal society in which they lived.

Only one African American’s grave is marked in the burial ground, though I believe more are buried there. A man by the name of Bristol has a gravestone standing alone in the northwest corner. His stone reads, “Bristol, An African, Died 1814.” It is a simple but powerful remembrance of a man who bought his freedom from Thomas Hart Hooker in 1776 and who gained a reputation for his agricultural knowledge in his adult life. West Division farmers often consulted him. However, he could not be buried “among” them, and he was only given one name on his tombstone. Like his membership in the church, his location was separate in the burial ground.

A walk in the Old Burying Yard brings you back to another place and time. But it also jars you with the underside of life in the 20th century. The gravestones are in a bad state of disrepair. Trees and weeds compromise the stones. Lichens grow. And the writing on many of the stones is no longer readable. Vandalism from 1990 when 34 stones were damaged has still not been repaired. Can we afford to leave this window on the past in such disrepair? What does this tell us about our connection with those who came before us?

A Look at The Merrells

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, March 2002

When Jacob Merrell died from an accidental fall on his pitchfork, his wife Mary Merrell was left widowed. She never remarried, and lived in the West Division until her death in 1792. Surviving as a widow at that time in history was challenging, as it was seemingly impossible to live as a single person in an 18th century household. Mary stands out because she seemed to do quite well as a widow, probably through the support of her seven children.

How did Mary do more than just survive for the 21 years after her husband died?

The Merrells lived on the Farmington Road, now known as New Britain Avenue on their farm where Wolcott Park is located today. Samuel and Jonathan Skinner, Joseph Skinner, Allyn Seymour, and Charles Seymour were her neighbors. At the top of the hill, on the corner of New Britain Avenue and South Main Street stood a one-room schoolhouse for the south end of town.

Mary grew up in Wintonbury Parish (now Bloomfield), and married Jacob Merrell in the 1750s. Jacob was 41 at the time of their first child’s birth. When Jacob died at age 57, he and Mary had four girls and three boys who ranged in age from 16 to 4. Mary bore children in 1755, 1757, 1758, 1760, 1762, 1766 and 1767. Thus was the life of a farming woman.

According to Blackstone’s four-volume legal code written in 1765, married women were literally “covered” by their husband’s authority. Her “very being or legal existence,” he wrote was “consolidated into that of her husband; under whose wing, protection and cover she performs everything.” As a married woman, Mary

Merrell could not own or buy property in her own name, enter a contract or write a will. Once she was widowed, she gained some of these rights back.

We can get an idea of how Mary lived by comparing the probate record of Jacob Merrell when he died in 1771 with Mary's inventory when she died in 1792.

Upon a husband's death, wives received one-third of their husband's wealth, called the "dower's share." The most valuable "movables" Mary received were a feather bed bolster, a year old heifer, curtains, a blanket, and six silver teaspoons. Each of these items was worth more than a case with drawer (a blanket chest with one drawer). She also acquired a bed, two pillows and two blankets. For her third of the farm, she got a one-year-old heifer.

She also received one-third of the real estate of land and house. The probate records described specifically what parts of the house legally belonged to her. Along with getting the South Lower Room, she also got the "liberty to use the fire place in the North Room for washing and baking and to pass and repass thro' the entry North Room and Kitchen to the well." She also got the west end of the barn and the liberty to use the barn floor for carting in hay and threshing and feeding the cattle.

Her oldest son Jacob, who was 13 at the time, owned the other two-thirds of the estate. What would it have been like for a grown woman to have to depend so heavily on her 13-year-old son?

Mary's inventory on her death 21 years later provides a window on how she survived for those years without a husband. She kept many of the movable goods she received in 1771 and she added a large number of goods showing that, though she may not have prospered, her standard of living probably did not decline noticeably.

By the time of her death, when she was in her late 50s, she had items that reflected economic production, furniture and clothing, and items that went beyond the necessities.

There was clearly economic production in her house. Mary had a churn, Dutch wheel, and two hetchels for preparing flax to spin into linen. She had a few hogsheads and two meat barrels in which to store her food. She had one pig, two cows, and one steer. She had a right to the horse house and she owned 36 acres of land in her own right. She also had two hives of bees, which aside from her animals and land, were her most valuable property. Perhaps she got these hives during the Revolutionary War when West Division families chose to stop importing British traded sugar.

She had about the same amount of furniture, and had added blankets, quilts, another bed and several sheets. She had many more kitchen tools including a porridge pot, teapot, large basin, brass kettle, large iron kettle and a washtub.

Her ownership of a clock, two "best" tablecloths, five teaspoons, five napkins, and two pictures show the growing gentility of the age. The standard of living for all New Englanders improved over these twenty years, and Mary's ability to buy or produce these items shows that she was able to improve her standard of living.

Her children were in their 20s and 30s by time she died. Some of them must have stayed to help her or lived nearby.

Mary had enough money to pay her funeral expenses which included, in order of value, a gravestone, money for the distributors, two quarts of gin, money for the surveyor, money for the advertisements, money for "time and trouble", one quart of rum, and a horse and wagon.

Widowed farm women had to live with others to survive, and Mary Merrell had her children. She could continue to run the household and, in Mary's case, her honey might have given her some extra buying power. Women could choose not to remarry, but my guess is that Mary's 21 years of widowhood would have been remarkable in small town New England.

Old Lights and New Lights

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, October 2003

In 1977, local historian Elizabeth Hathaway wrote a “Chronology of some of the events that might have been discussed by West Division families during Noah Webster’s youth.” In this four page chronology of the years 1757 to 1774, she notes two particular events about choosing a new minister and buying and settling land in the Susquehanna which tie the reader to colonial and international affairs, illustrating how learning the history of our town, then the West Division, can teach about national and international issues.

Choosing a new minister was part of a web of larger events. The issues of fate, salvation, the role of the sermon, the role of emotions and good works were all part of the decision about who to choose as the next pastor. In 1759, Benjamin Colton, the first minister in the West Division, died. He served the town for 46 years and baptized Noah Webster, Jr. Colton trained to be a Congregational minister at Yale, and so was ordained by other ministers, not by bishops. Pastors from surrounding towns, including the First Church in Hartford, ordained him.

Colton held the beliefs of an Old Light minister, a man who supported the Puritan ideals of the colony’s founders. Old Lights had softened some of the strict rules of the church and the Halfway Covenant allowed more members into the church. The New Lights challenged the established Old Light clerical leadership who were trained at Yale. They emerged from the First Great Awakening in the 1740s. New Lights were considered more evangelical, and the sermon, which could move congregants emotionally, was more important than the reasoned sermons of the learned Old Light ministers. New Light ministers were not college educated, but were known for their ability to preach.

The Hartford ministry liked the revivals at first. They felt they breathed new life into their congregations. Itinerant preachers like George Whitfield – an outsider, without a Yale education - preached in the area. As the New Lights gained followers, the Old Lights condemned them. Local Puritan ministers refused to approve New Lights for ordination.

The Old Lights, like Benjamin Colton, supported the Presbyterian associations that were set up by the Saybrook Platform in 1708 which centralized the choosing of ministers to make sure that they were products of Yale and the traditional preaching of the Puritans.

New Lights wanted each church to have congregational independence. They accused Old Lights of believing that people could control their salvation contrary to the belief that their fate was established at birth. (Anne Hutchinson was kicked out of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the 1630s for this idea that people had some control of their fate.) The Old Lights denied this, but the accusations stuck. New Lights said that the Old Lights examined people’s lives, not their hearts. New Lights opposed the rational, more intellectual teachings of Old Lights. These New Light evangelical ministers allowed congregants into their churches without saving grace and attacked Old Light ministers for being spiritually dead.

There must have been some discussion of these issues in the West Division upon Colton’s death in 1759. In that same year, there was an attempt to oust the Old Lights from control of the General Assembly which met in both Hartford and New Haven, but it was not successful.

In 1759, the West Division congregation elected Nathanael Hooker, another Yale graduate, thus affirming the Old Light control of their church. But the New Light presence did not disappear. Just seven years later, in 1766, a parish member invited a New Light minister into the group and it was deemed a disorderly thing to do. The influence of the First Great Awakening had West Division residents thinking, but their allegiance remained with the Old Lights.

A second issue which brought world issues to the West Division was Connecticut land claims in what had become Pennsylvania. The Connecticut Charter dating back to the 17th century claimed Connecticut’s land stretched from sea to sea. This led to overlapping claims with William Penn’s charter, which most people agreed, superseded this charter. But, some people, especially in eastern Connecticut still believed they had jurisdiction over western Pennsylvania. The French also claimed some of this territory.

People in the Connecticut colony started a land bank where people borrowed and deposited money. The deposited money earned interest, and people put up Susquehanna land as collateral for the money they borrowed. The land bank invested in the Susquehanna land company. Speculators in eastern Connecticut had done so for years.

Noah Webster, Sr. subscribed to the land bank in 1754; he owned land there that would be bought by a settler. This land was disputed during the French and Indian War which endured from 1754 to 1761. When the war ended and the threat of the French and the Indians dissipated, settlement began in Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania.

However, the Proclamation of 1763, part of the French and Indian War peace treaty, banned settlement in the Susquehanna land. Webster's investment seemed to have lost his value. But, in 1769, Connecticut residents, in direct opposition to both Parliament and the Pennsylvania colony, once again settled in the Susquehanna.

This settlement stirred up old tensions over Connecticut's charter. Opponents of settlement, who tended to be Old Lights, felt settlement jeopardized Connecticut's charter. They feared that this charter, which allowed for an elected Governor, not an appointed one by the Crown, would be in jeopardy if the settlers persisted. Connecticut was the only colony which did not have a Royal Governor, and the Old Light leaders believed Connecticut should lay low and not draw attention from Parliament in any way.

After Parliament passed the Stamp Act in 1765, New Lights took the principled stand of proclaiming the tax as evil. They questioned the Parliament's ability to lay an internal tax and used this issue to unseat the Old Light Governor Thomas Fitch. Fitch had written a pamphlet on the issue, but he had not opposed the Stamp Act strongly enough. William Pitkin, a New Light, won election and took control.

Webster, Sr., aligned with the New Lights, while he lived in an Old Light town. Certainly there would have been those here who would have discouraged the speculation in Pennsylvania land. We can only guess whether Webster was making a political statement along with trying to make some money. We do know from Hathaway that Webster, Sr. was elected a grand jury man in 1760, and a selectman in 1768 and 1769, and from 1772 to 1774 he was elected Treasurer of the Ecclesiastical Society when Nathan Perkins, a Princeton graduate, became minister, upon Hooker's death.

In the 1760s, tensions abounded in the West Division. These religious, economic, and political tensions were often tied to national and international events. The beauty of local history is that it provides specific evidence, familiar to us, that helps shed light on these broader events and ideas. The local and national events can each gain deeper meaning when we can make those connections.

Here Lies the Story of Elisha Seymour

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, November 2011

Elisha Seymour died at age 32 in October 20, 1776 of "the putrid fever" while serving in the West Division's militia to fight the British Revolutionary War.

He left an inventory of his "reale and personal estate" which allows us a window into the world of revolutionary America. By carefully reading Seymour's inventory one can discover what he did for a living and something about his position in the community.

Noah Webster House researchers found Seymour's inventory in the Probate Records Collection at the Connecticut State Library. They searched through the Fourth Congregational Church records to find out how big his family was to try to recreate the texture of his life.

Elisha married Rhoda Sedgwick on June 13, 1762 when he was just 18 years old. Their first son Elisha was baptized just seven months after they married, a sign that premarital sex is not new.

Just 14 months later they had their second son. Rhoda and Elisha went on to have five more children, for a total of six boys - Elisha, Levi, Theron, Herman, Luther and Ambrose - and the last, a girl born in 1773 named Prudence.

When their father died in the war, their children were ages 2 to 13.

Seymour's fighting in the Revolutionary War may have led to our independence, but what did it mean for Rhoda and her seven children? We don't know how soon she remarried, but it would have been most difficult

for her to survive on her own.

At age 13, it would have been difficult, but possible, for son Elisha to act as head of household.

Seymour's inventory was used to appraise the total value of his estate so that his debts could be settled and his belongings could be fairly distributed to his heirs. The colonial court appointed appraisers, usually neighbors, to conduct inventories.

For Seymour, Daniel Webster (Noah Webster's uncle) and Noah Webster Sr. appraised the property. Solomon Ensign and Benjamin Gilbert appraised a few more items that were tacked on to the end of the inventory, completed almost a year after his death on October 16, 1777.

Usually, the wife received one-third of the estate and the sons got the other two-thirds. Seymour's entire estate was worth 257 pounds, 6 shillings and 10 pence.

He owned land, but probably not enough to be a farmer. He owned a house, three acres of land and a barn worth 140 pounds. This made up about 55 percent of the worth of his estate.

He also owned eight acres of woodland worth 33 pounds, about four pounds per acre. In the 1770s in New England, a middling farmer needed about 50 acres to make a go of it.

Seymour owned a yoke of oxen (10 pounds) and four cows (10 pounds) that provided him with a means for transportation and milk. He owned one draft chain and a narrow axe. He also owned a "chair carriage," which likely was pulled by his team of oxen.

He owned seven stock sheep and two swine. He had two bushels of flaxseed in his inventory as well. Flax was used to make linen cloth.

Clearly, Seymour did not have enough land to make it as a farmer. Further down in his inventory, a set of shoemaker tools and a pair of boots is listed. He owned a shoemaker's candlestick as well. So, he would have had a farm, but would have made a living as a shoemaker.

To process the wool and flax, Seymour owned two wool cards, a great wheel and a Dutch wheel for spinning. Cloth manufacturing was going on in his home, probably by Rhoda and the children.

In the kitchen, his household had a new corn basket and a frying pan. He had three old cider barrels and two hogsheds. He had a pepper mill, an old brass kettle, a box iron and heater, old knives and forks, a shovel and tongs, a pair of hand irons, a great trammel and a small, both installed in the fireplace.

He had two powdering tubs, three bottles, one stone jar, one coffee copper pot, a tea kettle and an iron pot. He had two great platters, five pewter plates, two pewter basins, a pewter teapot, three glasses, a china cup, a warming tan and a punch bowl.

The poor used wooden utensils, so the existence of pewter objects shows that Seymour did have the ability to show signs of gentility. Pewter cost about one-tenth of the price of silver, but still the cost of a dish equaled what a skilled craftsman could earn in a day. More than 300 pounds of pewter were shipped to the American colonies annually in the 1760s.

He also had eight earthen plates made by the local potter. He had a hand-held looking glass. There was a glass decanter and a glass cruet for vinegar. Seymour had an iron kettle and iron shovel for the fire, a pair of flat irons, which may have been manufactured in western Connecticut where an iron foundry was established in the early 1700s, despite British policy that no manufacturing could be done in the colonies.

In colonial homes, rooms had many different functions: Homeowners moved their furniture around daily. The best room where guests visited would also be the parental bedroom. Seymour owned two chairs, two feather beds and a second bedstead. a trundle bed and a bed quilt. He had three pillows and two pillowcases.

He also possessed woolen sheets. These woolen sheets could be a sign that Seymour bought locally woven woolen cloth. Cotton cloth was manufactured at this time in England, but Patriots like Seymour would have chosen not to import such materials during this time period.

He also owned linen sheets. Flax plants were grown right west of Webster's house down the hill in what is now Rockledge Golf Course. The two bushels of flax seed in his inventory point to home manufacturing of these sheets.

Before the invention of the cotton gin in 1793, flax literally sustained people in colonial America. It was grown in every colony. It was not only used for its fiber to make cloth. Fiber also was used for its linseed oil.

Seymour's ownership of a tablecloth and curtains were a sign of the increased ability to produce cloth and the sign of a growth in consumerism.

Clothing was a valuable part of anyone's estate in the late 1700s. Seymour had four coats, four vests, one pair of leather breeches and one pair of knit breeches. He had three pair of stockings, a new checked linen shirt, two plain shirts, a yard and a half of cloth, six pair of trousers, a silk handkerchief, a pair of gloves, a pair of shoes, a pair of shoe buckles and a pair of knee buckles.

He stored his clothing in a chest of drawers and a white chest. Seymour owned a gun and two powder horns. It is notable that he left a gun at home, because he probably had one with him while serving in the militia.

Seymour also owned two Bibles. He had a mariner's calendar, a book called the Young Man's Companion and an Old Mariner book. The shoemaker was both literate and religious.

Finally, he had a "note against Joseph Waters" worth 4 pounds 16 pence, 7 shillings. This note made him a lender, not a debtor.

Seymour made a living at one of the most commonly practiced trades in colonial New England. Because it was so easy to set up shop, the competition could be fierce and by the late 18th century, ready-made shoes from England were part of the competition.

With non-importation that came with the American Revolution, this could have helped him financially. Instead, he chose to go off to war.

Perhaps young Elisha had taken up the trade by that time. My guess is that family and maybe even the town had to step in to help Rhoda as she managed her household of eight without her husband.

Textiles in Early West Hartford

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, February 2002

Go see Lucy Young's tablecloth and towel in the Noah Webster House's exhibit "Textiles 2001." The tablecloth is an "M's and O's" pattern made of natural linen. It is 23.5 inches wide and uses three panels of cloth. Woven sometime between 1775 and 1820, it has a hand netted fringe similar to fishnet attached on all four sides. Lucy Young signed her name to this tablecloth.

You can also see a towel, known then as a "point twill diamond diaper" with a cotton tab on each end. This, too, was woven between 1775 and 1820 and belonged to Young. These pieces of woven cloth are beautiful to look at, and represent so much of the change and tension of life in a small town in Connecticut at the time of the new nation.

I happened to view these two textiles, among the 30 on display in the exhibit, while I was in the middle of reading Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's new book, *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth* (2001). Ulrich argues that textiles, as much as farming, were the center of the economy of the new republic in New England. When you find out how linen cloth was made, you get an idea of the interdependence of men and women and a feeling of the rising sense of gentility in places where people had been living for almost 100 years.

Ulrich, a Harvard history professor, uses a linen tablecloth from New Hampshire, very similar to the Lucy Young's, as an example of household production. She argues that the edgings, tassels and fringes were a sign of "emerging neoclassicism and the spread of rural refinement." She spends a chapter showing how this tablecloth reflects New England's industrial beginnings, not as a radical departure from home production,



Figure 1.5: Lucy Young demonstrates her skill weaving natural linen using the “M’s and O’s” pattern. The fringe on the tablecloth denotes a sense of gentility in a growing consumer culture. It also represents women’s role in an economy based on work by both men and women. Source: Noah Webster House & West Hartford Historical Society.

but as an adaptation to what they already knew. She describes the interdependence of men and women in household production.

When we think about Lucy Young's tablecloth within Ulrich's interpretation, it gives us a new window on life in the West Division.

Local historians believe that flax was grown west of the Webster house, in what are now Rockledge Golf Course and the neighborhood that surrounds Duffy School.

Daniel Webster, grandfather to Noah, had a loom in his house. His inventory in 1766 listed one peck of flaxseed worth 1 shilling 3 pence, and 7 pounds of flax worth 6 pence.

Flax was planted in May by farmers who sowed the seed by broadcasting it. The seeds were light, but it was difficult to seed evenly. To plant a half an acre, farmers needed $\frac{3}{4}$ of a bushel of seed. In June, women often weeded the flax. Three or four days of harvest in late July or early August meant pulling the flax plants up by its roots, being careful not to tangle the stems. New Englanders let the plants grow long enough to produce seeds and the next step was to remove the seeds from the stem to save them for the next planting. Ulrich reports that in one Connecticut town, merchants exported more than 4,000 bushels of flaxseed in one year. West Division farmers probably produced only for local consumption. Daniel Webster's flax seed was probably from last year's crop.

The next step was to "ret" the flax to get the hard outer stem off the silky fibers. Interpreters at the Noah Webster house believe that this was done in the brook, which today flows through the golf course and then runs through a pipe under the Conard High School Athletic fields. Ulrich believes that many New Englanders retted flax in the fall by placing the flax on the grass where it would soak up the dew, until the outer shell broke down. Whichever method was used, it smelled terribly.

If you go up to the garret in the Noah Webster house you will see the tools used for the rest of the process. A "braking" machine swings a heavy plank onto a small bundle of flax and then a small paddle was used to separate the husk that remained. The short fibers called "tow" fell to the ground. Either women or men could have done this task. The husk was saved as tinder to start a fire; processing flax was often dangerous because of its flammability.

Hetcheling was women's work and could be dangerous. Hetchels consist of a square of wood with an array of nails through which one draws the flax to prepare it for spinning. The Noah Webster House has three different sizes.

Spinning was a big part of women's work in the early republic. Women spun alone and they spun in groups. They spun flax and wool. And they spun day after day.

Even as people were able to buy machine-made cloth from England, and as the industrial revolution began in New England, they continued to weave and spin. The consumer society, which we so easily recognize today, had begun. People had more textiles in their homes in the form of clothing, bed and table linens. But the home production continued. When 100 years earlier, a man might have two shirts; by 1800 he could have five.

In Connecticut, certain portions of the textile making were taken out of the home. By 1800, almost every town, including the West Division, had a carding mill. One was on Trout Brook in what is now Beachland Park, just north of the pond. No longer did women need to do the time-consuming job of carding the wool. People took their wool to the carding mill and it did this work very quickly. Then women had more time to spin. This did not mean that families got rid of their cards. Some total home production continued. In the 1759 inventory of the West Division's Thomas Olmsted, one pair of cards is listed along with 15 $\frac{1}{2}$ pounds of wool.

Inventories of Jacob Merrel (1770), shows him owning a weavers' loom, a winding wheel, three shuttles and one hetchel. Allyn Seymour (1760) had a Little Wheel, a Dutch Wheel, linen yarn and worsted yarn. Ebenezer Mix (1766) had 32 pounds of wool, some wool colored blue, a Dutch wheel, clock reel, hetchel and 34 weight of flax in his garret.

Mehitable Bidwell's inventory (1767) shows the cooperative nature of the world 200 years ago. The inventory shows $\frac{1}{3}$ of a hetchel, demonstrating that Bidwell had to share. Ulrich argues that ownership and cloth

making were often community affairs.

The existence of Lucy Young's table cloth, which is homespun, also tells of a new sense of gentility and the possibility of having more than what was necessary, another sign of the growing consumer culture. It is not until the 1770s that tablecloths begin to appear in inventories. By this time, people have the time and means to make what are not necessities. Allyn Seymours inventory (1760) lists two tablecloths, Ebenezer Mix's (1766) two diaper tablecloths, a fringe tablecloth, a birdseye table cloth, and a plain and a diamond tablecloth. Ebenezer Sedgwick (1760) had a diaper tablecloth, two tablecloths, six diaper napkins, and four homemade diaper napkins. In this case, the distinction is made between machine bought and homespun.

These inventories and Lucy Young's textiles remind us that men's and women's economic lives were interdependent. The household remained a site of production even as the industrial revolution began to move some production outside the home. This Industrial Revolution was not a sudden dislocation, but a slow process that was blended into the family economy providing more consumer choice and a higher standard of living.

West Hartford Center

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, August 2009

West Hartford Center's vibrant mix of commercial, residential, religious, office and public buildings attracts many people each day. Even back in the 1770s, according to Elizabeth C. Hathaway, a local historian and researcher for the Noah Webster House in the 1970s, the town center from the Old Burial Ground south to Sedgwick/Park Road consisted of commercial, residential, religious, educational and public land.

John Pantry originally owned West Hartford's Center in the late 17th century, according to Hathaway in her unpublished article "A look at West Hartford in 1776." In many New England villages, the proprietors made small house lots near a center meeting house but in the West Division, the land was divided in long lots from Mountain Road to Quaker Lane before there was a meetinghouse. In the late 1670s, when the land was divided, the proprietors expected that the residents would attend church in Hartford. It wasn't until 1711 that the General Court allowed for a meetinghouse to be built in the West Division, and according to Hathaway, this is when the "center" began to take on an identity.

In the 1710s, the Ecclesiastical Society, the name by which the Congregational Church was known, bought land from John Janes north of the meetinghouse to establish a burial ground. According to the deed, Janes kept his animals there but had to maintain the fence around the land

Soon after the burial ground was established, the Brace family bought land abutting the burial ground. Probate records show that family members were paid to dig graves. The Brace family built the second mill in the West Division in the 1720s, right north of where Farmington Avenue crosses Trout Brook. If you walk in the Old Burial Ground, you can still see the lane that led from Main Street down to their mill. Sons of the first Brace mill owner, Zenas and Henry, operated the gristmill and lived on opposite sides of Main Street just south of the Old Burial Ground.

Citizens built the one room schoolhouse just south of the mill lane on the east side of Main Street.

Dr. Caleb Perkins lived across from the schoolhouse, and just north of the meetinghouse. He was a cousin of the Reverend Nathan Perkins.

By 1742, when the meeting house became too small for the increased population, Timothy Goodman granted land to the Ecclesiastical Society on which to build a larger meeting house. Goodman married a Pantry daughter and he gained ownership of the western section of land as part of her dowry. Goodman also granted land to the Ecclesiastical Society "for a place of parade forever." Local men in the town's militia trained at what today we call Goodman Green. Though the size and shape of the Green has changed in the last 265 years, it is still owned by the First Church of Christ Congregational and leased to the town for \$1 per year.

The Ecclesiastical Society chose Reverend Nathan Perkins to be minister in 1772 after the Reverend Nathaniel Hooker died at age 30. Perkins served the church for 66 years. He purchased Hooker's house on the east side

of South Main Street and it remained the parsonage and stood until the 1930s when the new library and new Town Hall were built. Perkins tutored young men who had finished at the one room schoolhouse and wanted to attend Yale.

The Butler family owned land south of Hooker's parsonage. Descendants of Joseph Butler lived on both sides of Main Street. John Whitman's account book records the Butler family producing barrels, pails, wheels and plows on the land probably at the location of the Crate and Barrel and Radioshack today.

South of the Butlers, probably where the Town Hall is today, was the land of Abijah Colton, the son of the first pastor. He lived in his father's house.

John Belden lived across the road and lived in what people in 1738 perceived of as "mansion home." Belden also owned land west of Mountain Road on land that was then part of Farmington. He owned a share of a sawmill.

The Olmstead family owned the next pieces of land on the westside of South Main Street reaching to a point just north of Sedgwick Road. They were descendants of Nicholas Olmsted, one of the original landowners in town. His son Thomas inherited the land in 1683 and was the first member of the family to settle in town. In 1776, Thomas's sons, Stephen (age 82), and Daniel (age 75) and his grandson Timothy and great grandson Nathaniel Steel, Jr. all had homes on the original property. Stephen had been a blacksmith and Nathaniel was a shoemaker. The land stayed in the family until the 1880s.

Ebenezer Crosby, Samuel Sedgwick, and Stephen Hopkins owned the land at the intersection of Sedgwick and South Main. On the northwest corner where the SNET building is today, Ebenezer Crosby ran his blacksmith shop. On the southwest corner, Samuel Sedgwick had his farm and his tavern. In 1714, he got a license "to give public entertainment for victuals and drink to sell at his house to people who come for ordination of their minister." By 1731 his license included the "retail of strong drink and keep a house of public entertainment of strangers." This is probably the site of the first tavern in the West Division.

Just to the west of this site, the Sedgwicks sold a piece of their land to the heirs of Reverend Colton. They built the colonial home which still stands today on the corner of Sedgwick and Ridgebrook Roads.

On the east side of South Main at Sedgwick, Samuel Sedgwick's great grandson lived on part of the original farm and continued the weaving shop that had been there for two generations. He built another house and a tanyard that he worked into the 1800s. A tanyard was the part of a tannery that had the tanning vats to process cowhides into leather.

West Hartford's town center in 1776 had mixed use. The third and fourth generations of the original owners had divided and subdivided the land, many carrying on the economic use of their elders. Weaving, tanning, shoemaking, blacksmithing, preaching, tavern keeping combined with farming provided for a lively town center.

Today, with West Hartford Center's post office building on the list to close to save the federal government money in these tough economic times, it reminds me just how fluid the ownership of land in the center has been. While residents lament a loss of convenience, and a walkable service, and sign petitions to keep the small, but handy post office, both the federal government, and some local elected officials and developers yearn to develop this prime spot of land in the town's center.

Bristow: A man who bridged cultures, and bought his way to freedom

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, November 2004

Bristow, an enslaved African aged 44, bought his freedom from Thomas Hart Hooker in 1775. Imagine the human dynamics of this manumission transaction. His manumission paper, in the Connecticut Historical Society, approximately 18 centimeters in length and of paper yellow with age reads:

Know all men by these presents that I Thomas Hart Hooker of Hartford in the County of Hartford for the consideration of Sixty Pounds money Rec'd to my full satisfaction – do by these present fully freely and absolutely release manumit and set at full Liberty a Certain Negro man Named Bristow from (?) to my house & assigns forever and I Do Grant to him said Bristow his full Liberty and Freedom from me and my Service that he may go & come when & wherever he pleases without any Hindrance or molestation from me or any one claiming from by or under me. In Witness whereof I have hereunto set my hand seal the 9th day of May Anno Dom 1775 in the 16th year of his Majesty's Reign.

Signed, Sealed & Deli'v In presence of Thomas Hart Hooker Salmon Whitman Mary Root

Did Bristow know what freedom was while enslaved? Did he understand it once he had his freedom? His manumission paper clearly states what freedom included:

- Being at full liberty from Hooker's house forever
- Having freedom from service to Hooker
- Going and coming when and wherever he pleased without any hindrance or molestation from Hooker or anyone claiming to be working for Hooker

When I study slavery with my students, I often ask if they think enslaved people can understand freedom. Some students argue that not having freedom allows a person to understand the concept better. Others say that if a person can see his/her master's freedom, s/he can know what it is. Still others argue that a person can only know what freedom is when they have it.

Thomas Hart Hooker, the owner of Bristow, was 30 years old in 1775 at the time of Bristow's emancipation. He was the great-grandson of Thomas Hooker, the first English settler in Hartford. Thomas Hart Hooker married Sarah Whitman Hooker six years earlier in 1769 and they had two children, Abigail, born in 1770 and Thomas Hart Hooker Jr. born in 1772.

At a point in time before 1775, Bristow had come to be the property of Hooker. This was not an unusual event in the West Division of Hartford. The pastors, Benjamin Colton (1713-1759) and Nathanael Hooker (1759-1770) each owned slaves. Africans who were enslaved were present in both Hartford and the West Division and most likely it was the economic and political leaders of the day who owned these Africans and their descendants who were often referred to as "servants."

In December 1774, many colonists agreed to stop the importation, exportation and consumption of British goods. But even after the first battle of the war at Lexington and Concord April 19, 1775, most Americans believed that the British would change their ways. They remained loyal to England and thought that the Parliament would treat the colonists more fairly.

Hooker enlisted in the Hartford militia as a private soldier at "first call" in 1775. His wife, two children and maybe some other "Negro" servants were left home, but Bristow would have been free. With a wife and two children aged five and three, Hooker went off not more than a month after the battles at Lexington and Concord. Thomas Hart Hooker was killed in the siege of Boston and died on November 11, 1775. His body lies in an unmarked grave in Roxbury.

Hooker's genealogy says that "before going to the seat of war he gave freedom to his negro servants saying that he would not own property in a human being while he, himself, was fighting for freedom." The lore about Bristow was that Hooker bestowed freedom upon his "negro servants." Bristow's manumission paper reveals a story of Bristow's freedom that directly challenges Hooker's genealogy.

What makes Bristow's manumission document so significant?

What surprises me the most was Bristow's ability to buy his own freedom. He earned 60 pounds to pay Hooker. This was a large sum of money, especially for someone who was enslaved.

One day's work was worth three shillings, according to account books from the time period. At 20 shillings per pound, Bristow paid 1,200 shillings or the equivalent of 400 eight-hour days of work. (At minimum wage in 2004 that would be close to \$25,000.)



Figure 1.6: This new gravestone was added to the Old Burial Ground in 2004 when the original (now at Bristow Middle School) broke off at the ground level. His name was spelled variously as Bristow, Bristol, Bristoll and Bristo. This site, in the northwest corner of the cemetery, is a part of Connecticut's African American Freedom Trail. Source: Noah Webster House & West Hartford Historical Society.

This document is also significant for its use of “republican discourse” which had crept into American political and social life since the mid-18th century years. This was rhetoric different from that of England. The colonists established new norms for behavior in America. The use of the terms “set at full liberty and freedom” are the very words used by the revolutionaries of the day.

The two witnesses to this transaction, Salmon Whitman (perhaps a relative to Sarah Whitman Hooker) and Mary Root witnessed this economic transaction when Bristow paid his sum of money to his master. Women had few political rights, and yet Mary Root was allowed to be a legitimate witness for the transaction.

According to law, Hooker could not manumit Bristow unless Bristow could take care of himself. It seems, from reading Bristow's will from 1791 (16 years later), that Bristow then went to work for Thomas Hart Hooker's brother, Roger.

Roger, according to the Hooker genealogy, was born in 1751, and was six years younger than his brother. He made 11 voyages to the West Indies before the Revolutionary War. What did the colonists trade with the West Indies? A profitable commodity was Africans.

Historians have claimed that enslaved people in New England were treated as part of the family and were treated better than their counterparts in the South. Numerous runaway ads in the Connecticut Courant and a number of manumissions give us evidence that this was certainly not true for all.

But Bristow's will shows him bequeathing “all my estate both real and personal unto Thomas Hart Hooker and Abigail Hooker, children of Thomas Hart Hooker late of Hartford.”

Imagine Bristow's decision. Terry Schmitt, Board of Education member, suggested that Bristow was a man who could bridge cultures and that was why Schmitt said he voted to name the new middle school after him.

Bristow was an African-American who, after buying his freedom, continued to respect and be respected by the children of his master. That could only have happened if this was a two-way relationship from a man who knew what it meant to be free and be human.

Putting the Pieces of an African-American Life Together

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, February 2006

The Noah Webster House's newest exhibit, "Bristow: Putting the Pieces of an African-American Life Together," opens February 28. The exhibit is the culmination of a year's worth of research, collecting artifacts and puzzling out the mysteries of Bristow.

Come visit, read, see, and feel Bristow's experiences in the context of an 18th century home.

Noah Webster House Executive Director Chris Dobbs, explains that one of the challenges for public historians is to catch the emotions of their audience. He argues that reading about the past and seeing pictures can pique curiosity, and once the emotions are stirred, people's memory is enhanced.

Mr. Dobbs wants this exhibit to be a visceral experience that draws visitors to the house.

You can sit on a bench and see images of a British slave ship carrying African captives. You'll be below deck with a hatch above you. You can hold the shackles for the below-deck scene of the middle passage.

A blacksmith from Mystic Seaport reproduced the type of shackles that would have been found aboard a ship in the mid-1700s. These shackles linked the captive to the person on either side through a horseshoe and rod, and were chained to a place on board the ship with a lock holding the individuals together. Captives were riveted together and only a blacksmith could undo them. Even feeling the weight of the shackles gives some sense of the agony of the middle passage.

Some time after Bristow arrived in the West Division of Hartford, he was acquired by Thomas and Sarah Whitman Hooker. Sarah was the daughter of John Whitman, a slave holder. Might Whitman have given Bristow as a gift to the newly married couple in 1769? We don't know the answer. We do know that at age 43, in 1775, Bristow bought his freedom for 60 pounds as Thomas Hart Hooker made his way to Massachusetts to fight in the American Revolution.

Imagine an enslaved man earning what was the equivalent of \$9,500 today, working in his spare time on farms beyond that of the Hooker's. In the exhibit, you can view a copy of Bristow's manumission papers from the Connecticut Historical Society.

Those who visit the exhibit will be able to fill out a copy of a manumission paper to document their own freedom. Imagine the value of that paper for free African-Americans who lived in a tenuous state of semi-freedom in New England.

An interactive flip panel will help participants understand the limitations of freedom for those freed by the gradual emancipation law in 1784 or by buying their freedom.

Unlike most African-Americans in the late 18th century, Bristow had economic success. He bought three acres of land and a grist mill in 1788 in Bristol. The exhibit will display a copy of the land deed. He bought these properties for "the consideration of 140 pounds lawful money," more than double the cost of his freedom. Bristow sold the land for 85 pounds four years later, at a substantial loss. A map in the exhibit shows where the grist mills in Bristol were in the 1790s.

While Bristow owned the land he wrote a will, something unusual for an African-Americans in the 18th century. He bequeathed his property to his former owner Sarah Whitman Hooker's children; they were 21 and 17 at the time the will was written.

By the time Bristow died in 1814, his estate was worth \$600. You can see a copy of his real will, which is held at the Connecticut State Library.

These historical documents will be set against three original pieces of art by Brian Colbath, an accomplished West Hartford artist. One painting is a collage of the major events in Bristow's life. The painting will be in the exhibit, scanned and printed onto magnets, so that those who visit the exhibit can piece together Bristow's life on a magnet board.

The second work is a five-by-six-foot painting of the Sarah Whitman Hooker House, which will be the backdrop for Bristow's and the West Division's main economic activity, farming. A real wood and iron plow from the 1790s will be displayed here. In the late 1800s, in a memoir of early West Hartford, Bristow was hailed for his agricultural expertise.

The third mural is of a liberty tree, an elm planted at the Sarah Whitman Hooker House. Elm trees were planted as liberty trees in the 1770s as a symbol of the American Revolution; the first elm named a liberty tree was in Boston, where an effigy of Massachusetts Gov. Thomas Hutchinson was hung in reaction to his enforcement of the Stamp Act.

All along the street in Elmwood, citizens planted elms which gave that section of town its name. There is evidence that either Amboy or Bristow planted the elm at Sarah Whitman Hooker's House. Those who view the exhibit can imagine the strength and symbolism of these trees.

The exhibit is part of a series of events during February and March 2006 that will highlight the role of African-Americans during Bristow's lifetime. On February 12, West Hartford native Jenifer Frank will discuss her book, *Complicity*. On March 9, this author will lead participants through a series of primary documents that tell the story of African-Americans in the 18th century West Division.

The exhibit will remain at the Noah Webster House for about six months and then will travel to Bristow Middle School as a permanent exhibit.

History museums are one of the prime ways that Americans learn history. Museum exhibits often provide a way into the past not offered by books or television or the big screen. Be part of the growing number of Americans who learn and feel history at museums. Check out the Noah Webster House exhibit, beginning February 28.

Rochambeau and the Revolutionary West Division

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, June 2005

The West Division was a vibrant farming community when le Comte de Rochambeau and his French army of about 5,000 men marched through in 1782. In May 2007, West Hartford commemorated his march by installing a marker at the Sarah Whitman Hooker House. This marker shows us how a war had far reaching effects on the homefront in our town.

The Revolutionary War was over when Rochambeau marched through, but the effects of the seven-year war reverberated through the town's economic and political life.

Nathan Perkins was a young pastor in 1775 when he gave an impassioned sermon in which he delivered a scathing attack on British imperial policy as a threat to the New England way of life. He delivered his speech in a patriot hotbed. Most locals had voted to support non-importation of British goods and once the first shots were fired at Lexington, West Division men volunteered to fight.

Out of a total of about 1,000 people in the West Division during the American Revolution, about 250 would have been adult males. Twenty-six men died, about 10% of the adult male population. These men had an average age of 33. Thomas Hart Hooker was the first West Division man to die in December 1775 after fighting in Boston. In 1778, members of the militia went to Ticonderoga and a Negro servant of John Whitman Jr., named Pent, died in the camp. The widows and families of those who died were forced to rely on each other to survive.



Figure 1.7: Ebenezer Faxon, a potter, celebrated the win over General Burgoyne in 1777 by planting elm trees on his front lawn and along what became New Britain Avenue. After the elms died in the 1940s and 1950s, the Elmwood community has funded the replanting of elms in Victory over Burgoyne Park, also known as Blanchfield Park. Source: Noah Webster House & West Hartford Historical Society.

The first turning point in the war came in 1777 at the Battle of Saratoga. British General John Burgoyne invaded upstate New York from Canada hoping to meet up with William Howe's troops in New York to cut New England off from the other colonies. Burgoyne captured Ticonderoga. In October, Burgoyne surrendered to American troops at Saratoga. Howe's troops never made it north. This was a big blow to the British and proved to be more than a military victory for the Americans.

This victory led to the French making an alliance with the United States and sending about 6,000 troops to the United States to help in the war effort. Jean Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, le Comte de Rochambeau, led this group from France in 1780. When they landed in Rhode Island in July, they were quickly put to work. Rochambeau marched to Connecticut in May 1781 where he met with Washington in Wethersfield. His last visit in 1782 was the one commemorated in May 2007.

In the West Division, citizens celebrated Burgoyne's defeat and Ebenezer Faxon organized the planting of elm saplings at the corner of Quaker Lane and New Britain Avenue (then South Road). The elm was a symbol of liberty in colonial New England. Patriots in Boston hung tax collectors in effigy from the elm Liberty Tree in Boston.

The town also participated in the war effort by providing land for a Revolutionary War Camp set up on Albany Avenue as early as 1776. Some of the original fireplaces remain. When soldiers stayed at the Revolutionary War Camp in 1779, townspeople benefited by supplying them with provisions. At least 50 West Hartford men supplied goods and services including coffins, medicine, milk, Indian meal, straw, wood, hay, horses to use to transport sick from Hartford to the West Division, Indian corn, turnips, mutton, vinegar, oats, horse feed, paper, and transportation.

According to West Hartford's first Town Historian Nelson Burr, West Hartford sheep supplied wool for blankets, which the people sold to army quartermasters at the campsite on Albany Avenue up Talcott Mountain. The potter, Ebenezer Faxon, supplied tow cloth, a mixture of wool and linen. The army bought cows for food for the soldiers.

Aside from supplying the encampment, West Division families made money by supplying soldiers in the war. In 1777, 21 families provided blankets for the militia. Thirteen more families supplied beef cattle to the army between 1775 and 1777.

Moses Goodman & Co. ran a distillery one mile west of the West Hartford meeting house, probably not too far from present day Gin Still Lane. Moses was the son of Timothy Goodman who lived on Mountain Road. These distilled spirits were a boon to the men who marched through and those in camp.

Even those not directly involved in provisioning the army were affected by the war. People had to sacrifice in their businesses for the war effort. In 1779, Ebenezer Faxon asked the General Assembly to let him purchase lead in Boston for his pottery business in exchange for three barrels of flour and a hogshead of Indian corn. He declared that his occupation was necessary for the town, but the General Assembly turned him down, deeming lead for the war effort more important than for his pottery.

Governor Trumbull asked the West Division to house British and Loyalist prisoners from the battle at Fort Ticonderoga. The British prisoner of war Colonel Philip Skene was moved from Middletown to West Hartford when his African slave John Anderson, attempted to become Negro Governor of Connecticut. Connecticut officials believed that the British, through Skene's slave, might encourage the Connecticut slaves to revolt against their masters, thus helping the British cause. Sarah Whitman Hooker House housed Skene on the corner of New Britain Avenue and South Main Street from July 26, 1775 until September 1776. It is probable that Hooker's house had a tavern. Its previous owners, Timothy Seymour, held a license for a tavern starting in 1733. It is likely that Hooker's house was a meeting place for political talk about the war as well as a place to rest, eat and drink.

Though the fighting was far from the West Division, we were about halfway between New York and Boston and many armies marched through, along the street where the liberty elms were planted. What is now New Britain Avenue, but used to be called South Road, was an important military highway, according to Burr.

Another French soldier, Marquis de Chastellux, who marched through in 1780 wrote in his journal that he noticed the "inhabitants engage in some industry in addition to their prosperous agriculture, some cloths and other woolen stuffs are manufactured here." He went in a house in which they were weaving and dyeing cloth.

It wasn't until October 1782, a year after the British surrender at Yorktown, that Rochambeau marched back through the West Division with his men from Yorktown to Boston. It is thought that he may have stopped at Sarah Whitman Hooker's house. By that time, her husband Thomas Hooker had died in the war, and she had remarried Seth Collins in 1779. Her children were 13 and 11. Though her slave Bristow had bought his freedom in 1775, Hooker still held Amboy as a slave.

Sarah Whitman Hooker's life during the revolution shows probably as much dislocation as any in the town. In 1775, Bristow bought his freedom from she and her husband. Her husband went off to war and died leaving her with a 6 and 4 year old. She ran a tavern during the war and held prisoners of war there. The French army marched by her house and probably stopped for provisions. But like many Americans, she was able to adjust, take advantage of her circumstances, and endure the political and economic turmoil. She remarried in 1779 and readjusted her life. Using her as an example, it is clear that social, economic and political life in this small town changed as dramatically as it ever did in a short period of time.

Bring on the Elms

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, November 2007

On October 6, the Elmwood Business Association and the town planted a disease-resistant elm, with 12 more to follow, on the Elmwood green in the former parking lot of Talcott Junior High School. This tree planting has its seed back when the first elms were planted in 1777, giving this section of town its name.

Symbols are significant to every community. For Elmwood and West Hartford, the recent planting of the elm symbolizes a love for liberty defined during the Revolutionary War, reconciliation with opponents and it reinforces the sense of community which Elmwood has had since the original elms were planted.

First and foremost, the elm tree stands for liberty, harking back to its significant role in the Revolutionary War. The elm was a liberty tree, first getting its fame in Boston in 1765 as a symbol of resistance to tyranny. Tax collectors were hung in effigy from the Boston elm.

In Connecticut, the oak tree from the Charter Oak story served as the symbol of liberty more often than the elm. But the important piece here is that Ebenezer Faxon had to plant the trees; as you may know, there are oak trees everywhere in West Hartford. The elm was a special tree and Faxon's action was noticed and helped bring an identity to the community.

The specific trees planted in Elmwood harken back to the Revolutionary War, commemorating the Patriot win at Saratoga over British Gen. John Burgoyne. This was no small battle. The British were 9,000 strong at this battle and they surrendered on October 6, exactly 230 years before the replanting.

This battle secured the northern American states from further attacks out of Canada and prevented New England from being isolated from the rest of the colonies. Burgoyne's force was made of 3,000 red-coated British, 3,900 German mercenaries and about 650 Canadians, Tories and Indians from Canada. This multinational force surrendered to a larger Patriot force under General Gates.

But the treatment of the enemy seems unusual to us today. The demand for unconditional surrender was flatly turned down by Burgoyne, but eventually a treaty of convention was accepted as the British agreed to not surrender, but be taken as prisoners of war and be marched to Boston and returned to England on condition that they would not serve again in the war.

On October 17, 1777, Burgoyne appeared before General Gates in his full ceremonial uniform and they greeted him with formal cordiality. About 6,000 men were surrendered to the Patriots. This common 18th century military practice, however, was not carried out.

The Continental Congress refused to ratify the convention and the enlisted men were held in captive camps in New England, Virginia and Pennsylvania until the end of the war. It seems that Charles I, Duke of Brunswick, did not want the soldiers back in England. He believed their presence would hurt recruitment for the duration of the war. Many of the British soldiers were housed by local patriots and ended up becoming Americans.

Burgoyne and Gates, as the story goes, had a cordial dinner party after the battle, with Burgoyne toasting George Washington and Gates replying with King George III.

Frederica de Riedesel, the wife of a German mercenary and the daughter of the Prussian minister of state, was 31 when she witnessed the dinner party in the fall of 1777. She wrote a journal, published in 1801, in which she recorded the events:

We reached Albany, where we had so often wished ourselves; but did not enter that city, as we had hoped, with a victorious army. Our reception, however, from General Schuyler, and his wife and daughters, was not like the reception of enemies, but of the most intimate friends.

They loaded us with kindness and they behaved in the same manner towards General Burgoyne, though he had without any necessity ordered their splendid establishment to be burnt. All their actions proved that at the sight of the misfortunes of others, they quickly forgot their own.

Burgoyne was so much affected by this generous deportment, that he said to Schuyler you are too kind to me who have done you so much injury. Such is the fate of war, he replied; let us not dwell on this subject. We remained three days with that excellent family and they seemed to regret our departure.

This scene, describing the reconciling of enemies, reminds us of the importance of the results of battle. How are we to live together when the war is over if we objectify the enemy? This treatment of prisoners of war was not unusual during the Revolution.

In the West Division of Hartford, Sarah Whitman Hooker held prisoner of war Philip Skene during the war. On July 26, 1775, Ethan Allen sent him and his slave to Hartford after the capture of Fort Ticonderoga. It seems Hooker also held dinner parties in her home for the prisoner of war. Coming face to face with the opposition humanized the enemy right here, as it did in Albany.

It is thought that Hooker's freed man Bristow planted an elm on the front lawn of their New Britain Avenue home. The Burgoyne elms helped to establish a sense of community in the southeastern section of town. They were planted in the West Division while Skene was held as prisoner of war. The elms helped to define a part of Hartford separate from the West Division, leading to the name Elmwood.

This sense of community and love of liberty remain today.

But the lesson of reconciling with our enemy takes even more strength to develop and is a more difficult lesson to practice.

Elmwood's Elm Trees Stand as a Powerful Symbol of Liberty

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, November 2008

The Elmwood section of West Hartford has had a long tradition of planting elms. On October 4, Duffy Cub Scout Pack 161 planted a Liberty Elm at Burgoyne Park as part of Elmwood's project to "reclaim Elmwood."

The planting of this elm represents a positive good for the environment, a community activity and a way to connect with a past that defined and redefined liberty.

In New England, elm trees are a symbol of individual liberty and of resistance to tyranny. In 1777 the first elms were planted and when this section of town got the name Elmwood, the area was still part of the city of Hartford. In Connecticut, because of the Charter Oak incident, many think of the oak as the tree of liberty, but in Elmwood, the idea of the liberty elm endures.

In mid-October 1777, American troops defeated British General Johnny Burgoyne at Saratoga, New York, at what scholars call a turning point in the American Revolution. To celebrate, Capt. Ebenezer Faxon and his friends planted a small grove of 13 elms, one for each colony, at New Britain Avenue (then called South Street) and South Quaker Lane (then called East Street) as a lasting monument to Burgoyne's defeat.

Faxon was the founder of the Elmwood pottery and his homestead was on the northeast corner of the intersection. As the elm saplings grew, they became a town landmark known as the Burgoyne Elms.

The history of the elm as a liberty tree began in 1765 as a protest against the British-imposed Stamp Act. That protest showed support for individual liberty and resistance to tyranny. The story of the first liberty tree, an elm tree, began in Boston on August 14, 1765. As farmers streamed into Boston for market day, they walked along a line of elm trees in front of Deacon Jacob Elliot's house. As they looked up, they saw a body hanging from a branch. It was an effigy marked with the initials A.O. – Andrew Oliver. He was a Boston merchant who had agreed to collect the new Stamp Tax levied on the colonies.

During that summer day, the size of the crowd around the tree grew. Public officials felt they needed to control the crowd. The sheriff ordered the effigy to be chopped down, but his deputies said they would be in danger of their lives if they did so. The effigy was hung by a Boston group called the Loyal Nine, men who were avowed Whigs who detested tyranny. The Nine were men of property and standing who became the core of the Sons of Liberty.

When the Nine discussed their protest the previous night, they knew economic times were not good. The colonies were caught in a world depression. The British Parliament imposed a new stamp tax without their consent and they believed they could not afford it. Every member of the Loyal Nine was directly threatened by the tax. The printer had to put a tax on every issue of a newspaper and on advertisements; artisans and merchants had to pay taxes on each contract, indenture, and bill of sale. Distillers and attorneys had to pay a tax on licenses, and citizens had to pay taxes on school diplomas and militia commissions.

Clearly the British Parliament believed the American colonies had too many newspapers, schools, attorneys, and liberties. To the Loyal Nine, the elm tree symbolized access to information, access to an education, rule by law, and individual liberty.

In the early 1800s, it is thought that Bristow, the African man who was owned by the Hooker family, planted a Liberty elm on the lawn of the house the Hookers owned. A photograph from the late 1800s shows the mature tree with a caption saying that the tree was planted by a slave of the Hookers.

I wonder if Bristow planted that tree before or after he bought his freedom.

By the late 1800s, the traffic on Quaker Lane increased. I think that a line of elms served as a median strip for the two lanes of traffic. People used the road to get to the Beach creamery north of New Britain Avenue.

In 1926, more elms were added to Elmwood when the state Highway Department awarded a contract to plant 85 American elms along New Britain Avenue from Hartford through Elmwood to New Britain. Many elms were killed in the 1940s and 1950s by Dutch Elm Disease, but that was not the only way that Elmwood lost its elms.

In 1957, with the opening of Elmwood Plaza, Quaker Lane had to be widened again and 22 elms that formed the island known as Victory over Burgoyne Green were chopped down and replaced with a triangular green made of asphalt with a flagpole.

In 1957, the spirit of progress overtook the ideals of liberty. A Hartford Courant reporter wrote, “the passing of Burgoyne Green is just another price that must be paid for progress. Along with the green went 22 large trees along the avenue that had been the pride of the Elmwood community for hundreds of years.”

By re-elm-ing Elmwood, today’s citizens make a connection with the past that symbolizes a belief in access to information, education, rule by law and individual liberty, all ideals shared by the West Hartford community.

Drive by Burgoyne Park and take a look at the two elms planted there. These trees will grow just like the stately elms that lined New Britain Avenue.

The enlarged park abuts the new Quaker Green condominiums and provides more space than the previous park bench and flag pole that were squeezed onto the corner. Now, a former asphalt parking lot has been greened and “elmed.”

Note: On October 30, 1996, the town officially renamed Burgoyne Park as William E. Blanchfield Park in honor of the late longtime local resident and businessman. He owned the Battey Shoe Store in Elmwood for many years and raised and lowered the park’s flag every day. He volunteered extensively in youth sports and is a member of the West Hartford All Sports Council Hall of Fame.

Researching the Revolutionary War Dead

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, April 2005

The voluminous work of the Veteran Memorial’s Joe Donahue, researching every veteran who died in uniform from West Hartford, compels me to try and make meaning out of the facts of their service, the tragedy of their deaths, and the sacrifice of their lives for the larger cause. The local connection makes the American Revolution come alive.

Twenty-six men from the West Division died in uniform in the Revolutionary War. Three quarters of the West Division’s men died by the end of 1776, just six months into the war. Their average age was 33. Their median age was 31. Two men died at age 50 and one man died at age 17.

Of the 26 men, there is a record of service for 21. Cornelius Flower served just five months before dying in camp of putrid fever. Epaphras Bull served for 56 months before he died of fever in Williamsburg, VA in September 1781, about 2 weeks before the British surrender at Yorktown. The average time of service was 17 months

Eleven men died “in camp.” Seven died of fever Two of the 26 died in battle: Aaron Henery died of a wound at Fort Anne, NY, and Eli Mix died in an assault at Stony Point, New York. Three men, Jonathan Gillet, Joel Clark, and Joseph Mygat died after being released from prison ships.

As soon as news of the Battle of Lexington April 19, 1775 made it to the West Division, men answered the call. Thomas Hart Hooker enlisted into Connecticut's Second Regiment under the leadership of Captain Samuel Wyllys of Hartford on May 10, 1775, just 25 days after the Battle at Lexington in what was known as the "first call" for troops from the state legislature. Hooker served at the siege of Boston and died of peripneumonia at the age of 30. On November 26, 1775 he became the first West Division man to die in the war. Just before he left for the war, Bristow bought his freedom from Hooker for 60 pounds. Hooker's genealogy claimed Hooker gave Bristow his liberty before going to "fight for liberty" from the British.

West Division men fought in the next battle at Fort Ticonderoga. New York and three died there. Controlling Boston depended on an attack of this Fort about 150 miles away from Boston. The Green Mountain Boys, led by Benedict Arnold and Ethan Allen, surprised the British garrison and then hauled the fort's heavy guns to Boston. The threat of bombardment forced the British to evacuate Boston.

The West Division men thought, like most of the Patriots, that they were involved in a skirmish, not a Revolution. The Patriot Army left a list of artillery taken from Fort Ti. They thought they would return the arms to the British as soon as things calmed down. The British remained uncertain about whether or not they were actually engaged in war. They believed they were only quieting pockets of rebellion.

West Division soldiers John Cowle, Cornelius Flowers and John Steele all died at Ticonderoga between April and October 1776. Members of their militia held onto Fort Ticonderoga to stage an assault on British Canada. Arnold threatened Quebec after a difficult winter march. The Patriots were frustrated in Canada when they could not get the Canadians to ally as a 14th state. Cowle was 50 years old when he died in the camp. He enlisted in August 1775 and died six months later. Cornelius Flowers also died at age 50 in the camp of "putrid fever." John Steele was an army private who died of "putrid fever" as well was 17 and had served 18 months. His regiment helped Gen. Schuyler reinforce the troops besieging Quebec. They retreated in April 1776 and were stationed in Ticonderoga. The men suffered severely from smallpox. The assault on British Canada was not successful, but the British evacuated Boston and many Loyalists fled to Halifax.

Nineteen of the West Division's 26 men died in the second phase of the war in the Mid-Atlantic region. Fourteen died in 1776 and 12 of them at the outpost of Peekskill on the Hudson, north of New York City. Most of them are listed as dying "in ye camp." Two died of "putrid fever."

The British regrouped in the waters around New York City under Sir William Howe. He had 32,000 trained soldiers. Washington had 19,000 men who were poorly armed and poorly trained. Washington had no navy. Still, the Continentals fought and suffered one defeat after another as the British pushed them out of Manhattan, over the plains of New Jersey, across the Delaware River into Pennsylvania. Two West Division men, Lt. Col. Joel Clark and Private Joseph Mygat died on a prison ship in the waters around New York in 1776.

The British hunkered down for the winter of 1776-7, but George Washington recrossed the Delaware River on Christmas Eve. Joseph Hulbert from the West Division was with Washington when he crossed the Delaware. Hulbert died that night. He had served for 20 months in the war. Washington's troops scattered the Hessian soldiers and claimed two minor victories at Trenton and Princeton.

In 1777, Horatio Gates defeated Burgoyne at Saratoga, New York. The citizens in the West Division were so excited that, led by Ebenezer Faxon, they planted a living memorial in a park named Victory over Burgoyne at the northwest corner of Quaker Lane and New Britain Avenue.

At the same time, Howe headed for Philadelphia taking many of his troops with him to take the Patriot capital. In Washington's unsuccessful attack on the British at Germantown, Pennsylvania, 17 year old Lewis Stanley was killed after serving for 2 years and one month in the militia as a Minuteman. Stanley must have been 15 when he signed the second call. He died "in captivity." He served under Col. Jebidiah Huntington at Germantown.

When George Washington retreated to Valley Forge, February 16, 1778, William Wheeler, an army private was with him. Wheeler died with many others at Valley Forge where soldiers suffered from sickness, cold and starvation.

Jonathan Gillett died at home after being held prisoner by German troops in British service for 18 months.

The Hessians confined him on a prison ship in New York Harbor. He was disarmed, and beaten. The prison ships in New York harbor were notorious for filth, disease, and cruelty. One of Gillet's letters to his wife Elizabeth detailed his being disarmed, beaten by the Hessian soldier's gun butts and treated unkindly. He was released after 18 months and returned to the West Division but died in December 1779 at age 41. He and his family lived in the house just north of the Noah Webster House on the east side of Main Street.

Epaphras Bull, aged 33 and a Major in the Army died of fever after serving for four and a half years in Williamsburg Virginia, just two weeks before Cornwallis' surrender at Yorktown.

About 5,000 Patriot men died in the Revolutionary War, only a fraction of the 58,000 in the Vietnam War. Out of a total population of about 1,000 people in the West Division, 26 men died – approximately 5 percent of the male population of the town. These men, whose average age was 33, left widows and families. Those on the home front sacrificed by not importing British goods. The dislocation of this war, in retrospect, loomed large. In the Vietnam War, 18 West Hartford men died out of a population of about 70,000, or 0.05 percent of the male population.

But both wars split the community as its citizens debated the merits of fighting for democracy and independence. Joe Donahue's statistics of those who died in uniform bring home the heroism, tragedy, and misery of war.

Naming the New Middle School: Bristow or Sperry?

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, August 2004

As a high school history teacher, I am constantly considering what to include and what not to include in the curriculum. How much should I focus on leaders who made decisions which affected large numbers of people and changed the way people acted and thought? How much should students learn about those who left little record but were instrumental in building our nation?

It is this choice, it seems, that the Board of Education is faced with in naming the new middle school on Highland Street to open in September 2005. What the Board decides will be a symbol for the community.

A committee has narrowed the choice to two names: Bristow (1728-1811) and Roger W. Sperry (1913-1984). This is the choice of two men, the first who spent almost his entire life in West Hartford, and the second who spent his formative years here. This is the choice of an enslaved and then free African man and a white well-educated man. This is the choice between one man who had to fight for his very survival and another already well-recognized for his accomplishments. Each man is worthy of having a school named after him, but on the face of it, Sperry certainly has the credentials.

Sperry's brain research had a great impact on further research in psychology and medicine in the 20th century. In his lifetime, Sperry published 290 scientific articles.

He discovered that the neural network that connects the sense organs and muscles to the brain is hardwired. He disproved the theory of his mentor, Paul Weiss at the University of Chicago where he got his PhD in 1941, who believed that the neural network was randomly connected. Sperry's experiments, which included surgery on fish, salamanders, and monkeys, showed that the development of this neural network is just the opposite of what Weiss believed. In fact, each nerve cell, he found, was tagged in the embryo with its own chemical individuality and the function of the cell was fixed for life.

Sperry did not win the Nobel Prize for this discovery. He won that prize for his discovery on split brains. Sperry determined that both hemispheres of the brain are conscious and can act separately. This finding came again, from Sperry questioning the accepted theory that sectioning the corpus callosum, the large band of fibers that connects the two hemispheres of the brain, did not affect behavior. Sperry investigated first with cats and monkeys, and then later on humans whose brain hemispheres were surgically separated to control epilepsy. Sperry found that the right hemisphere was conscious, and could perceive, think, remember, reason, and emote. Further, he argued, the right and left hemispheres could be conscious, carrying on mutually conflicting mental experiences at the same time.

Sperry was born in Hartford to Francis Bushnell, a banker and Florence Kraener Sperry. His mother was born in Elmwood. Sperry's father died when he was 11 and Roger took his mother's surname. When his father died, the family moved to West Hartford, and his mother became the assistant to Hall's principal for almost 20 years starting in 1924.

Sperry went to elementary school in Elmwood possibly at Charter Oak School. In his autobiography, found on his website, Sperry wrote that he "collected and raised large American moths in grade school." When he was at Talcott Junior High, he "ran trap line and collected live wild pets."

At Hall High School, from which he graduated in 1931, Sperry was not just an academic. He was also an accomplished athlete who lettered in football, basketball, baseball, and track. At Oberlin College, Sperry was the captain of the basketball team and also lettered in football, baseball and track.

As an adult, Sperry practiced what his Hall yearbook quote proclaimed, "There's time for work and time for play." In 1981, at the time the Nobel Prizes were being awarded, Sperry left Caltech for a week's fishing vacation with his wife. It was over a week before he came back and actually knew he'd won the Prize. In his spare time he was an artist in sculpting, ceramics, water colors and figure drawing. He loved American folk dancing, fishing, boating, and snorkeling. And he had a large collection of unusual fossils.

Clearly, Sperry has much to offer as an inspiration to school children and townspeople.

Bristow may, too, have been a renaissance man, but the documentation on him is not nearly as rich. Bristow is the only African American with a marked headstone in the Old Burial Ground on North Main Street in West Hartford. Bristow spent about half of his 83 years as an enslaved person. He was born in Africa and was involuntarily brought to the America when it was still a colony. He was owned by Thomas Hart and Sarah Whitman Hooker until 1775 when he bought his freedom for 60 British pounds. The fact that Bristow could raise 60 pounds shows the ability of enslaved people to make money and Bristow's initiative to better his position in society. According to the recently published *Celebrate! West Hartford*, Bristow became an agricultural expert in his later years and farmers in town consulted with him.

Booker DeV Vaughan, the President of the West Hartford African American Social and Cultural Organization, was the impetus behind Bristow's new headstone in the Old Burial Ground and in getting this headstone placed on Connecticut's Freedom Trail. DeV Vaughan, in his dedication of the headstone on June 12, argued that Bristow represented many attributes that make him the quintessential American. He represents those ever-present American traditions of self-improvement, upward mobility, and reinventing ourselves.

We have only three pieces of primary evidence about him: his gravestone, his manumission papers, and his last will and testament. Much of what we make of Bristow comes from the ideas of social historians who study those who have not left a record and try to place them in the context of their times.

We don't know if Bristow was literate, if he had a family, or if he made any important agricultural discoveries. But we can surmise, from information gathered about involuntary African immigrants, that Bristow had no formal schooling. He probably lived in the Hooker homestead at 1237 New Britain Avenue, and probably did a variety of jobs for the Hookers. Unlike slavery in the south, where those enslaved repeated the same tasks over and over, men like Bristow in the north, could learn a trade and could hire themselves out and make money.

Bristow represents the African American presence in the West Division which goes back to 1738. Sally Whipple, former Director of the Noah Webster House, researched African Americans for an exhibit the Noah Webster House in 1989. Her research through land and probate, birth, marriage, death records and account books shows how much African Americans were an integral part of the town in the 18th and 19th centuries. The first record of an enslaved African American is Jack, born in 1696 and owned by Col. Whiting.

Between the years 1738 and 1791, at least 20 white West Division men and women owned at least 37 black slaves. If there were 124 families in town in 1764, over 15% of the families owned Africans. These families were those that were wealthy and leaders of the town. Two of the first three ministers, Benjamin Colton (1713-1759) and Nathan Perkins (1772-1838) owned Africans. When Colton died in 1759, his inventory listed a "Negro" worth 33 pounds. This "negro" was probably Chris who had been baptized in 1758. By law, at Colton's death, Chris was passed on to his son Abijah Colton.

John Whitman grew up in a house with slaves. To pay for purchases in 1740, Thomas Hosmer paid Whitman's father "a negro named Ned a boy of nine years old w[orth] 115 [pounds]. Enslaved people were split from families, and even those who were free, lived in quasi-freedom.

In Dr. DeVaughan's dedication of Bristow's headstone, he said that "with all his American traits, however, he very well may not have risen to the very pinnacle of success. He was marginalized because of who he was . . . freedom for Bristow and his contemporaries was severely limited."

Students in my Local History class leaned toward naming the school after Bristow. "We stand for diversity in this town," one student said, and "we shouldn't just give it lip service." Another said that Bristow spent all his life in West Hartford and that gave him an edge.

Both these men are exemplary. The more I read about Sperry, the more I think, how could the Board not choose him? Yet there is this part of me that also wants to celebrate the common person, the ordinary citizen who rose above the circumstances to which he was tethered in slavery, the one who represents struggle, freedom and a measure of success beyond what was expected of him. But these attributes could apply to Roger Sperry whose father died when he was young and whose scientific career is characterized by his questioning established theories of giants in his field.

Is the symbol more valuable if the person has reached the pinnacle of society, or is someone who would live among us?

Contact your Board of Education members (Jack Darcy, Beth Bye, Bruce Putterman, Harry Captain, Terry Schmitt, Tom Fiorentino, or Jeanette Becker) with your opinion about the school name.

Lemuel Haynes Crossed the Color Line

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, September 2011

Who has crossed the color line? Many people in the United States today can lay claim to a family member, neighbor, or friend who has crossed the color line in marriage or in a lasting relationship of some type.

In the mid-1990s Gary Nash, a UCLA history professor, helped to start a movement called Mixed Race Studies in which historians, sociologists and artists focus on understanding multiracial, interracial and transracial adoption populations with a focus on social justice.

Mixed race studies scholars challenge dominant conceptions about race, emphasizing the flexibility of race and the porosity of racial boundaries. They critique how social stratification is often based on race.

West Hartford was the birthplace of Lemuel Haynes (1753 - 1833), a man of mixed race who married a white woman. Haynes' legacy has been resurrected by the PBS series, *Africans in America* (1998) and by Gary Nash's book, *Forbidden Love: The Hidden History of Mixed-Race America* (2010).

On July 18, 1753 in the West Division of Hartford, Lemuel Haynes was born to a father of "unmingled African extraction" and Scottish servant girl Alice Fitch. Lemuel took the name of Fitch's master, John Haynes of West Hartford, likely a descendant of John Haynes, the first governor of the Connecticut Colony who served eight terms and was instrumental in writing the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut.

Haynes took the name of his mother's master rather than that of his father, implying that his father was enslaved. Lee Ellenwood, former minister at the First Church of Christ, Congregational, suggested that his father may have been Bristow.

Five months after Haynes was born, his mother gave him up to Deacon David Rose of Granville, Massachusetts, who took him in as an indentured servant. Part of the agreement was that Haynes be educated.

Though not much is known of his youth, Haynes spent time helping out on the farm. He attended church and showed a passion for the Bible and books on theology. In his teens, he was exposed to Calvinist thought and conducted services at his local church.

At age 21, Haynes' indenture expired. He joined the Minutemen of Granville. Haynes marched with his militia company to Roxbury after the Revolutionary War battles of Lexington and Concord. He also volunteered in the expedition to Ticonderoga, NY in 1776 to help protect the fort.

In 1776, Haynes wrote a well-circulated pamphlet entitled "Liberty Further Extended" in which he said "That an African. . . has an undeniable right to his liberty." Haynes condemned slavery and was one of the earliest to point out the irony of slave owners fighting for their own liberty while denying it to those of African descent.

When he returned to Granville, he was offered a scholarship to Dartmouth College but turned it down and "apprenticed" with local Congregational ministers, learning theology, Greek and Latin, and how to write and deliver sermons.

He spent 1780 in Wintonbury (Bloomfield) studying Greek with the Rev. William Bradford while teaching in the local one-room schoolhouse. He was a Calvinist who read revivalists George Whitfield and Jonathan Edwards from the first Great Awakening. He believed in the absolute sovereignty of God and that human virtue was a reflection of God's love.

Haynes married Elizabeth Babbitt, who was white, in 1783 in Hartland and stayed married to her for 50 years. They had 10 biracial children born between 1785 and 1804. One of their sons became a physician and another a lawyer.

Haynes was licensed to preach in 1780 and in 1785 was the first African American officially ordained a minister of the Congregational Church. He was first called to be pastor of the Torrington Congregational Church from 1785-1787. He was the first black man in America to serve as a pastor to a white congregation. However, he left after two years because of the active prejudice of the all-white congregation.

Haynes' longest pastorate was in Rutland, Vt., where he served for 31 years from 1787-1818 until he was 64. While there, his fame as preacher and scholar spread. He earned a transatlantic reputation largely due to his 1804 published sermon against the idea of universalism.

Under Haynes, the church grew from 46 members to more than 300. In 1804 Middlebury College presented him with an honorary degree, the first of his race to win such an award.

But by 1818 he said that conflicts had grown within his congregation that at first seemed to be about politics and style, but in the end seemed to be more based on racism.

He was so popular in Vermont that he preached at a different church every Sunday after his dismissal and then served for three years in a Manchester, Vermont, church. He finally moved to Granville, NY and served his last 11 years as its pastor.

Haynes' homestead in Granville is now part of the National Historic Register and he and his wife are buried in the cemetery in South Granville, just a mile from his house.

Since his rediscovery in the 20th century, Haynes has been criticized for not coming out strongly enough against slavery. But he needs to be seen in the context of his times. He would have been at the forefront of a moderate approach to the abolition of the slave trade.

According to Gary Nash, he never stopped preaching that "liberty is equally as precious to a black man as to a white one, and bondage equally as intolerable to the one as it is to the other."

Haynes' life exemplified the tension between the ideology of freedom in the new republic and that of slavery, as he argued for the full inclusion of African peoples in the new republic.

Haynes crossed the color line yet had to constantly be aware of his color in a country divided by race. His legacy to his birthplace can be to ask if race determines what neighborhoods people live in, if race determines school achievement and if race determines socioeconomic status.

Studying men like Lemuel Haynes can help us to see the social construction of race and help us to think more about whether race overpowers other human attributes which contribute to success. If race does, it makes us wonder even further about those willing to cross that color line.

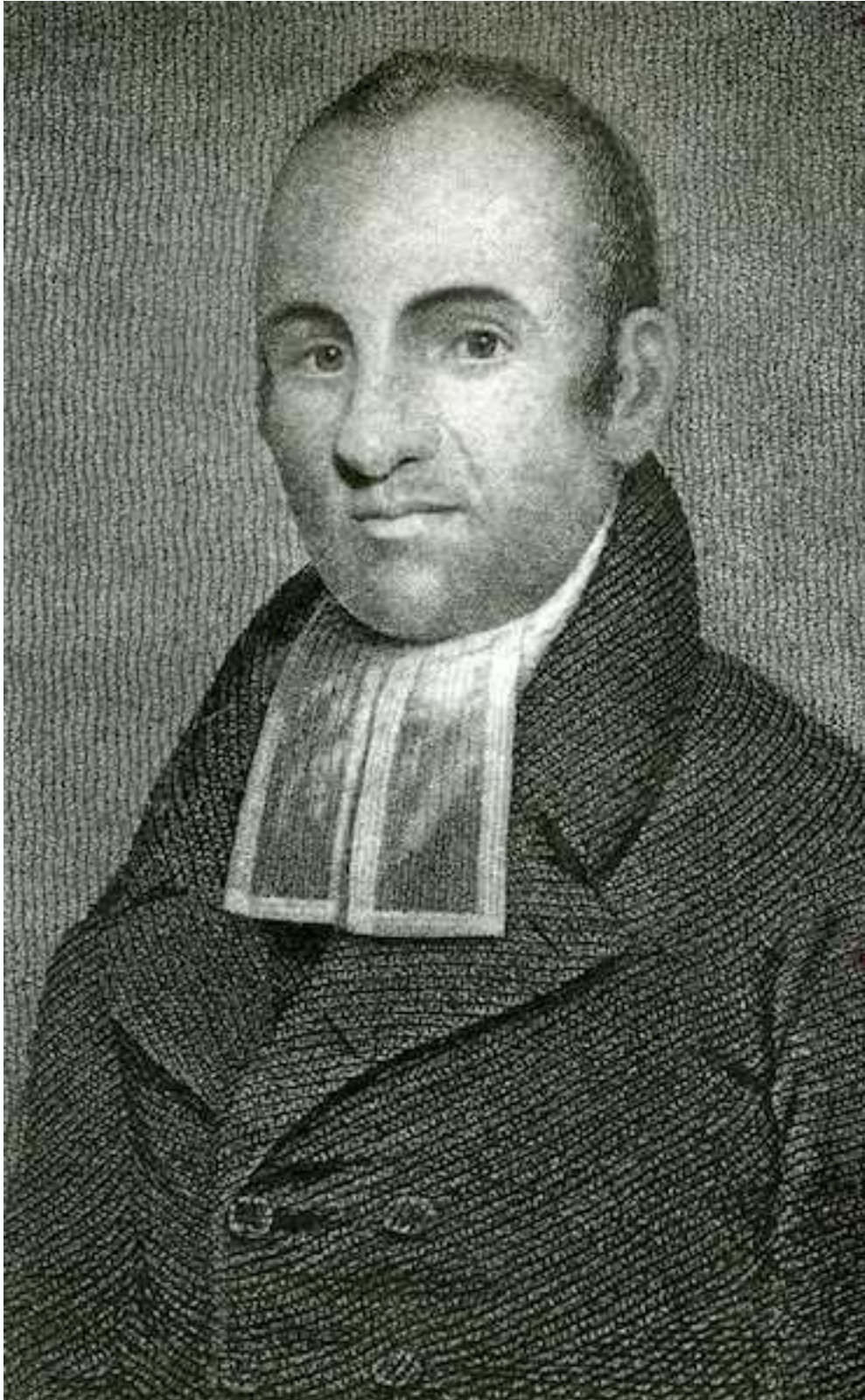


Figure 1.8: Haynes served as a pastor from 1785 to 1833. He was popular as a preacher and as an intellectual. In his 1776 pamphlet “Liberty Further Extended,” Haynes condemned slavery and was one of the first to point out, in writing, the irony of white men fighting for liberty while enslaving those of African descent. Source: Archives, First Church of Christ Congregational, West Hartford, CT, John P. Webster Library.

Why are people like Haynes willing and able to buck societal norms and cross the color line? Who plays Haynes' role today?

Chapter 2

Noah Webster

Noah Webster's Sketches in American Policy

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, September 2008

With election season rolling around, it is fun to look back at Noah Webster's take on the new republic in 1785. Webster yearned for a strong national government and an American culture that emerged from the American Revolution based on the power of citizens. How did Webster want to define this new government and why?

October 16, 2008 marks the 250th anniversary of Noah Webster's birth in the West Division of Hartford and the Noah Webster House will be celebrating Webster's legacy in a number of ways this fall. Though he was not considered a "founding father," Webster was a man who was part of the founding generation who weighed in on many key political issues.

While Noah Webster is most famous for his 1828 dictionary, and in West Hartford for his *Blue Back Speller*, he boasted that he was the first person to call for a strong federal government two years before the Constitution was written in 1787.

In Webster's *Sketches in American Policy* (1785), written as a four-part pamphlet, he outlined the need for a strong central government. His arguments helped him define an American character different from Europeans and from the native "savages."

At age 26, Webster was bold enough to print his Sketches, and in fact the record shows that James Madison, author of the Constitution, read it. According to Webster's most recent biographer Harlow Unger, Sketches had "a far wider circulation than any other published Federalist document prior to the Constitutional Convention and covered a broader range of issues." In the fourth section of Webster's pamphlet, he urged the public to call for a stronger central government based on the will of the people, not based on power that emanated from state governments.

Webster knew citizens feared that a strong central government could lead to tyranny, the main issue of the American Revolution. Webster believed that a strong central government, abolishing slavery, and a good educational system would all protect Americans from tyranny.

Webster argued that until the 1780s, three principles made an independent state: a standing army, a government controlled by religion, which made government less transparent, and the fear of an enemy nation. After the Revolutionary War ended, according to Webster, none of these existed in the United States.

He believed standing armies should be banished from free governments because they could easily be used as an instrument of tyranny. The Confederation Congress did establish a standing army in 1785, but it was under civilian control and Webster did not perceive it as a threat to democracy.

He argued that Christianity had been separated from the state and thus would work in a spirit of peace and harmony, not coercion as it was used in many European countries. Even though Connecticut had an established church, and citizens paid taxes to that church, Webster did not believe the Congregational faith was used to keep people in ignorance.

Webster did not feel that either Canada or Mexico were enemies that would unite us and he believed that we would stay out of Europe's business, so Americans would not be united by a common enemy.

Webster wrote his *Sketches* with a sense that there needed to be national government that would help bind us into an American nation. States could easily opt out of any decision made by the Confederation Congress with no penalty. The most famous example was both Rhode Island's and New York's refusal to support taxes in the form of an import duty. The Congress needed money to pay off war debts, but the fear of a far away government raising taxes was too much for either state. Hadn't they just fought a war about taxes and hadn't they wanted a voice in that taxation? Now that they were represented in the government, Rhode Island and New York chose to use their prerogative to stop the import tax. Webster wrote, "So long as any individual state has power to defeat the measures of the other twelve, our pretended union is but a name, and our confederation, a cobweb" (p. 32).

Webster did not see the Congress as established by the Articles of Confederation defining an American nation. The government allowed for each individual state to stop the nation from acting as one. But, he also knew that Americans feared tyranny. How to strike the balance?

To protect against tyranny and have a unified government, Webster argued that power should be vested in the people, not in state governments. Under the Articles, representatives were elected by state legislatures, and thus were beholden to state governments, not to the people. Webster's plan was to have equal congressional representation chosen annually by the citizens. He believed there should be a three-year limit on the length that magistrates could serve to insure that the people were heard.

In *Sketches*, Webster explained how an executive could work to enforce the laws without being tyrannical; he used Connecticut's Governor as an example. He wrote:

The state elects a governor or supreme magistrate and cloaths him with the power of the whole state to enforce the laws. Under him a number of subordinate magistrates such as judges of courts, justices of the peace, sheriffs, etc. are appointed to administer the laws in their respective departments. These are commissioned by the governor or supreme magistrate. Thus the whole power of the state is brought to a single point; it is united in one person (p. 33).

Webster put his faith in the citizens to elect the best people. He thought that if elections were held frequently and the freemen were treated equally, the government would be free of tyranny. In a footnote, he explained how he chose to vote for a candidate:

People, in the choice of rulers, are too apt to be deceived by ... a specious show of popular virtues. I pretend not to lay down rules for other people; but for my own part, I will never give my vote to a man who courts my favor. I always suspect that such a man will be the first to betray me. Nor, will I give my vote to men, merely because they have been in office and it will hurt their feelings to be neglected. Such motives appear to me to discover weakness and a disregard to the true principles of government. I endeavor to give my votes to men, in whose integrity and abilities I can repose confidence; men, who will not dispense with law and rigid justice, to favor a friend or secure their own popularity. When I hear people talk of elevating a man to an office, because he comes next in course, and he will do well enough, I suspect they have forgot that they are freemen, and have lost their oaths or their consciences (p. 34).

Webster's words ring true today as we head toward the polls in November. At an early age, Webster knew the importance of an enlightened citizenry to make the right decision about who represented them. This power in the hands of ordinary citizens, he believed, was the core of the American identity.

Noah Webster, 248 Years Later

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, September 2006

The 13 foot, 8.5 ton marble statue of Noah Webster, with one finger missing, endangered by acid rain and errant vines, is gone from its spot at 50 South Main Street. On Thursday, August 11, 2006, conservators removed Korczak Ziolkowski's statue which had graced the lawn of the old Town Hall building for 65 years.

The statue is part of the town's logo and Webster's presence symbolizes the town's dedication to learning. Naming the new development Blue Back Square is further evidence of the man's influence in the town.

Webster's 250th birthday will be here in just two years and already the Noah Webster House and West Hartford Historical Society is planning a bash. What form will this take? How will we remember Webster in 2008?

In 1958 for his 200th birthday, West Hartford had no ordinary celebration. The West Hartford Historical Society and the Noah Webster Bicentennial Committee held a parade, followed by a "huge community banquet" at Temple Beth Israel on Farmington Avenue. Governor Abraham Ribicoff, U.S. Senator William A. Purtell, U.S. Representatives Edwin May, Thomas Dodd and Rohe Walter attended both events.

The parade began on Memorial Drive, stopped for a ceremony at Webster's statue on South Main Street, and then proceeded east on Farmington Avenue all the way to South Highland Street. The parade included the Governor's Foot Guard, Governor's Horse Guard, the Conard High Band, the West Hartford Remington Riders and a number of floats.

The celebration included a four cent Noah Webster commemorative stamp first available here and delivered to all West Hartford homes by their mailman as a souvenir. Businesses in the community sponsored the mailing.

A town wide spelling bee on October 15 was held at the Duffy School, with Ross Miller of WTIC as master of ceremonies. Governor Ribicoff presented the keynote address. Included at the head table with him were the president of the Merriam Company which owned the Webster dictionary, Mayor Harold Keith, and ministers from three faiths in West Hartford.

Along with the postage stamp, every home in town also received a pamphlet called "Your Schools" devoted to Noah Webster and produced by the School Department.

The West Hartford News produced a 24 page "souvenir supplement" on Webster. Henry Steele Commager (1902-1998), the head of the history department at Amherst College, wrote the cover article. At that point, Commager was "one of America's most noted historians," a devotee of the consensus school of American History. This same article appeared in the *Saturday Review* just two days later.

Commager was a prolific writer who believed that history should inform the public discourse. He continually transcended the divide between the academic and the public world as he lectured extensively and wrote hundreds of articles and columns for the public press. He campaigned for political candidates, railed against the anti-communism of Senator Joseph McCarthy, and publicly opposed the Vietnam War. He rallied other liberal historians like Arthur Schlesinger behind his causes.

So what did Commager say about Webster almost 50 years ago?

Commensurate with the consensus school of history, Commager argued that Webster's *Blue Back Speller* served to draw all Americans together with a common language. Commager argued that "under its benign guidance, generations of young Americans learned the same spellings, the same pronunciations; read the same stories; absorbed the same moral lessons." Commager claimed that Webster deserved to be considered one of the Founding Fathers and clearly he was "Father of the American language . . . and of American education."

According to Commager he was also a Father of American political thought in his *Sketches in American Policy* (1785) and as editor of the *American Magazine*, the *Minerva*, and the *Herald* through the 1830s.

Webster was a leader in science with his two volume work the *History of Epidemics*. He was the father of the copyright, one of the first to write about American history, and American banking and finance. Webster, like Thomas Jefferson, rewrote the Bible, and wrote the first American dictionary in 1806 and then in 1828.

Yet, according to Commager, Webster did not have the mind of a Jefferson or Franklin. He claimed Webster was full of “nagging ambition, grim determination and indefatigable officiousness... and vanity.” For all his wide range of interests, Webster “did not have an open mind.” Commager argued that Webster was:

narrow, cold, almost passionless, [and] was wholly lacking in those grace-notes his great contemporaries added to their scores with such ease. He read everything, but in order to get definitions for his dictionary; he taught music, but revealed not the slightest interest in the musical giants of his own time; he studied history, but only to learn that man is vile. He knew the languages of 20 nations but was interested in none of these; he visited France only to deplore its licentiousness; he visited Cambridge only to remark on the inferiority of its architecture. He was devout, but curiously untouched by religious sentiment... He was zealous for education, but had little faith in the young, and thought voting should be restricted to those over forty-five.

Even so, Commager believed that Webster was much more than his personality. He should be remembered for his desire and ability to build an American culture. Commager thought that, through language, he diminished the role of class, background, or region to invent a common culture, especially with his *Blue Back Speller*. Commager argued that “no other secular book has ever spread so wide, penetrated so deep, lasted so long.”

And, Commager said, Webster was typical of his age. The Founding Fathers were intent on building a national character which differentiated this new country with the corruption and division of the Old World. No longer would the Monarchy, the Church, the Aristocracy, or the Military be the definers of the nation.

For Commager, Webster’s role as “teacher” was his most important role. In 1958, Commager argued that “in America the teacher should play a larger role in the creation of nationalism than almost anywhere else. . . because the United States was the first nation to inaugurate anything remotely like universal free education.”

Webster was the first to write “moral and patriotic readers.” On page one of Part III of the *Blue Back Speller*, Webster wrote, “Begin with the infant in the cradle; let the first word he lisps be Washington.” Webster believed that learning about the great men would build pride in nation.

Commager concluded that Webster’s most important contribution to American culture was building a pride in the American language and literature. Even though he was a practical and utilitarian in all he did, his key contribution was developing a belief in the United States as a unified, successful, self-sufficient whole.

Interestingly, Commager prided himself on being a teacher first and scholar and writer second. In the midst of the Cold War, an excellent education system for all seemed to distinguish us from Communist countries, as well.

In 2008, on Webster’s 250th birthday, with a national consumer culture, but a country as ethnically diverse as ever, will our interpretation of Webster’s influence on the nation change? Do we still consider a common language a binding force? Does education tell our nation’s story? Is this education accessible to all? Stay tuned!

The Noah Webster House is reviving the Noah Webster Birthday Party. Come September 30 for the celebration!

Noah Webster’s Social Life

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, August 2007

I found the green shoebox the other day – the one I was looking for. It holds 3 x 5 cards on which I tracked social meetings Noah Webster had with his friends and acquaintances in the 1780s. The box is a size 9 ½ wide (that’s children’s size) and it is 2/3 full of cards noting people with whom Webster met from 1783 (when he was 25) to 1786.

Let’s see, 9 ½ wide means my oldest son was about 3. Sixteen years ago seems like I might have entered these social interactions on the computer. If I did, I could manipulate them by date, by activity, by gender,

and by place, but alas, I have them alphabetized by last name in this green shoebox. So, I have a chance to look back at events on paper. I have about 500 cards and to me, this is the stuff of history.

How do I make sense of them?

I remember why I put them on note cards. That summer when I read the book compiled by Webster's granddaughter, Emily Ellsworth Fowler Ford, *Notes on the Life of Noah Webster* (1912), I was amazed by the number of times Webster socialized. Ford's book was a compilation of seven first printings of extracts, letters, memos and diaries of his life. In 1912, the book was privately printed, and was reprinted in 1971. The Noah Webster House has a copy of the two-volume work. Was there a pattern in who Webster talked to? Was this an average number of interactions in the time period?

Webster's life will be celebrated next year in town as we reach the 250th anniversary of his birth. Americans like anniversaries and we like to revise our history as well. As the West Hartford Historical Society and Noah Webster House gear up for this grand event, we struggle with the issue of who Webster really was. If you look at the paintings and sculpture and read some of what he wrote – there is a 500-page bibliography of his writing – he has the reputation of being ponderous, taciturn and a bit overbearing. But all these interactions make me think he was something more.

He wrote the *Blue-Back Speller* in 1783 and we know to make money from the speller he had to travel to each state to secure publication rights to his book. There were no national copyright laws and printers could buy the book and just print it and gain the reward. Webster traveled up and down the Atlantic seaboard selling his book, selling the idea of an American language, boosting public education, and pestering state legislators to pass copyright laws to protect intellectual property.

Perhaps the travel to push for copyright laws led him to believe in a stronger national government. In fact, in 1785, two years before the Constitutional Convention, Webster called for a stronger central government in his pamphlet, *Sketches of American Policy*.

His social interactions show him talking to leaders of the revolutionary generation. A quick look through my cards reveals that he took tea, dined, danced, and would “wait on them,” meaning to go to see or visit on business.

As I looked at the cards and wrote this article, I “googled” the men he visited. Today information about the revolutionary generation is right at my fingertips – a big change from 16 years ago.

Between November 1785, and March 1786, Webster met with Mr. Moses Austin seven times, dining three times and taking tea with him four times. Moses Austin, 34 years later set out for Texas, petitioning for a land grant to settle 300 families on 200,000 acres of land. His son Stephen Austin, carried out his plan.

In May 1785, Webster took tea with Col. Aaron Burr and his wife Mrs. Theodosia Prevost Burr. Burr married Theodosia in July 1782 when he was 26 and she 36 with five children. She was the widow of a former colonel of the British Army and some questioned her loyalty to the new country. Webster knew her because he taught her children when he was a schoolmaster in Sharon, Connecticut. Just 10 months later, Webster met with the family again in Philadelphia. Burr was a member of the New York State Assembly at the time of their meeting.

On a 1786 visit to Philadelphia, Webster met with Benjamin Rush. In February and then in March Webster dined with him. Rush, like Webster, had many interests including physician, writer, educator, humanitarian, and finally a professor of medical theory and clinical practice at the University of Pennsylvania. He was an early opponent of slavery and capital punishment.

Webster heard Mr. Moyes and Dr. Rush speak on “harmony of tastes.” Moyes, who was blind, was a lecturer and professor of the philosophy of mathematics, engineering, and the history of medicine. Webster had tea with Moyes, attended his first benefit lecture on air, attended his last lecture and on two different occasions wrote that he “waited on him.”

Rush was a very good friend of John Dickinson of Wilmington, Delaware. Webster met Dickinson in February 1786, possibly through his connection with Benjamin Rush. Webster noted that Dickinson wrote *Letters from an American Farmer in Pennsylvania* (1767-8), which united the colonists against the Townshend Acts.

Webster declared him a “sensible man.” Dickinson was one of the wealthiest men in America who served for four years, until 1785 as the President of Pennsylvania. Rush was the founder of Dickinson College in Pennsylvania in 1783, named after John Dickinson.

Webster met at least three times in late 1785 and early 1786 with a Mr. Samuel Curson of Baltimore. Curson was a merchant who traded corn, wheat, wines, flour, slaves, gunpowder, tobacco and rice in the U.S., the Caribbean, Africa, and England. On September 28, 1785, Webster noted that Curson was a man of “respectable character.” In October, Webster met him for tea, and three months later in January 1786, they dined together. In April 1786, Mr. Burling of New York killed Curson in a duel. The dispute seemed to be over Curson fathering a child with Burling’s sister. Burling wanted Curson to pay him money and he pursued Curson from the West Indies to London and finally to America. Burling challenged Curson to a duel and stabbed him in the groin. Curson died three days later. I wonder how much Webster knew of the allegations when he deemed Curson a “respectable character.”

This article was spun from seven out of my 500 cards. The possibilities of making sense of Webster’s social life through historical research right at my fingertips is something I could not have imagined 16 years ago. Webster, at a young age, was a man of the world and must have been pleasant company. My cards show he had numerous meetings with the same people and then they introduced him to their friends. Knowing something about his meetings helps us to open a window into the social context of a world of ideas, duels and travel that are not so familiar to us today. There’s a lot more to learn from my green shoebox!

Noah Webster the Federalist

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, July 2007

In 1800 at age 42, Noah Webster penned a pamphlet called “A Rod for the Fool’s Back,” in which he took New Haven’s Abraham Bishop to task for supporting Democratic-Republican principles. The pamphlet, published in New Haven, was part of a flurry of pamphlets stirred up by the Democratic-Republican win in the 1800 national election. Webster’s pamphlet was a searing commentary not only on Bishop’s beliefs, but also on his virtue. Webster believed that Bishop cared only about his own self interest, and that his political beliefs would hurt the common good.

Webster was a staunch Federalist who believed in a strong national government, a standing army and navy, and a unified culture based on a common language. On a national level, Democratic-Republicans like Bishop believed that we needed no foreign diplomats, no national debt, and no attention by the government to commerce. Connecticut Democratic-Republicans had so little power that the 1800 federal election win gave them some hope.

From 1800 to 1816, in five straight elections, Connecticut voters cast the majority of ballots for Federalists. In 1804 only Connecticut and Delaware gave their electoral votes to the Federalist Charles Pinckney. In 1816 when James Monroe ran against Federalist Rufus King, Connecticut once again voted for the Federalist, this time with two other states. Being a Democratic Republican in Connecticut meant being in the minority, even though nationally they were the majority. Webster’s support of the Federalists was mainstream for Connecticut.

Webster found himself embroiled in a debate about both national politics and the state Charter of 1662, which unlike most other colonial constitutions, had not been replaced in the 1780s after we separated from England. But by 1800, when Democratic-Republican Thomas Jefferson defeated Federalist John Adams for the presidency, followers of Jefferson in Connecticut were encouraged to believe they should have some say in state politics. Both sides used both national and state issues to garner support.

By 1800, Webster had been married for 11 years and had four of his eight children. In 1798, Webster moved to New Haven from New York City where he edited the Federalist *American Minerva*, New York’s first daily newspaper. From 1802 to 1807, Webster, the Federalist, represented New Haven in Connecticut’s General Assembly. He helped make the laws to carry out Connecticut’s 1662 charter.

The national fight between the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans spilled over into state issues. The Connecticut state government “established” or supported the Congregational Church with tax money longer than any other state in the union. When all but Connecticut and Rhode Island rewrote their state constitutions in the 1780s and disestablished their Congregational churches, Connecticut did not do so until 1818, because of the power of the Federalists here. The Federalists believed that their policies furthered the common good and used the tactic that Democratic Republicans did not understand the common good – only their own self-interest.

The Charter of 1662 required all people to attend Sunday services and pay taxes to support the local church unless they got a certificate signed by an officer of a dissenting church, like the Baptists, Quakers, or Episcopalians. A 1791 law stated that the certificate had to be signed by two civil officers, always Congregationalists, and so the dissenters were often harassed. These laws, while attempting to solidify the power of the Congregationalists, actually caused an uproar among the dissenters like Bishop, and helped them to get support from the Republicans.

Webster was a Congregationalist, but one who did not support the establishment of a particular denomination. He believed, as he said in his 1828 dictionary, that religion was the source of virtue:

In my view, the Christian religion is the most important and one of the first things in which all children, under a free government, ought to be instructed. . . . No truth is more evident to my mind than that the Christian religion must be the basis of any government intended to secure the rights and privileges of a free people. . . .

However, unlike other Federalists, Webster had a more wide-ranging view of religion and did not feel that Congregationalism was better than other Christian sects. He would have been happy with the 1818 Constitution, which disestablished the Congregational Church but privileged Christianity. In Webster’s pamphlet, his religious views come out by lumping Bishop, a deist with “Atheists, Adulterers and profligate men” who will “lead the people to destruction.”

Webster characterized Bishop’s pamphlet as “mere rant, declamation and incongruous sentiments, incapable of being comprehended, much less answered.” He claimed that Bishop wanted to be part of the state government only for his own self-interest, not for the good of all. Webster argued that the state was doing very well economically, so why would anyone want change? The government’s regulation of trade and its relationships with other countries were very important to the Federalists, but not to the Democratic Republicans. Bishop believed all foreign entanglements were a waste of good taxpayer money.

Bishop believed that Alexander Hamilton’s funding scheme for Revolutionary War state debts was a “calamity” and led to “aristocracy, even more so than in France.” Democratic Republicans did not believe in having a national debt, or in funding state debts incurred during the Revolution. They believed that a citizen’s allegiance should be to his state, not to his nation. Webster countered by saying that only a small number of speculators grew rich off the funding scheme. In fact, Webster argued, independent farmers got most of the money.

When the Constitution was written, Democratic-Republicans won the election of 1817 to push for the Constitutional Convention. Once the Democratic-Republicans held power, they could change the charter. The Constitution opened up suffrage to all white men. But Webster clung to his Federalist beliefs claiming:

The very principle of admitting everybody to the right of suffrage prostrates the wealth of individuals to the rapaciousness of a merciless gang who have nothing to lose and will delight in plundering their neighbors.

In the early 19th century, as both state and local issues became part of the political world, Webster held fast to the ideas of the Federalists long after the party had lost its national and then state power. He believed that the right people who served in government had to protect the state from those who were in government only for their only self-interest. While Webster believed he knew who those leaders were and what their vision of the US was, so did Bishop. Each believed they would serve for the common good and both believed the other was in politics for their own self-interest, a conflict which appears in politics to this day.

Noah Webster and Amos Beman

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, November 2005. Thank you to Robert Forbes at Yale for bringing my attention to this letter.

In 1840, Noah Webster, age 82, wrote the following letter to Amos G. Beman, a black Congregational minister and abolitionist in New Haven.

Mr. Beman,

I have your note of thanks, with a request that I would refer you to such authors as may give you some account of the origins of the African race.

In answer, I would remark that of the woolly haired Africans, who constitute the principal part of the inhabitants of Africa, there is no history. There can be none. That race has remained in barbarism from the first ages of the world; their country has never been explored very fully by civilized men, & the late efforts of travelers to penetrate to the sources of the Niger, have not been very successful.

Of the nations inhabiting the northern portions of Africa, who are of a different origin, viz. the Egyptians, Carthaginians and Numidians, I suppose you will find the best accounts in some Encyclopedia, under the words Copt, Egypt, Carthage & Numidia – add also Moors.

Yours respectfully, N Webster

A twenty-first century reader may well cringe at this correspondence. But a closer look at Webster's times and at Amos Beman's beliefs can illuminate the range of ideas about racial equality in the early 19th century.

For many years, scholars have argued that Connecticut's treatment of African Americans both enslaved and free, was paternalistic and overshadowed by abolitionists. However, recent scholarly research and books for a popular audience like the newly published book *Complicity: How the North Promoted, Prolonged, and Profited from Slavery* by Anne Farrow, Joel Lang, and West Hartford's Jenifer Frank, challenge this view. The authors describe how much whites in the north participated in the institution of slavery either by owning slaves or profiting through trade. This milieu sets a context in which Webster could make a statement which was degrading to Africans.

Webster's letter was typical of nineteenth-century "white" American opinion. Webster and his contemporaries assumed that vast, fixed, biological, and intellectual differences separated Europeans from Africans. He believed these things were fixed by nature, not constructed by human beings. These assumptions led to a tremendous cultural divide between the Africans themselves, and whites who supported emancipation but not equality and those few whites who supported emancipation and equality. A belief like Webster's led to decades of racial discrimination before, during and after the Civil War.

As early as 1785, Webster wrote that he wanted the abolition of slavery to be part of a new constitution. In 1791, Noah Webster co-founded Hartford's Society for the Abolition of Slavery. He believed, as many northerners did in the 19th century, that slavery should end, but he never conceived of free blacks having the same rights as whites. Lincoln, in his writings and speeches, claims to want to free the slaves, but he does not accept social, political, or economic equality, just a short time after Webster died in 1843.

Webster's writings 50 years earlier, in the 1790s reflect interest in emancipating slaves, but not in equality. In 1793, Webster published a lecture called "Effects of Slavery on Morals and Industry," in which he argued that it was not economically profitable to favor enslaved over free labor. Webster believed he needed to convince slave owners that it was in their best economic interest to emancipate slaves. He felt slave owners would be alienated by appealing to them about the immorality or cruelty of slavery. And, there were many who perceived that slavery uplifted what Webster stated was the "race [that] has remained in barbarism." Webster may have seen educated, Christian, free blacks in a different light than the Africans in Africa, but clearly he gives Beman very little to feel good about in this letter.

Amos G. Beman, the recipient of Webster's letter was a black minister and abolitionist leader from the Temple Street African Congregational Church in New Haven, who later served the Talcott Street Church in

Hartford. Both Amos Beman and his father Jehiel organized abolitionist and political conventions throughout Connecticut. They were leaders of Connecticut's black abolitionist movement, and they led a successful petition drive in 1847 for black suffrage which was passed by the General Assembly. However, the right to vote was defeated in a statewide referendum soon after. Clarissa Beman, Amos' first wife founded the Colored Female Anti-Slavery Society in 1834, the second one of its kind in the country.

Beman's Congregational and evangelical religious beliefs moved him to be an abolitionist, in many of the same ways it moved many white Congregationalists. Beman believed that all people – British, American and African – suffered from sin. He believed Jesus would emancipate equally all people from the slavery of sin. This salvation would lead to a colorblind society.

Beman believed God treated all sinners equally. He believed that black people had a moral obligation to reform themselves. Beman believed that people had to try to eradicate selfishness and be kind. He preached against drinking alcohol, theater-going, and the use of tobacco. He argued that if black people could show white society that they were morally pure, they would more likely win the right to vote. Lewis Tappan and Beman helped found and later served on the executive committee of, the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society. Beman recommended disobedience of the Fugitive Slave Law and made his Hartford church a station on the Underground Railroad. Beman's religious and moral beliefs matched those of many of the white religious abolitionists.

Perhaps part of Webster's point is that education is the hallmark of civilization; Webster knew Africans in Africa were not educated as Americans were. Webster is certainly willing to correspond with the educated Beman, but Webster cannot see any history of people who had no written language or formal schools. Beman believed, like Webster did about white people, that blacks had a history. Webster could not fit that into his frame of reference.

However distasteful Webster's words may be to us today, if we do not listen to Webster's voice, it makes the Civil War and equal rights seem inevitable. A look at the tensions of the 1840s makes us realize that racial equality and abolition were clearly contested terrain that we still address. It is our job to try to understand the motives of men like Webster and Beman. This allows us to see the past as a contentious playing field of ideas and actions, not one ordained by nature or God.

Chapter 3

The Market Revolution

We Are What We Have

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, December 2002

When I look at the possessions in my house, I know that life is different for my children than it was for me. They have more things: more toys, more sports equipment, more books, computers, electronics and even different types of food.

The material trappings of a 21st century life reflect not only what we have, but also our values. Different things surround me, and my beliefs are shaped, to a degree, by these possessions.

Historians look back in time to reveal both what we have in common with those who lived before us and what makes us different. They like to discover connections between people over time that reveal not only what they own, but also what they thought and felt.

An 1836 inventory from West Division resident Thomas Barrows gives a snapshot of his world. When Barrows died in 1836, officials from the town came to his home and enumerated all of his belongings.

When I read his inventory, a list that goes on for five and a half columns, I see evidence about how life changed in the West Division from 1770 to the 1830s, and I think about how national and world events contributed.

The first industrial revolution began in the U.S. because of an embargo of British goods caused by the war of 1812. With the embargo, Americans began to manufacture more of their own products outside the home and shops and factories. This began with the mass production of textiles in Lowell, Massachusetts, around 1815 and continued with mass production of chairs, pottery, and carpets. Manufacturers used new technology and a new organization of work to produce better goods at a cheaper price.

As farmers began to specialize and produce a surplus, they joined the market economy and had the means to buy more products. Transportation improved with the coming of the steam engine and railroads; the steamboat and canals also encouraged trade.

Thomas Barrow's inventory does not let us down on this score. His belongings revealed the increase in the amount of goods Americans possessed.

He had more than 40 pieces of clothing including nine coats, nine pairs of pantaloons, six cotton shirts and nine vests. This is far more clothing than the three sets of clothing the average man had in the 1770s.

Cloth was cheap and without having to spin, women had more time to sew clothing. Even though he had a great wheel, it is likely it was used only for spinning thread for specialty items, not for everyday cloth. He had one pair of boots and three pair of shoes.

Some items tell us about trade. He had a silk handkerchief, silk stockings and a palm leaf hat. The China trade, which began in the 1780s, continued, and the interest in producing silk cloth in Connecticut had begun. Cheney Mills in Manchester started to produce silk cloth. It is likely the palm leaf hat came from the British-controlled islands in the Caribbean.

The Barrows inventory reflected the increased importance of individualism found in the amount of silverware. In the 1770s, some inventories list no silverware. Barrows had three sets of knives and forks, two large silver spoons, five tablespoons and twelve silver teaspoons.

He had a tin wash basin. In the 1770s, wash basins were made of pottery. The 1850 census shows that a tinner actually lived in town. Barrows also had tin funnels, a tin coffee pot and a tin two-quart measure. In the 1770s, measuring for baking was done with a pottery cup with no markings. In the 1830s, the first recipe books came out which required more exact measurements. New foods were available and cooking changed as people began to use cook stoves rather than cook over an open fireplace. No longer was a meal made as a stew in one pot.

Barrows owned a carpet, a new addition to home decorating. This was a sign that people had money beyond what it took to provide food and shelter. Carpet mills in Tariffville and Thompsonville had already started to manufacture these carpets.

Though there is no evidence in his inventory, some people put wallpaper on their walls for the first time and others added curtains. This ability to decorate was not just an activity of the rich, but served the middle class as well.

Barrows' brass clock may have come from the fledgling clock industry in Waterbury and signified an increased interest in time, which came with industrialization's marketing of a workday in hours.

But some things continued. Reminding us of 60 years earlier, Barrows had a horse harness, leather halter, horse whip and draft chain, a plow, a wood saw, 30 harrow teeth, a hoe, an axe, an iron crowbar, an ox yoke and an iron shovel, all tools of a farmer.

Barrows had a Bible and a psalm book and these were his only books. He had horses, swine, sheep and cows. He had 4 pounds of wool rolls, 5 bushels of wheat, 4 bushels of rye, 2 and a half bushels of wheat, 100 bushels of potatoes, 17 pounds of butter, 10 tons of hay, 6 barrels of cider and 75 pounds of cheese. These items showed continuity with the past.

He had mulberry trees worth \$14, the value of one of his 24 acres of land. Silkworms live in mulberry trees, and there was an idea that they could grow silkworms in New England for the silk industry. Only two years later the Cheney Silk Mills opened in Manchester.

Why would Barrows take a risk and invest in mulberry trees? As a budding capitalist, he had an idea that his investment could bring him some profit along the way. He had to have a surplus to take the risk; he had to have an idea to take the risk. He had to have the means to procure a tree, all things that took time and money. Woefully, this experiment with mulberry trees was unsuccessful, though the silk industry in Connecticut was quite profitable from the 1840s to the 1920s.

Thomas Barrows' inventory provides a snapshot into a life during Andrew Jackson's presidency that shows both continuity and change. He was both a traditional man with his roots in farming, but also a man accepting new ideas with his carpet and his mulberry trees. Often it is our grounding in the past that allows us to try new things.

Diversity in West Hartford

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, November 2003

According to the 2000 United States census, 22% of West Hartford residents spoke a language other than English at home. The languages spoken in these homes included Spanish (6.4%), other European (11%) and

Asian (4%). Almost 15% of the town's residents are foreign born. Of these foreign born, 46% come from Europe, 28% from Asia, 16% from Latin America, 6% from North America, and 4% from Africa.

When residents report their ancestries, the largest was Irish at almost 17%, followed by Italian (11%), English (10%), Germans (9%), Polish (6%) and Russian (6%). When residents were asked about their race, 86% indicated they were white, 6.3% Hispanic, 4.8% African American, and 4.8% Asian.

This represents a population which many consider to be much more diverse than West Hartford has ever been. In the schools, the differences are even more defined. That is, at Conard, for instance, about 12% are Hispanic, 9% African American and 9% Asian, about double that of the general population. These groups tend to be younger and have families.

However, a look back into the 19th and 20th centuries shows a picture of ethnic, racial, and religious diversity as well. The 1840 census (in which West Hartford was included in the Hartford figures), the population included Irish, German, French, and Swedish immigrants. Patrick McCabe, Patrick Martin, and James Riley were all petitioners in 1854 to make West Hartford a separate town. None, though, were among the first office holders in the new town.

The Irish presence in the 1840s, however, did not translate into much religious diversity at that point. In fact, it wasn't until 1918 that the first Roman Catholic Church, St. Brigid opened in town. This church was a mission chapel of the St. Lawrence O'Toole Church just west on New Britain Avenue in Hartford. Today St. Lawrence O'Toole holds services in Vietnamese on Sundays.

A look at the birth records of the town from 1885 to 1899 reveals quite a diverse population before the turn of the twentieth century. Irish, English, Swedish, and French Canadians are the ancestries most listed. A look at the death records for the same time period reveals mostly native born and Irish.

Other anecdotal evidence appears as well. In a letter which described registering men between the ages of 18 and 46 for the war on September 12, 1918, three interpreters were present: N.C. Casciano, Italian, Bernard Caya, French, and Malcolm Swanson, Swede. In 1918, West Hartford's population stood at about 8,000, and there was a need for interpreters in three different languages.

By 1919, Swedes bought property on Park Road near Oakwood Avenue for \$1,000 to build a chapel seating 200. The structure was built mainly by men from the church. In 1921 the West Hartford Ladies were organized into an auxiliary and by 1941, they had worked long enough and hard enough to pay off the mortgage. The Swedes were active in the Boy Scouts and they built a cabin for the troop near Mountain Road in the area around Spice Bush Swamp. Very quickly the West Hartford Chapel had to be enlarged because the Sunday School grew so rapidly.

Even today, the legacy of this large group of Swedish immigrants remains in the Park Road area. You can still buy Swedish sausage and bread at Hall's market. A.C. Petersen's and Youngstrom's Floor Covering are still going concerns.

But, today if you drive down Park Road, you will see a distinct Asian presence with a Vietnamese and a Chinese market, and Pho Tuong Lai, a Vietnamese restaurant.

In 1936, Congregation Beth Israel moved from Hartford to 701 Farmington Avenue. Jews began to move from Hartford's north end to West Hartford in the mid 1920s. Abraham Feldman had been the rabbi of the congregation since 1925. When he came to Hartford, there were about 200 families at the temple. When he retired in the early 1970s, his West Hartford congregation had over 1,400 families with more than 1100 children in the religious school.

Feldman, in an oral interview in 1974, remembered West Hartford as being a closed community politically. He believed it was "the most Republican town in the United States." Feldman related that there was "no chance for a young Jew, or a Jewish lawyer... to enter the political life of the community." He said this was also true for Catholics.

Feldman related a story he had with a town chairman of one political party in town at the dedication of the Universalist Church in town in 1931. Feldman said the chairman asked him point blank, "What do you want?" He replied, "There isn't a damn thing I want from you... I have never come to ask you to appoint a

Jew, to give a job to a Jew, or to do anything else for a Jew. But heaven help you if I ever get a report that you have denied a job to a man because he was a Jew.”

The Catholic population had been in town longer than the Jews, but still the Protestants controlled the town politically until the 1960s when Democrats got elected more frequently. In the 1970s and 1980s Sandy Klebanoff, Beverly Greenberg and Lonnie Brick led the Town Council and Board of Education.

How has the town reacted to these changes? It seems like the economy changes first. The various ethnic and racial groups establish businesses and through that become a part of the community. It seems as though it takes at least another generation to get political representation.

The newer migrants to West Hartford – Asians, Hispanics, and a larger group of African Americans – have only begun to test the political waters in town. The first Asian, Naogan Ma, who serves on the Board of Education, is a Republican. Today’s elected officials reflect the ethnic diversity of second and third generation migrants from the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. Present members of the Town Council and Board of Education represent the Irish, Italian, French Canadian, and Jewish migrants of two or more generations earlier.

Though the housing stock in town has changed little since 1970, those who live in those houses have changed, not so much in their economic backgrounds as in their ethnic and racial makeup. In a real democracy, the town government should reflect those changes, but using the past as a yardstick, without any direct recruiting and encouragement, it may take another generation.

Remembering Romanta Seymour and 19th Century Agriculture

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, April 2010

In 1850, if you stood on the ridge that is South Main Street where it meets New Britain Avenue, cleared fields, pastures, and woodlots would surround you. You might see a grist mill to the east along Trout Brook and the South District one-room schoolhouse to the west.

If you traveled down the hill toward Elmwood Center, you could find Romanta Seymour’s farm. In October 1850, the Hartford County Agricultural Society awarded West Hartford’s Romanta Seymour second prize in a contest for the best-cultivated farm in the county.

Seymour won \$15 for his farm production, which made a 19 percent profit over the 1850 growing season.

By 1815, competition with western farms began the switch for New England farmers from wheat and meat production into dairy farming and vegetable production. Transportation improved over the next 35 years, allowing local farmers to more easily sell their surplus. The Hartford-New Haven Railroad line opened through Elmwood in 1839. Agricultural societies and fairs flourished under state aid.

Farmers began to use more scientific methods to increase their yields and the agricultural societies supported these efforts. The Hartford County Agricultural Society was incorporated in October 1817. While the industrial revolution in textiles began during this period of time, agricultural production continued to drive the U.S. economy. The value of agricultural goods increased more than 100 times between 1810 and 1880. West Hartford farmers were part of this growth in production.

Romanta Seymour’s house lot of 50 acres was on the south side of the old Farmington Road, now known as New Britain Avenue. The entire front of his property was lined by a white picket fence, according to the agricultural society, “giving a pleasant and comely appearance.”

In 1847, Romanta Seymour passed the farm’s management to his son William, who actively worked to increase the cultivation and production of the land. According to Seymour, the field produced a large hay crop without any manure and only a light top dressing of ashes.

He planted grass seed in two small patches and its yield increased so much that he thought he would do that more in the future. His fields produced between two and three tons of hay to the acre. The average farm produced between three-quarters and one ton per acre.

Seymour probably planted about one quarter of his acreage in hay. The pasture at the end of the ravine that ran through his farm had not produced much under his father's cultivation. However, William plowed the tract and the improvement raised yields by 50 percent.

He bought a section in the southeast part of his farm, which was covered with white birches and bushes so thick that even the cattle could not get into the area. In the past three years, Seymour "subdued it" to get in a crop of buckwheat.

Buckwheat, not related to wheat, grows best in a low-fertility, acidic soil. Today buckwheat is eaten as soba noodles, porridge and kasha. The grain grows quickly and is used as a second crop in the season, especially where the growing season is short. Some farmers use buckwheat as a cover crop because it grows and establishes itself quickly and keeps out weeds. Seymour's crop netted him \$50 in 1850.

According to the agricultural society, this land would soon turn into "handsome meadow ground producing hay in abundance, adding more than 100 percent to its value." Seymour's intensive use of the land through his "untiring industry" was a major factor in winning the agricultural prize.

Seymour owned 12 acres of land across the street to the north of his house. On this patch, he had three acres in pasture and the rest in grass and corn. The agricultural society commented on Seymour's use of manure. He had large stalls with abundant straw. With some of last year's manure remaining in the bottom to act as yeast, he was able to accumulate a good batch of manure. His animals produced 200 loads of manure annually, all of which Seymour plowed in for crops.

Even though by 1850 many New England farms had switched to dairy, it is unclear how many cows Seymour kept, but he did raise hogs and turkeys. He started an orchard by planting young apple trees that in 1850 were growing "luxuriantly." He grew strawberries and had beehives and grew 11 different crops. Seymour's income also included pasturing a neighbor's two cows and a calf for \$21 and labor done off the farm garnered \$72.

He grew crops to consume directly, but also marketed some. According to former Town Historian Nelson Burr, rye was in great demand; West Hartford had a prosperous distilling business. Elmwood's Ebenezer Faxon specialized in distilling and selling rye. The Goodman family distilled rye, corn, barley and cider. Mountain Road and Still Road had five distilleries and Gin Still Hill had three.

The Connecticut River Valley also grew into a center of broom making and Seymour's broomcorn would have fed this industry. His hay and corn were most likely fed to animals.

Seymour's expenses included \$160 for his own labor and \$180 for hired labor. He bought ashes and plaster worth \$47 and seeds for \$25. His 19 percent profit for his work added up to \$757 and led his farm to be recognized in Hartford County.

In 1850 West Hartford, farming dictated the rhythm of life. The fields, barnyard, garden and household ruled the lives of young and old from April to November.

But farming changed with the market, just as manufacturing did. Farmers like William Seymour were moved by supply and demand, using their acreage to make the highest profit, and experimenting on plants, animals and insects to insure a good income. To be a good farmer in 1850, farm owners had to change with new technology, markets, transportation and crops. Seymour's willingness to take risks on his farm led the Hartford County Agricultural Society to honor him.

In so doing, the society encouraged others to step out of the traditional ways and experiment, not unlike those in the industrial sector.

West Hartford Moves to Payson, Illinois

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, December 2012

This building was erected by Henry M. and Lucy W. Seymour In memory of their only son
CHARLES 1912

Jeff Zanger, principal of the Payson Seymour Elementary School, Payson, Illinois, assures me that this bronze plaque is still in the “beautiful marble foyer of our building. It is the first thing you see when you walk through our front doors.”

West Hartford descendants of the first settlers of Payson funded this high school building in 1912 and named it after the Seymour family. One of the original Charles Seymours lived in the West Division of Hartford during the American Revolution and served in the local militia. His son, Martin Seymour moved to Payson in 1838 and his grandson Henry built the high school.

West Hartford’s connection with this town of 1,026 people dates back 180 years. According to William H. Hall in his *History of West Hartford* (1930), “in 1833, Albigeance Scarborough, a prominent citizen of West Hartford, rode on horseback to the far-off state of Illinois, for the purpose of prospecting with reference to the establishment of a new settlement there.” Scarborough, like so many others, believed that life could be better out west; his new settlement in Payson is a story of the transplanted, a move which made him adapt to the geography of Illinois, and brought much from New England.

A 1919 book, the *History of Payson and Plainville, IL*, claimed that Payson had “some of the richest lands” in its location just five miles east of the Mississippi River, just south of where Missouri, Iowa and Illinois meet. In the 1830s, many farmers from Connecticut and Massachusetts moved west as land became scarce and word of the fertility of western land filtered east.

Scarborough, it seems, walked “much of the way, in order to save the strength of his mule to carry provisions” on his first trip in 1833. He must have found the location satisfactory as he returned to West Hartford in 1834, packed up his family and belongings in a wagon to returned to Illinois.

Deacon Albigeance Scarborough purchased the land on which Payson now stands and in the spring of 1835 laid out the village in a grid, having it mapped and recorded. Scarborough followed the pattern of New England towns by setting a commons in the center. With two other settlers, he laid out and sold lots in late summer 1836, and four acres of land were given by Deacon Scarborough upon which to build a school.

Scarborough named the town after Edward Payson (1783-1827), a Congregational minister from Portland, Maine who preached during the Second Great Awakening. Scarborough admired Payson, a man who read Jonathan Edwards and preached with “the eloquence of truth spoken in love.” Payson preached in Maine and in many pulpits around New England and Scarborough must have heard him.

Scarborough acted on his faith and helped to build a Congregational Church in 1839 but even before it was dedicated, it burned down. A second church, smaller than the first, was built right away. The Congregational Church was the second church in town, following the Baptist Church in 1834. In 1836 the Methodists formed a religious society as well.

Deacon Scarborough planted the first apple orchard in the spring of 1838. He bought the trees in St. Louis. A few years later he planted peach trees which produced some of the best peaches around. By 1835 a new migrant from New York opened the first store in Payson. By 1837, two merchants set up shop and one became the first postmaster.

Scarborough helped fund and build the first parsonage in 1845. Scarborough had the help of the Mormons in his endeavor. They were hounded out of Nauvoo, a town just 60 miles north where Mormon leader Joseph Smith was killed in 1844. Most of these refugees made their way to what became Salt Lake City by 1849, but in the meantime, some stopped in Payson and helped Deacon Scarborough.

In the late 1830s, many other West Hartford residents moved to Payson. According to Hall, Moses Spencer left his farm on Farmington Avenue just west of the center and took his wife and nine children there in 1839. In 1930, his descendant was one of the largest landowners in Payson. Charles Whitman, Cyrus and Wells Butler, and Martin Seymour with his wife and nine children all travelled to Payson. Seymour owned a 100 acre farm on the present site of the American School for the Deaf in West Hartford; in Payson he managed a limestone quarry.

Payson quickly distinguished itself as a place to get a good education. This was unusual for the frontier, but the West Hartford settlers seemed to take responsibility. When Scarborough sold the first land in Payson village, he took 20 percent of each sale price and donated that money to education in the town.

Before there were enough students for a public school, many were educated in private schools. The first was in an old log cabin with a roughly finished timber floor on the northeast corner of Edwards and Fulton streets. Miss Emily Scarborough, probably Albigence's daughter, taught students at this school and later became the first public school teacher.

In 1916, Henry M. Seymour, a grandson of Martin Seymour, one of the founders of the town, donated one of the finest school buildings in the west. He gave the building in memory of his only son who was killed at age 16 playing baseball on the school playground and commemorated his son with the aforementioned bronze plaque.

The five West Division families that settled Payson in the 1830s brought material goods and values with them. While the geography of Payson, near the Mississippi River may have changed something of their daily lifestyles, their priorities stood the test of time. The idea of common land, and the importance of an education were key parts of 19th century New England settlements that descendants carried on in both towns.

Chapter 4

An Independent Town

Democracy in the Mid-19th Century

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, December 2000

What did freedom and independence mean for the new town of West Hartford in its first decade? How did democracy take shape in this town of about 1,200 Americans in the 1850s and 1860s?

Democracy here was contentious and bipartisan. The 153 men who petitioned to the General Assembly for independence in 1854 argued that with a population of more than 1,200 and a Grand List of more than \$20,000, it was as large as most of the towns in the state.

The 95 men who presented a petition to the General Assembly opposing independence argued that their business was all transacted in Hartford, the population was not large enough, and the new representatives would increase membership in the already too-large House of Representatives. They thought that their indebtedness for roads and bridges would increase taxes in an independent town.

The General Assembly accepted the petition for independence and those who were opposed were brought into the new government. By looking at the town meeting minutes from 1854 to 1863, one gets an idea that this was a highly participatory democracy.

By 1860, West Hartford had a population of about 1,200 people. Of that, about 600 were men and of the 600, at most half of them were over 21 and eligible to vote. With about 300 eligible voters, at the first Town Meeting in June 1854, the citizens voted 31 men into office. Jobs included selectmen, grand jurors, constables, treasurer, registrar, fence viewers, pound keepers, haywards, and sealer of weights and measures, indicating the agricultural basis of the town. Later on jobs including school visitors and a board of relief were added.

If 31 men out of 300 voters were elected, more than 10% of the voting male population served in elected office, making up almost 3% of the total population. The equivalent today would be 1,800 officeholders in the town for our population of 60,000. Today there are 18 elected town officials (nine on the Town Council, seven on the Board of Education, a Probate Judge, and a Town Clerk).

These first officeholders, elected in May 1854, indicate that the townspeople wanted a bipartisan government. Of the 31 men elected to office, 18 signed the petition for independence, eight signed a petition against, and five did not sign either petition.

The townspeople quickly mended fences and worked shoulder to shoulder. They met at Town Meetings twice a year, usually in March and October. Between 1854 and 1863, they voted on the candidates, the tax rate (anywhere from 5-7% of assessed value of their property), building roads, establishing a second cemetery and attempting to build a Town Hall.

And they argued about all of it. In November 1857, a resolution passed that said no person could speak on one subject more than twice or for more than 10 minutes.

In 1858 as the town tried to separate itself from the power of the Congregational Church, citizens debated who should take care of Goodman Green, property of the Church. At first the town voted to take over care of the green from the church and “a committee would be established to grade, fence in, improve the park near the meeting house.” The motion went on to ask that \$20 be set aside to pay for these improvements. Then it was amended to have the town take possession of the land. Then it was amended to table the whole idea. Then it was voted to drop the issue indefinitely. The town also attempted to build a separate meeting room so that town meetings did not have to happen in the church.

The discussions about this issue began in 1858 and finally in 1863 the town purchased the Congregational Church’s vestry building to serve as a Town Hall. At every meeting during this period of time, citizens debated the roads: where to build, how much to pay workers, how much to pay the highway surveyors (\$1.25 per day), where the roads would go, and making the highway district the same as the school district.

Collecting taxes must have been troublesome because there was constant mention of how to collect those that were in arrears. The highway surveyors collected the highway taxes separately and citizens were taxed separately for one of the eight school districts in the town.

Newcomers to the town were the beneficiaries of this roadbuilding. The 1850 census showed a considerable number of laborers born in Ireland living in town. Laborers were paid about one dollar per day to work on the roads. The labor of these Irish men, many of whom had families here, was much in demand as the town grew. However, there is no evidence that any of these men served in any elected town office during this period of time.

Decisions about education also led to protracted discussions. Education was an important foundation of the town and town government. Each of the eight school districts had their one-room schoolhouse. Each hired its own teacher and collected their own school tax. In 1859, the district known as “the commons” (presently the area around Charter Oak School) wanted to join together with the district to its east, in Hartford. The resolution to accomplish this was voted and re-voted over a two-year period until the cross-district school became a reality.

Citizens fought over who was in each district and whether one district got more funds than another. In 1860, the town voted to collect taxes as a town and divide them among the districts to equalize the spending. It was not until the 1890s that consolidated schools were built.

The town also closely monitored its care of the poor. When it separated from Hartford, one of the stipulations of being an independent town was taking responsibility for the poor. West Hartford chose to do this by providing for the poor citizens in their place of residence. The town provided firewood, food, medical care and clothing for those in need. But the town was also circumspect about its money. It paid medical bills of \$1.25 to Dr. Wells and Dr. Brace, but then made a resolution that the town would not make another payment of that amount of money unless it was approved by the selectmen ahead of time. A resolution passed in October 1856 said that a particular woman, Sarah Cadwell, could receive no more aid until it was proven she was a pauper of the town.

It was rare for events outside town to impinge on the town meeting, but the Civil War certainly did. At the March 1861 meeting, the town voted to pay a bounty of \$30 for every man who enlisted. It voted to pay five dollars in money or goods and services to any resident family whose son or husband went to war.

West Hartford’s fledgling democracy in the 1850s and 1860s deliberated and exemplified the idea of civic engagement for those landholding men eligible to participate. That these meetings were contentious and bipartisan is a tribute to its citizens and the system itself.

When Abraham Lincoln Came to Hartford

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, December 2008. Thanks to Eugene Leach, "Glimpses of Lincoln's Brilliance," Hog River Journal, Fall 2005.

March 5, 1860. I can imagine a 16-year-old William H. Hall making his way to Hartford in an open carriage.

He could have joined a "larger infusion of young men than was usually the case in antebellum political assemblies," as the *New York Times* described the crowd, to hear Abraham Lincoln give a speech. Lincoln had not yet been nominated for president; that would come two months later on May 16 in Chicago, but he was looking for a national audience. I want to believe that Hall would have been there based on his political interests.

His town of West Hartford had been an independent town for less than six years. The population was about 1,300 people, perhaps 200 families. During the 1850s, the new Republican Party appealed to local voters emphasizing higher education, banking, railroads, industry and cities, and free homesteads to farmers.

The Republican Party started as revolt against the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which allowed settlers to vote on whether there would be slavery in their territories. The Republican Party pledged to stop the spread of slavery.

In 1858, 136 men voted in the local election, about 85 voting Republican and about 50 voting Democrat. (See Nelson Burr's *From Colonial Parish to Modern Suburb*, p. 46.) It is likely that the native born were Republicans and the more recent immigrants including the Irish, German, French, and Swedish listed in the 1850 census were more likely to be Democrats.

Hartford, a city of some 29,000 people, was a solidly Democratic town. This might have encouraged the interest in West Hartford's independence movement in 1854. The first officers in the new town and delegates to the General Assembly were Republicans.

On Lincoln's swing through the northeast, he claimed to be visiting his son Robert at Phillips Academy. But by February, Lincoln clearly had an interest in the presidency.

He made a series of speeches in New York, New Hampshire and Connecticut to make himself known nationally, as he was seen as a sectional candidate from the northwest. His most famous speeches were the one given at Cooper Union in New York City and the one given in New Haven, the day after his Hartford speech.

Still, the Hartford speech is worth noting. In it Lincoln established himself as a strong opponent of the extension of slavery and slavery itself, even as the Republicans were trying to moderate their stances to show that they were not abolitionists, but instead merely opposed to the extension of slavery.

He spoke inside a packed Hartford City Hall on that Monday in March. According to the *Hartford Courant*, he was "greeted with applause which was almost deafening." Lincoln used the image of a snake to represent slavery, as he established the Republican focus on banning the extension of slavery. For instance, Lincoln argued:

... out in the street, or in the field, or on the prairie I find a rattlesnake. I take a stake and kill him. Everybody would applaud the act and say I did right. But suppose the snake was in a bed where the children were sleeping.

Would I do right to strike him there? I might hurt the children or I might not kill, but only arouse and exasperate the snake, and he might bite the children.

Thus, by meddling with him here, I would do more hurt than good.

Slavery is like this. We dare not strike at it where it is. The manner in which our Constitution is framed constrains us from making war upon it where it already exists.

The question that we now have to deal with is shall we be acting right to take this snake and carry it to a bed where there are children? The Republican party insists on keeping it out of the bed.

His statement clearly spoke to his audience on the dangers of slavery's spread. With the focus on the extension of slavery, there are some who argue that it was hard to tell whether Lincoln was against slavery when he took office a year later.

He claimed that when the Union entered the Civil War, it was to keep the Union together, not to abolish slavery. Some say his stance was not clear until he issued the Emancipation Proclamation in September 1862 that he was opposed to the institution of slavery. However, at Hartford's City Hall on March 5, Lincoln declared:

... the free states carry on their government on the principle of equality of men. We think slavery is morally wrong and a direct violation of that principle. We all think it wrong. It is clearly proved, I think, by natural theology, apart from revelation.

Every man, black, white, or yellow, has a mouth to be fed, and two hands with which to feed it, and bread should be allowed to go to that mouth without controversy. Slavery is wrong in its effect upon white people and free labor. It is the only thing that threatens the Union.

This clear declaration denouncing slavery on intellectual and economic grounds pushes the Republican feelings that they had to tread lightly on the topic of slavery or a Republican would not be elected president. Lincoln was clear in his declaration against slavery.

The most interesting aspect of his speech was how he tried to find common ground with southerners, highlighting how important economics were in their political decisions. Unlike William Seward, the frontrunner for the nomination, Lincoln did not demonize the southerners. In fact, he found what the two sections had in common:

One sixth, and a little more, of the population of the United States are slaves, looked upon as property, as nothing but property.

The cash value of these slaves, at a moderate estimate, is \$2,000,000,000. This amount of property value has a vast influence on the minds of its owners, very naturally.

The same amount of property would have an equal influence upon us if owned in the North. Human nature is the same; people at the South are the same as those at the North, barring the difference in circumstances.

Public opinion is founded, to a great extent, on a property basis.

What lessens the value of property is opposed, what enhances its value is favored.

Public opinion at the South regards slaves as property and insists upon treating them like other property.

Lincoln's claim that "people at the South are the same as those at the North" would have been anathema to abolitionists, and even to Seward, who claimed that those in the South were greedy and amoral, while those in the North were idealistic and righteous.

This position was one that echoed through Lincoln's presidency, including one of his most famous lines found in his second inaugural.

"With malice towards none; with charity for all... to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow, and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

Here Lincoln does not distinguish between Union and Confederate people. If William Hall did indeed hear him, he probably would have then proceeded with the crowds led by the Hartford Corner Band, which led Lincoln to the home of his host, Mayor Allyn. He also might have been interested in Lincoln's meeting with Gideon Welles of Glastonbury at a local Hartford bookstore after his speech.

The next year, Welles was appointed Lincoln's Secretary of the Navy.

The Town's Role in the Civil War

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, August 2005

When the Union went to war with the Confederacy in April 1861, West Hartford had been an independent town for only seven years. Its population stood at almost 1,300. Thirteen men, 1% of the population from West Hartford died in the Civil War. At war's end, West Hartford had sent 117 men to serve, almost 10% of the population and about half of the male population of military age. The sheer number of men and the newness of the government may have led to fewer records being kept. But, the tally of West Hartford men who served and died in the Civil War (1861-5) probably tells less about West Hartford than any other war.

Incentives in the form of bounties led men to move from town to town. West Hartford's quota of 44 men was oversubscribed by 83 recruits. Many of the 117 were not West Hartford residents. It is more difficult to verify that those who died actually lived in West Hartford.

West Hartford men who served were lured by federal, state and local bonuses. Connecticut offered each man \$140 for enlisting while they received \$27 from the federal government. In May 1861 just one month after the opening salvo at Fort Sumter, South Carolina, West Hartford residents voted at town meeting to borrow \$3,000 for war bounties and for the families of soldiers. Male citizens voted for every inhabitant who enlisted in military service for three years to get \$30 or its equivalent in equipment and clothing. Families of those who enlisted were paid a monthly amount of up to \$5 and \$2 for every child under age 12. At first, the town paid this money to all those who enlisted from West Hartford, but within six months, rescinded the amount to those who it was determined did not live in West Hartford.

There was much incentive for men to become "bounty jumpers." They enlisted in one town, got the money, and then deserted. Then they showed up in a second town. Wealthy men were able to "buy" a replacement for \$300. Of 20 deserters from West Hartford, it is thought that many were never residents here.

The Union's many advantages made Union recruits believe the war would end quickly. Those who mustered first, signed up for 90 days. There were heavy casualties. The first six West Hartford men who died in 1862 averaged just four months in the army.

The Civil War was the last war in which soldiers for the same regiment were mustered from the same town. For instance, at the 1862 Battle of Antietam, the 16th Connecticut Regiment had nine West Hartford men. At this crucial battle in Maryland, the Union Army stopped General Robert E. Lee's first invasion of the North in September 1862. On the bloodiest battle day, September 17, 1862, more than 23,000 men were killed, wounded, and missing. West Hartford's Edward Deming died on that day. At Antietam, three West Hartford men were killed, four were disabled and two survived to fight another day. Charles Sternberg and Arthur Talcott died of wounds within three months of the battle. West Hartford was thought to have suffered the most of any town its size from this particular battle.

In the 1860s, the majority of West Hartford's population consisted of white Congregationalist farm families. But the town's population was changing. The 1850 census shows a growing presence of Irish and German immigrants and African Americans continued to live and work here. These demographic patterns were reflected in the Civil War dead and the enlistees.

Charles Sternberg, who died at Antietam, was one of four German immigrant brothers who fought in the war. Their father Charles emigrated from Germany in 1854 as a result of the 1848 Revolution. Charles established a farm at the corner of Sedgwick and Mountain Road. One brother William was imprisoned at Andersonville and survived.

The 24th Connecticut Regiment included three Irish companies one of which came from Hartford and West Hartford. West Hartford's John McCarty, who had been a musician in the Regiment, was sent to the front lines and killed at the siege at Port Hudson, Louisiana in the second assault on June 14, 1863. Port Hudson was a pivotal battle for control of the Mississippi. The siege began on May 23, 1863 and lasted for 48 days. About 30,000 Union troops fought 6,800 Confederates. On the morning of May 27, and again on June 14, the Union army launched assaults against the earthworks protecting Port Hudson. McCarty sacrificed his life in the second assault. Finally, the Confederacy surrendered on July 9th, seven weeks later.

Once the men got to battle, there were many deserters. In light of the conditions in the Union Army, it is not surprising that desertion was so rampant. It is thought that over 200,000 deserted over the course of the war. The daily hardships of war, lack of weapons, and forced marches which sometimes made straggling a necessity for less vigorous men, caused some to desert. West Hartford's John Hall mustered and served but died by a military execution for deserting. The military used men like Hall as examples to try to reduce the number of deserters.

West Hartford's Thomas Wells wrote a letter to his family in 1862 claiming to march 20 miles per day, sometimes in the pouring rain, with only a cup of coffee as nourishment.¹ J.G. Butler wrote that the army made it hard for soldiers to keep a high morale. Butler marched 300 miles in seven days.²

The horrors of the Civil War were made real to West Hartford residents through the first war photographs, letters, and returning men. In R. H. Morse's letter to West Hartford's Mrs. Elizabeth Sisson, 23 July 1863, he wrote "Only three short weeks before, our regt. left Hartford with over one thousand brave men ready to strike a blow for liberty and restore our glorious union once more. . . Only those who have seen it or have been engaged can tell one half the scenes of horror or carnage of the battlefield. Imagination fails to conceive the one half of it."³

West Hartford men's Civil War experiences show their willingness to join for a common cause and of a town to support them. Not everyone enlisted for the same reasons and their fighting situations varied greatly. Some could well articulate the purposes of war and some fought for bounties. The local history becomes more meaningful and complex when intertwined with state and federal policies and world immigration patterns.

West Hartford's First Foray with Regionalism

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, December 2006

An 1869 map of West Hartford shows an aqueduct running from a small reservoir #1 down Farmington Avenue into West Hartford center then on to Hartford. This first reservoir, authorized by the Hartford Water Board in 1866, flooded 32 acres of West Hartford land. But West Hartford residents could not drink the water from the sheet iron pipes coated with cement. It bypassed the town to serve the city of Hartford, which by 1860 had 30,000 inhabitants, to West Hartford's 1,200.

The aqueduct was the beginning of a regional solution to a regional need. In 1857, the Water Board in Hartford realized the city needed to provide more water to its inhabitants. Its population had more than doubled since 1850, and there was not enough potable water in the Hog or Connecticut Rivers. A report by the Water Commission in 1860 recommended that the supply of water should come from the hills west of the city and make its way by gravity, through pipes, to Hartford. Trout Brook seemed to be the perfect source for this water. Hartford's 1856 petition to the General Assembly to get water from West Hartford was finally granted. The Water Board acquired the pasture land and woodland on the north side of Farmington Avenue that we now know as the MDC reservoir.

There was some resistance in West Hartford to the reservoir system. Residents of the newly independent town of West Hartford (1854) did not take well to Hartford damming the brook which also brought their 1200 residents not only clean water, but a source of power for its grist and saw mills. An organized protest of West Hartford mill owners and citizens with water rights, however, was not successful. Resident William H. Seymour and 400 West Hartford citizens showed their support for the project by presenting a petition to support the reservoir project.

In 1866, Hartford's City Engineer began construction of the 53 foot high dam which held back 145 million gallons of water, 260 feet above the Connecticut River. The first water reached Hartford in January 1867. Many West Hartford residents living along Farmington Avenue felt that they should be able to drink the

¹George Wells to Mrs. Elizabeth Sisson, 2 June 1862, Butler Bassette Collection, Noah Webster House archives.

²J.G. Butler to Mrs. Elizabeth Sisson, 13 January 1863, Butler Bassette Collection.

³R.H. Morse to Mrs. Elizabeth Sisson, 23 July 1863, Butler Bassette Collection. Morse mustered on July 25 1862 as part of the 16th Connecticut Regiment.

reservoir water as the pipe went right by their houses. In a legal proceeding, West Hartford argued that because the water came from West Hartford territory they should get it for free. West Hartford citizens felt that the possession of the water outweighed the cost of the pipes. The courts decided that they could access the water, but had to pay the same rate as the people in Hartford.

Just eight months after the dam was completed, torrential September rains broke a portion of the dam, and the wall of water flooded across Mountain Road, on to Fern and North Main streets, carrying away three bridges. The water deposited stones and gravel on farm land and destroyed fences. The City of Hartford paid \$12,000 in damages to the town for the damaged roads and bridges and over \$17,000 to individual farmers and mill owners for damages. It took almost three years to rebuild the dam. They opened reservoir No. 2 in 1868, No. 3 in 1875, No. 4 in 1880, and No. 5 in 1884, and No. 6 in 1896.

As soon as the Farmington Avenue electric trolley was built past the reservoir in 1894, the reservoir became an even bigger destination for walking, picnicking and “pleasure riding.” By 1930, the reservoir area comprised 1,625 acres of land or about three square miles of West Hartford’s 22 square miles.

In 1929, the regional governing body, the Metropolitan District Commission was established with seven member towns including Hartford, Windsor, Wethersfield, Newington, Bloomfield, East Hartford, and Rocky Hill. By the 20th century, as West Hartford developed, the cleanest water was found even farther west in Barkhamsted and in New Hartford. By 1930 as is true of today, our water no longer came from the West Hartford reservoirs, but residents wanted to be sure the three square miles remained as open space for recreation in the town.

In the twentieth century this land has been used as a treatment facility for the water from Barkhamsted. West Hartford’s facility near Reservoir No. 1 and Bloomfield’s facility near Reservoir No. 6 treat an average of 55 million gallons of water daily. The facilities treat all of the drinking water provided to MDC customers. Today portions of Glastonbury, East Granby, South Windsor, Farmington and Portland use MDC water but are not members of the Commission. About 400,000 people get water from the MDC in 2006.

West Hartford did not become a voting member of the MDC until the last quarter of the 20th century. In 1981, Republican Mayor Chuck Matties encouraged the town to join the Metropolitan District Commission. With rising rates in the early 1980s, Matties felt that West Hartford should have a say on the Board. This was not necessarily a popular stance to take because people in town often worried about being involved in a regional solution. But Matties led the charge to join the other seven towns in the District. With the Town Council split 5-4, and his Republican caucus divided on the issue, he and two other Republicans joined two Democratic council members to join the Board. A follow up referendum passed overwhelmingly by the voters.

In November 2006, voters got a chance to vote on an \$800 million improvement to the water system. This referendum was prompted by federal and state mandated regulations to address sewer overflows where water gets into pipes carrying sewage. Damages from the 2005 rains that caused sewer overflows in Elmwood have finally been settled.

But now the Commission has to take on this regional maze of pipes which carry both clean water and sewage and the cost is high. The 15 year project has an estimated price tag of \$1.6 million, with the first phase estimated at \$800,000. While many of us believe water should be free, the cost of maintaining pipes today is just as much of an issue as in the 1860s when West Hartford residents were told that water is no longer free!

Elmwood’s Industries

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, July 2001

West Hartford has the reputation of being an upscale inner ring suburb. Many of its residents live here and work in Hartford. But, since the 19th century, West Hartford has had an industrial base that differentiates it from suburbs that are solely residential. Those businesses and their workers add to the stability of our town.

The first Industrial Revolution in the United States began in the 1820s with canals, textile mills, and the growth of the market economy. West Hartford’s residents bought ready-made cloth and products that came

from around the world.

Until the 1850s, the main industries in the West Division were grist mills, distilleries and blacksmith shops. The individually owned mills were tied to the only source of power — water — until the mid-19th century.

West Hartford's largest early industry was the Goodwin Pottery. The Goodwins began their business in 1798, before the railroad came. The West Division had excellent clay deposits and the company produced earthenware jars and containers sold throughout New England. The jugs the Goodwins produced also served the town's local distilleries. Fires plagued the pottery works, but after the second one in 1867, the Goodwin sons bought land south of New Britain Avenue where the present Abbott Ball Company stands, just west of the railroad tracks of the New York, New Haven and Hartford Railway Station that had been built in 1839.

By the end of the 19th century, the Goodwin Brothers diversified their line of earthenware to offer terracotta objects with ornate designs for outdoor and indoor decoration. They also made fine china. The market for these goods encompassed the span of the railroads, so became nationwide.

The Goodwins developed a large market for their products and soon their industrial site took up ten acres. By the beginning of the 20th century, they employed over 75 workers. Their workers may have included some of the immigrants who had moved to town. By the 1860s, a sizable number of Irish and Germans lived here.

With the railroad, the Goodwins hired salesmen to replace their traveling peddlers. These men sold the Goodwin's wares all over the eastern United States.

In 1908, a fire destroyed the wood frame factory. By then, H. Burdette Goodwin, who was in his 60s, decided not to rebuild the factory because of competition from other container makers.

The Providence and Fishkill Railroad (later the New York, New Haven and Hartford), whose tracks ran through the southeast section of town, changed the nature of the small farm town, by the 1850s. Industry grew up around this new transportation route and allowed for increased trade to distant points.

After the Civil War, the second Industrial Revolution based on heavy industry like steel grew in the northeast. Hartford became the machine tool capital of the country, and West Hartford's industries were a result of this industry. With the factories came immigrants. By the late 1800s, Scandinavians and Italians moved to town.

In the 1870s, Hartford boomed economically; it was dubbed the wealthiest city in America. Industries in Hartford grew and prospered, built to a certain degree on the profits of Colt's Manufacturing. By the turn of the century, as the insurance companies began to grow, there was little industrial land left for expansion. West Hartford had land available

In 1891, Whitlock Coil Pipe Company moved to South Street along the railroad tracks. In 1913, the New Departure Company moved to West Hartford from Bristol. The company made push-button doorbells and ball bearings for the growing automobile industry in Hartford.

Like many industries of its day, New Departure built something of a company town by buying a large tract of land between Woodlawn Street and Newington Road. The company divided it into 100 lots and sold them to employees at low prices. This allowed workers to live close to their jobs. These industrial workers who owned their own homes had a real stake in the town and added to the stability of the neighborhoods in the southeastern section of town.

During World War I, employment at New Departure grew from 200 to 1,200 in a matter of a year. The contracts for war materiel added workers and profits. In 1910, West Hartford's population stood at about 4,800, and grew to 8,000 by 1920.

In 1912, Abbott Ball Company moved to the old Goodwin Potter site from Hartford. Abbott began producing steel balls and became one of the largest producers of deep-hardened and tempered carbon steel ball bearings. Many of these ball bearings were made for the auto industry in Hartford.

In 1954, the founding family still owned Abbott Ball and employed 105 workers. They produced ball bearings for cars, conveyors, and lazy susans. In 2001, Abbott Ball employed a few more workers than 50 years before and was the 14th largest employer in West Hartford.

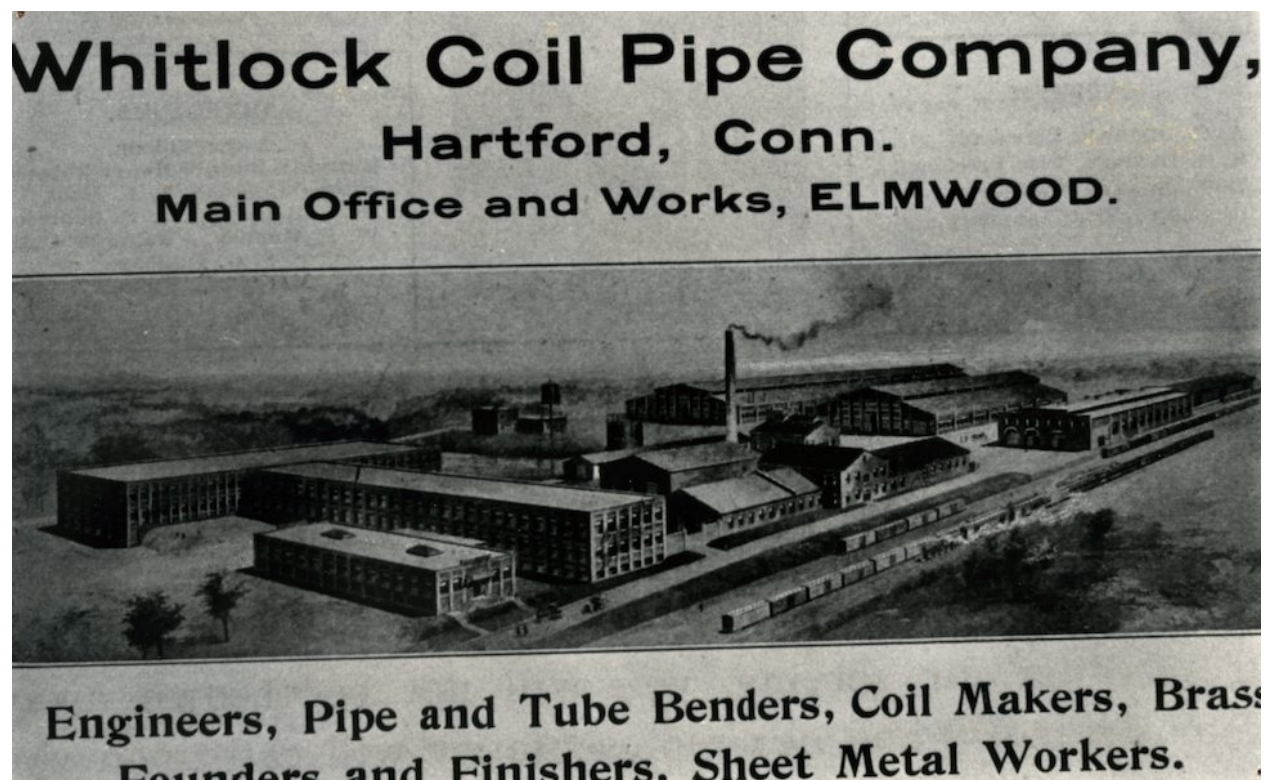


Figure 4.1: Whitlock Coil & Pipe Company moved to West Hartford in 1892 and was West Hartford's first big factory. Founded by 35 West Hartford men, Whitlock made products that transferred heat through bent pipe and tubing. They specialized in a feed water heater that connected to steam boilers. President Charles Edward Beach from 1898 into the 1920s also owned Vine Hill Farm, a dairy farm, much of which is now Beachland Park. Source: Noah Webster House & West Hartford Historical Society.

In 1919, Spencer Turbine moved to West Hartford. Wiremold arrived in 1929 and continues its manufacturing after being bought out by LeGrand in 2000. It continues to be one of the town's largest taxpayers. In 1939, Pratt & Whitney Machine Tool factory moved to the site of the old Charter Oak Race Track. This was the largest industrial site in West Hartford. By the late 1950s, Chandler Evans, Colt's, and Pratt & Whitney Machine Tool shared the site. In 1954, the three companies employed 5,000 people.

Since 1970, industrial production in West Hartford has slowed and commercial and retail sales have grown. But the blue-collar workers in Elmwood's factories played an important role in the town's growth. While the owners, financiers, and middle class commuters often have a high profile in town, these industrial workers also help define our suburb.

The Story of Vanderbilt Hill

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, March 2004

In a recent class, I asked my students if they had ambition. Do you expect, I asked, to live in a house larger than that of your parents? At least three-quarters of the students answered yes. I wondered at the pressure that put on them, and when the size of houses and rooms in houses would ever level off. Then I remembered the Vanderbilt Mansion.

In the mid 1870s, Cornelius Vanderbilt decided that his son, Cornelius, Jr. should have a mansion and that its location should be West Hartford. The mansion was to be built on a 75 acre farm at the peak of Farmington Avenue, across from Whiting Lane. Vanderbilt selected and bought this site in the late 1850s after he had surveyed prospects for the New Haven Railroad and the Providence & Fishkill railroad having routes through West Hartford.

Mark Twain called Hartford the richest city in the world, and New York City was building its reputation as the center of commerce and culture in the United States. West Hartford was but a farm town. The population in 1880 stood at just over 1,800, and the town had been independent from Hartford for only 25 years. No doubt the town was beginning to change with farmers specializing in dairy, and an increase in the number of immigrants, but wealth even on the scale of the most scorned Vanderbilt son hadn't really been seen before in the town.

Cornelius Vanderbilt (1794-1877) first made his money when he monopolized ferry service and then shipping on the Hudson River. By the mid-19th century, he invested in the luxury liner business and then by 1857 in railroads, eventually taking control of the New York and Harlem Railroad, and the New York Central. He built Grand Central Terminal in New York City and employed thousands of men during the Depression which began in 1873.

Vanderbilt had two sons, and eight daughters. Young Cornelius never lived up to his father's expectations and was sent off to live in a modest farmhouse on what is now known as West Hill, the same hill on which his mansion was built. His father bought the 75 acres in 1857 from the Hamilton family. Cornelius, Jr. hated every minute he was away from New York City. While living in West Hartford, young Cornelius went into debt. When his father died in 1877, he thought his money problems were solved. However, Vanderbilt left his son William \$95 million dollars, his eight daughters split four million dollars, and Cornelius received just \$12,000 a year.

Cornelius, Jr. tried to use the money to break his father's will. This gave him some ability to borrow money to build what he called his "dream house" on Vanderbilt Acres. He borrowed half the price of the \$60,000 house, a fortune at the time, for this area, but only a small amount compared to his father's and brother's mansions in New York City.

Cornelius hired architect John C. Meade to design a 27 room house on Farmington Avenue. Meade designed a four story tower mansion with a view of Hartford and the valley to the west. The mansion's cupola rose five stories high. The central hall was wide enough for a horse and buggy to turn around in. The mansion

had a veranda on three sides. The brownstone wall and entrance are the only things left from the house, setting it off from Farmington Avenue

But, Cornelius had no luck breaking the will, and thus was stripped of his West Hartford house and land. Meanwhile, sympathetic friends bought it and sold it back to him for \$1. However, Cornelius never lived in the house. He committed suicide in 1882. His desire to “live like a Vanderbilt” never happened.

The house was auctioned off to a real estate speculator and stood empty for six years, while a caretaker kept it up.

Ira Dimock, a rich Hartford silk manufacturer and inventor bought it in 1888 and lived there. In May 1917, his wife died in the house and he died a week later at age 90. In the midst of World War I, no one felt capable of taking care of the house, and it was torn down in 1918.

Dimock’s son Stanley Dimock and Horace Grant, a Hartford manufacturer, developed the Vanderbilt Hill area after the mansion was torn down. The houses Dimock built were smaller than the house he had grown up in. The two men made sure that the 25 homes built were all single family with garages. The developers approved each architect who designed the houses and made sure that each one cost at least \$10,000. The development became the first to put electric lines underground. The first house, completed in 1920, stood on the site of the Vanderbilt Mansion.

Both Cornelius Vanderbilt, Jr. and Stanley Dimock built and lived in homes that were smaller than those of their parents. Cornelius would say that his son lacked ambition and his alcoholism sank him into depression. Dimock, on the other hand, chose to make more of the land on which he had grown up by subdividing the land and making a handsome profit. Since 1988, West Hill has been denoted an historic district, representing a new style 1920s suburban neighborhood.

The Vanderbilt Mansion was the first of several mansions in town in the 1870s and 1880s. The first wave of suburbanization was not the middle class, but it was the upper class who moved here first. The Russell Mansion, at the corner of Prospect and Cone Street, built in 1874 was four stories. It too has been demolished. The Home of Yung Wing on the corner of Prospect and Fern was demolished as well. The Judd Mansion on Highland still stands, now surrounded by the Hughes Convalescent home. It wasn’t until the 1890s, when the electric trolley came through that developers began to build middle class housing. The ambitions of the wealthy in the 1870s and 1880s could not be sustained by the next generation as witnessed by the number of these mansions that were demolished.

Who was William A. Burr?

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, June 2009

W.A. Burr’s name is prominent in the 1896 and 1909 insurance atlas maps of West Hartford’s town center. He owned the land east of South Main Street to Trout Brook along Farmington Avenue. The land surrounding the First Church was bounded by present-day South Main, Burr Street and Raymond Road, and goes east as far as Trout Brook.

Surprisingly, Burr is not mentioned in any of the histories written about this town. Yet he clearly had a role in its development from rural town to modern suburb. He was a landowner and an entrepreneur.

Burr was born in Hartford where his father, Allen Burr and his grandfather, Thomas Burr, lived before him. Thomas ran the only general store in Hartford on North Main Street, then called Burr Street, near the head of Trumbull Street. William moved to West Hartford with his family when he was five, probably before this town was separate from Hartford.

William A. Burr was at first a farmer. In October 1873, a news article proclaimed that Burr could “boast one of the best orchards in the state. Mr. Burr’s orchard has produced 150 bushels of apples and his pear trees have been unusually prolific of choice varieties.” In the 1870s he took his produce and his animals to the Connecticut State Fair near the race track on New Park Avenue.

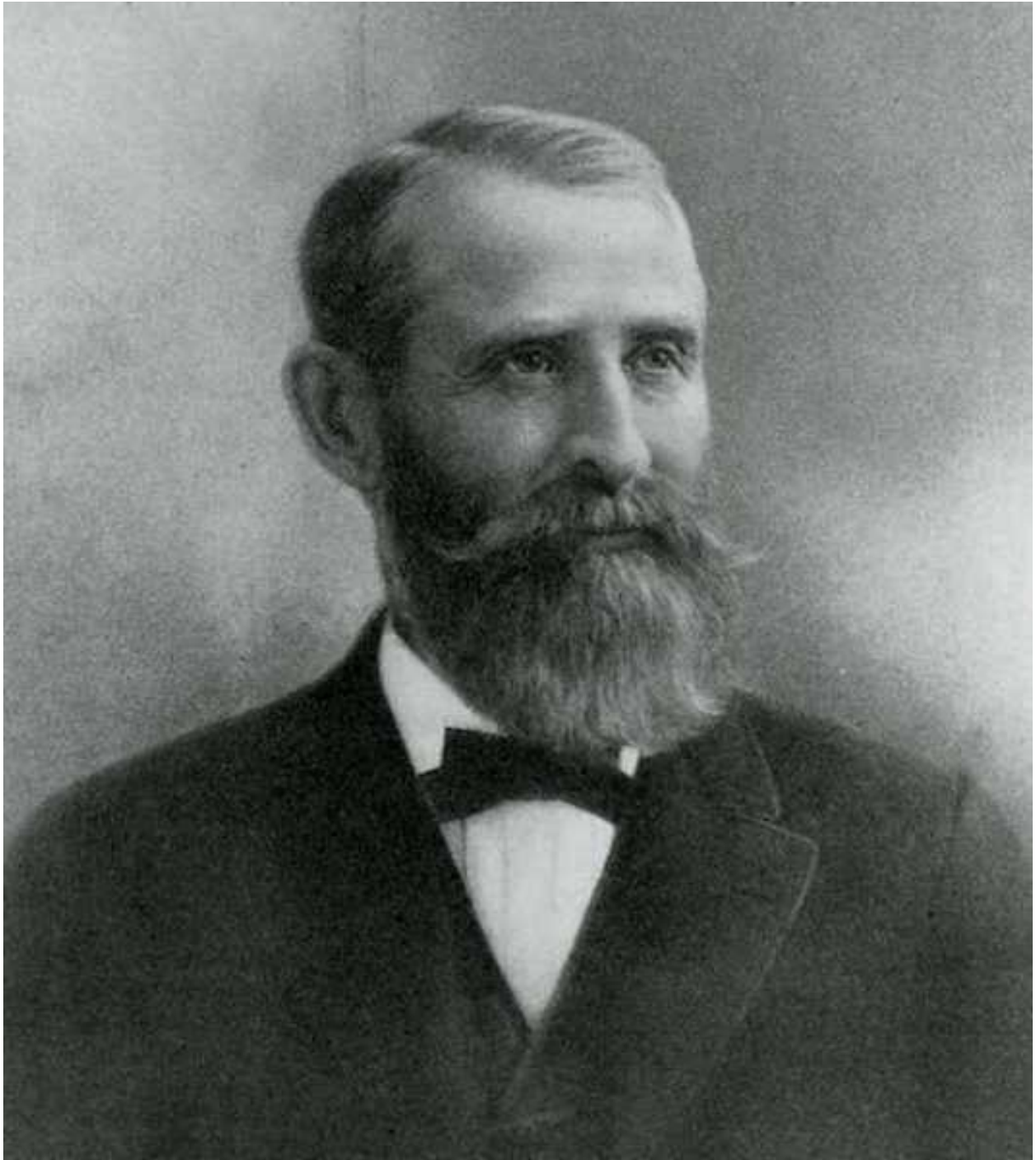


Figure 4.2: Ira Dimock, a silk manufacturer, owned and lived in the Vanderbilt mansion from 1888 to 1917. His son Irving Dimock died in the Spanish American War of typhoid fever in a camp training to go fight. Another son, Stanley Dimock teamed up with Horace Grant to tear down the family mansion in 1918 and establish the West Hill neighborhood with 25 homes. Source: Noah Webster House & West Hartford Historical Society.

By 1875, Burr had established a hardware store and carriage shop. An 1875 news short claimed that “Mr. W.A. Burr of West Hartford has the agency for the sale of the Tompkins County Self-Tilting Wheel Rake said to be the best wheel rake, seeder and plaster sower combined that there is in the world.”

This “Carriage Repository and Hardware Store” stood at the present site of the Noah Webster Library. There were two buildings in his operation in 1896 and 1909. Burr’s success with the sale of new farm machinery was a sign of the increasing industrialization of farming and of his role as entrepreneur.

In Burr’s role as businessman and real estate owner, he amassed wealth. He owned a summer vacation home in Branford at Short Beach and a winter home in Ormond, Fla., just north of Daytona Beach. A *Hartford Courant* article in October 1910 described William A. Burr buying land for a winter residence in Ormond, Fla. The paper claimed it was a time of “remarkable growth of resorts in Florida.”

In 1913, the pastor of the Congregational Church, the Rev. Thomas M. Hodgdon, expressed an interest in building a new church and a new parsonage for the growing church. He cited the congestion in the center and the increasing value of the present site for business purposes. Burr delivered.

In 1914, according to the *Hartford Courant*, William A. Burr, most likely a member of the church, donated a strip of land to the First Church of Christ in the center of town. The land was 19 feet on Farmington Avenue by 15 feet deep and ran on the east side of the church. This strip of land straightened the line of the church’s property and allowed the church to provide easy access to the sheds in the back of the church where people stabled their horses. It also allowed them to level the rear lawn and beautify the property.

The article claimed that Burr was thinking about running a street along the eastern boundary of the church property from Farmington Avenue to Seyms Street (now Memorial Drive), giving the church a corner on which they could possibly build a chapel.

In that same year, the Barker-Tanner Hardware Company bought Burr’s retail business. This was the same year the A.B. Judd Company was incorporated as a druggist and it purchased the building it occupied on the corner of Farmington Avenue and South Main Street.

In 1923, right after Burr died, his estate was valued at \$112,681 (\$1.2 million in 2009 dollars). The real estate on Farmington Avenue was more than half of the total of the estate. He had half a block of frontage on Farmington Avenue just when the Center started to become a retail center. He also owned land on Vera Street to the southeast of the center and two parcels of land on South Main Street, one worth \$6,500 and one worth \$7,300. He owned four parcels of land along Farmington Avenue.

In May 1924, the First Congregational Church bought a tract of land from Burr’s estate south of its property for \$59,000. The new tract was between South Main, Seyms Street and a proposed street running from Raymond Road to Seyms (the current Isham Road). This land helped the First Church survive during the Great Depression in the 1930s, as it was sold to the town to build the Town Hall and library. These building projects, along with other development in the Center, helped define the burgeoning suburb.

South Main Street from Farmington Avenue to Burr Street was the scene of much building activity by 1924. The population had grown to 9,000 and residents wanted to be able to take care of their needs without going in to Hartford.

The Masonic Temple was under construction on the west side of South Main Street. Hall High School was in mid-construction. The town was prepared to move two houses from the Hall High site to make way for the school. The West Hartford Trust Company site was being readied for the first bank in town.

Burr’s land sale, after his death, provided an important opening for economic growth as well as the placement of public buildings in the town center. Burr Street stands as a reminder of a man who successfully navigated the change from farm town to suburb through his real estate and business acumen.

Who was Burdett Loomis?

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, March 2008



Figure 4.3: On this 1909 insurance map, note William A. Burr's land on the corner of Farmington Avenue and Main Street, and on Main and what became Burr Street. Burr owned the Carriage Repository & Hardware Store just south of the Congregational Church and Parish. Sandwiched between was the Masonic Hall. Another piece of his property came to the town to build William Hall High School in 1924. Burr died in 1923. Source: Atlas of the City of Hartford, and the Town of West Hartford, Connecticut: L.J. Richards & Company, Springfield, Massachusetts, 1909, Plate 23.

Farmington Avenue is once again getting a makeover, and it seems like a good time to look back at the work of Burdett Loomis who led improvements on that Avenue in the 1870s, over 130 years ago. Burdett Loomis, (1838-1919) was a businessman and entrepreneur whose vision helped transform West Hartford from a farm town to suburb.

Loomis was an inventor, patent holder, and manufacturer of gas plant machinery and a citizen who “planned ahead for Hartford and West Hartford” according to a 1912 *Hartford Courant* news article. The 1912 article was prompted during improvements-in-progress on Farmington Avenue that year. Prospect and Farmington were each a standard three rods (48 feet) across and Loomis wanted to widen them to 75 feet.

By 1873, Loomis owned the land bounded by Farmington Avenue, Prospect, Fern and Vanderbilt Hill, now West Hill. Loomis was married in 1859 at age 21 and moved to Hartford in 1871. He first lived on Wethersfield Avenue in Hartford and in 1873, built what became known as the Russell Mansion on Prospect Avenue. This house had ornamental woodwork and a stately tower. It stood on the west side of Prospect near Cone Street, close to where the Bristow Middle School is today. It has since been torn down. Loomis seems to have lost his first fortune as a result of the panic of 1873, so was forced to sell the mansion, and in 1878, he moved north to 837 Prospect Avenue just south of Elizabeth Park, on the West Hartford side to a more modest home built in 1845.

When Loomis first moved to Prospect, he believed that Farmington Avenue would be “one of the finest thoroughfares out of Hartford” into West Hartford, Farmington and further west. Loomis also believed that Prospect Avenue should be wider and when Loomis asked Hartford to share in widening the street from 48 to 75 feet, the city refused to take land from the Hartford side even though no houses had been built there. Loomis reduced the grade of the avenue for about 1/3 of a mile to one inch in every 100 feet. He cut down trees and then planted a row of trees between Farmington and Fern. He spent \$1,000 of his own money to widen Farmington Avenue. As the town widened the street, the “Great Panic” — probably of 1873 — took over, and he lost most of his fortune.

Loomis’ businesses helped West Hartford grow through ingenuity and public utility and transportation systems. Loomis was a part owner of the trolley company. He was instrumental in getting the horse car line extended to West Hartford Center in 1889. Loomis also had a hand in the building of the water pipe system from the reservoir. It first opened in 1867 before he was here, but he worked on getting the pipes laid under the road and accessible to West Hartford citizens.

In 1881, at age 43, he organized the Steam Heating Company of Hartford. He soon found problems with the steam heat in that so much was lost in its transmission. He decided to substitute cheap natural gas to heat and invented cheaper methods to make gas, which was soon used for gas engines. From 1886 to 1889, he built the first gas plant that produced gas from coal, wood or lignite and delivered it to its domestic users through pipes laid underground over long distances. His company laid gas lines on the frontier. By 1899, Loomis headed the Loomis Gas Machinery Company in Hartford. His company laid iron pipes for gas and water, both important pieces in building the infrastructure of towns and cities.

In 1882, he organized the first Electric Lighting Company in Connecticut. By 1912 he and his son, Burdett Loomis, Jr., served as directors of the Northern Connecticut Light and Power Company. His son was also treasurer of the company.

Throughout these years as a developer, Loomis made and lost several fortunes, according to family legend. Probably Loomis’ biggest gamble, and his best fun came when he helped establish Charter Oak Race Track in 1873. Loomis promoted and developed the race track at Flatbush and Oakwood Avenues. In 1876, he planted the elms in the front of the park on New Park Avenue and had the avenue widened. The park became one of the finest trotting courses in the country. Loomis saw his first trotting race on a half mile track on Hartford’s Albany Avenue in 1861. When he relocated to the city, he believed Hartford should have one of the best courses in the country. He chose the site, organized the association, superintended the building of the track, planted the trees and gave the grounds a park-like appearance. Loomis had backing from Charles M. Pond and Governor Morgan Bulkeley. The track drew all the leading harness horses and their drivers. He was Secretary of the Charter Oak Association in 1880. Bets ranged from \$100 to \$20,000.

In 1882, Loomis decided he wanted a special event in Hartford, and he drafted conditions for a \$10,000 purse

over Labor Day Weekend, one of the largest in the nation. When Loomis proposed the large purse, people thought he would lose money, but Governor Bulkeley, the treasurer of the association guaranteed the race. It made money that year and every year after. That race continued into the 1920s, even after Loomis's death in 1919.

Loomis was one of the seven men who “labored zealously to establish and maintain the “Grand Circuit” of harness racing. This circuit gave light harness racing the prestige that it has maintained to date. Charter Oak Park was on the Grand Circuit until 1925.

Burdett Loomis, according to Caroline Church, was one of the men who helped turn West Hartford from a small farming village to a suburb over 100 years ago. In her senior college thesis, which brought Loomis to my attention, she focuses on the role of public improvements, particularly the West Hartford Reservoir system in defining the changing nature of West Hartford from 1870 to 1910.

He was certainly a man of his times — a businessman, an entrepreneur, and a man who wanted to give back to his community. His maxim throughout his life, still rings true today: “to do something for the world and the community, regardless of whether or not [he] was going to reap the benefits derived therefrom.” Something that distinguishes West Hartford from other towns is that there are so many in West Hartford who continue to abide by this maxim.

Chapter 5

A Growing Suburb

Sewers, Water, and Streetlights

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, April 2006

Between 1870 and 1920, West Hartford was transforming from a farm town to a suburban town. As it did, its government reacted by regulating construction and by building an infrastructure of bridges, sewers, water mains and paved roads. The population grew from about 1,500 residents who lived on farms, to 9,000 strong as housing developed in the center and along Farmington Avenue. The new, suburban citizens pushed for services that Hartford dwellers already enjoyed.

The Noah Webster House and West Hartford Historical Society archive holds many town records that describe these changes. One of them, *Special Acts of the General Assembly, 1854-1913*, provides a window into the infrastructure growth in town as well as the relationship between local and state governments. Annual Town Reports from 1870 also tell a story of how the town grew.

In 1888, when Hiram Hurlburt represented West Hartford, the General Assembly, established a Board of Health in each town. This Board of Health made rules that impacted the town budget and homeowners. It provided instructions for “privy, cesspools, drains and garbage.” This law led to the town digging sewers. It also established rules for selling food. No carcasses of calf, pig or lamb could be sold here. It also required residents of town to report any cases of croup, scarlet fever, diphtheria, typhoid, typhus, cholera, or yellow fever. The state was ahead of federal regulations as it was not until 1906 that the U.S. Congress passed the Meat Inspection Act.

The growing population and hence the growing amount of sewage seeping into Trout Brook, led the General Assembly in 1893 to authorize the town of West Hartford to construct sewers. The town decided where the sewers would go and the local property owners had to pay for the spur that went to their home. They made a deal with Hartford to hook up to their system as well, and to pay Hartford a fee for the hook up. Developer Frederick C. Rockwell was West Hartford’s Representative to the General Assembly when this law was passed. Rockwell had some interest in these sewers as he built the first housing development in town on the Boulevard between Trout Brook and Main Street. He owned the land and began to build houses in the 1890s. After the sewers were built, the next step was, in 1913 to build a sewage disposal plant. In the same year the town got the power to grant building permits.

In 1895, the General Assembly made it the duty of the Hartford Board of Water Commissioners to lay connecting pipes and furnish water to the residents in West Hartford who applied and paid for their water. Hartford’s water came from the reservoir in West Hartford, so by-passed the town itself. Adolph Sternberg was West Hartford’s representative to the General Assembly at this time. He was one of nine children of Charles Sternberg, a German immigrant lawyer who, in 1854, came to West Hartford to farm.

In 1897, the General Assembly allowed for the town to appoint a Water Commission and establish building lines. It gave the town the power to lay pipes and ask property owners to pay for the pipes that went across their property.

In 1903, when Representative G. F. Scarborough sat in the General Assembly, the West Hartford town government got the power to build sidewalks, but at the property owners' expense.

In 1907, Democrat Charles Edward Beach served the town at the General Assembly. Charles Edward was the son of Charles M. Beach, a Hartford businessman who bought land in West Hartford in 1859 and built Vine Hill Farm on the corner of New Britain Avenue and South Main. By 1900, Charles Edward managed the farm. He also was the town surveyor and served as selectman. As a representative at the State House, he helped establish a Special Commission to "inquire into the management of affairs" in town. It seems as though the town had a difficult time collecting taxes. Between 1888 and 1894 the tax collector books were missing. Beach, the only Democrat to serve between 1857 and 1925, seemed to be checking up on Republican politicians who controlled the town. Six years later, in 1913, the town established a Board of Finance to exercise supervision of financial affairs in the town.

The following table, which shows the growth in population, budget, and the allocation of funds within that budget, is a window into building the infrastructure of the town.

Year	Population	Budget	Highways	Streetlights	Budget per person
1870	1533	\$27,000	10%	0%	\$18
1880	1828	\$34,000	18%	0%	\$18
1890	1930	\$37,000	17%	0%	\$19
1900	3186	\$56,900	15%	0%	\$18
1910	4808	\$150,000	8%	5%	\$31
1920	8854	\$410,000	5%	2%	\$46

Over 50 years, the amount of money spent in town grew 15 times while the population grew 6 times. The percentage of budget money spent on highways and bridges peaked around 1890. The installation of streetlights occurred over a short period of time. Clearly by 1920, the town provided more services to its constituents.

One important piece of the infrastructure, education, became a larger percentage of the budget in the 1920s when seven schools were built: Beach Park, Morley, Smith, and Elmwood elementary schools, Plant and Talcott Junior Highs, and Hall High. After the town built up its infrastructure, it paved the way for more housing developments and attracted many new residents to enjoy the amenities of sewers, piped in water and street lights that had before, only existed in the city.

Biking in West Hartford

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, July 2012

In 2012, West Hartford's Bicycle Advisory Committee meets the second Monday of every month to make West Hartford a more bike friendly town. Bike enthusiasts yearn for bike lanes and safe places to ride on the roads. Twentieth century plans for roads were all about cars; bicyclists are trying to change that.

West Hartford's history as a bike town goes way back to the Charter Oak Race Track well before the "bike craze" of the 1890s. Back then, the bike craze led to athletic competitions, a new way to get to work, a new leisure time activity, and safer roads.

In September 1878, two Hartford physicians who purchased Columbia bikes proposed that the Charter Oak Race track add bicycle racing. In May 1879, the *Hartford Courant* reported that people were talking about a bicycle tournament at Charter Oak Park and that Hartford had some good bicycle riders ready to compete.

On June 13, 1879 George W. Pomroy of the Oakwood Hotel gave a purse of \$100 [about \$2,200 today] for a bicycle race at the Charter Oak Race Track. It was the best two out of three in mile heats. On the Fourth of July 1879, Charter Oak Park sponsored bicycle contests along with horse racing, and a sack race.

Mr. G.W. Pomroy at the Oakwood Hotel was particularly active in arranging the bicycle race. The crowd loved the race and pushed Pomroy to set up another race. According to the *Courant*, "The interest in bicycles is greatly on the increase in Hartford, since their manufacture has begun here at the Weed works, and many young men have become engaged in the use of the machine. A considerable number are very expert in its use, and with more entering a very entertaining race could be arranged."

Albert A. Pope, who founded Boston's Pope Manufacturing Company, started to import bicycles from England in 1878. Col. Pope wanted bikes to be made in America and so he approached Hartford's Weed Sewing Machine Company who used interchangeable parts and by the end of September 1878, they manufactured 50 bicycles with the large front wheel. To produce the Duplex Excelsior copies, Weed produced 77 unique parts and the only part that came from a supplier was the rubber tire.

Pope dubbed the new bicycle "Columbia." His use of the hollow tube and ball bearings distinguished his bikes from others. According to an 1878 *Hartford Courant* article, "Mr. Pope. . . who resides ten miles from the city [Boston], rides to and from his place daily on one of these vehicles, unless the weather is stormy." Further, the article stated that the bicycle craze in England had gone on for years and that an amateur rider had ridden a 3 minute 10 second mile.

Pope became an enthusiast about bikes at the 1876 Philadelphia Exposition. He started to import bikes from England and took out US patents on the European models. By the early 1890s, he developed a bicycle trust, which controlled all bicycle patents in the United States. For all bikes manufactured in the US he got \$10 per bike.

By 1881, The Hartford Wheel Club organized monthly races at Charter Oak Park. On Saturday, June 25, 1881, at 3:00 pm, the amateur competitors biked from Capitol Avenue and Washington Street to the park. The 50 bicyclists, including five racers from New Britain were divided into three classes. It was the biggest gathering of bicyclists ever. The winning racer rode the mile in 3:25 from a standing start. The three judges included George B. Day, son of George Day the leader of the Weed Sewing Machine Company that was building the bicycles.

In ten years, Pope changed the size of the front wheel to be equal in size to the back and had the rider sit between the wheels. This made the bicycles even easier to ride and democratized the athletic pursuit. The bicycle craze blossomed with this new invention in the 1890s. According to Ellsworth Grant in his article "The Miracle on Capital Avenue," in the *Hog River Journal* in 2002, Weed employed 600 men making these "safety" bicycles. In the mid 1890s, Pope lorded over 18 acres of factory space on Capitol Avenue. He employed almost 4,000 people and produced 50,000 bicycles a year.

In the summer of 1882, Mr. Hyde of the Charter Oak Park Hotel and Mr. William B. Smith leased Charter Oak Park for the Fourth of July. They offered prizes worth \$2,000 for trotting races, bicycle races and foot races. They offered a "shore dinner."

In September 1884, the Connecticut Bicycle Club mounted a race with prizes of \$1,000. Hundreds of people lined the streets for a parade of over 100 bikers. They scheduled 12 races with riders from Hartford, Springfield and Boston. The top racer had a time of 3 minutes 3 seconds. Five thousand people came to the races in the first large-scale bike race West Hartford had seen. Colonel Pope was one of the officials of the races. The *Courant* reported:

Never before in this country has a more successful one day's tournament been held, and never before in any race in the world has such good time been made as in the mile race. . . A comparison between such racing and horse racing must necessarily be to the advantage of the former sport, for there was no grumbling on the result of the contest and no boisterous language, and the auditors knew that the struggles they viewed between the race were honest and that the best man always won.



Figure 5.1: This drawing, originally published in *Harper's Weekly* (1885) by illustrator Albert Berghaus, shows the final heat of the one-mile open amateur bicycle race at Charter Oak Park in 1885. Note the crowds of spectators in the covered grandstands and the tall viewing platform to the right. The Connecticut Bicycle Club sponsored this series of races over a two-day tournament. At least 7,000 spectators attended. Source: The Connecticut Historical Society.

According to Pope, the main problem for bicyclists was that there were not safe, macadamized roads to ride. In 1880, he was one of the founders of the “League of American Wheelmen” to lobby local governments for improved roads. The late nineteenth century bicyclists long before the invention of the automobile spurred the “Good Roads Movement.” By the 1890s, much of West Hartford’s town budget was in building hard top roads.

Today, bicyclists are back at it, trying to improve the roads for riding. The context has changed dramatically as the gas-powered automobile is the main impetus for improved roads. But bicyclists want car drivers to share the road and allow them to feel safe as physicians once again encourage their patients to bike to keep fit.

James Talcott, Merchant and Philanthropist

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, April 2003

As the town plans for a new middle school on the east side of town, I wonder what we’ll call it. How have we named other schools? What does it say about the historical context and about the town’s values? School names can be an interesting source of information about both.

Talcott Junior High, on the corner of Quaker Lane and New Britain Avenue opened in 1922. Its opening was part of a reorganization of the town schools as they moved away from both the one room schoolhouse and the kindergarten to grade 8 school. James Talcott (1835-1916), lived in town for 19 years, and was “a successful merchant and member of a family long active in town and school affairs.” He moved to New York City at 19 to become a merchant and lived there until his death at the age of 81. His contact with the town seemed minimal after he left, but his career and public life in New York made him a man to emulate.

William Hurd Hillyer, James Talcott’s 1937 biographer, described him as a man who prospered on individual initiative, responsibility, morality, ethics, integrity, honesty, being honorable, kindly and steadfast and having a spirit of cooperation. He tied these values to the Puritan work ethic as well as Talcott’s pure English lineage. These values are part of the civic education public schools try to teach.

James Talcott descended from a man who shared the same name and migrated to America with Thomas Hooker in 1632. John Talcott was one of the founders of Hartford with Thomas Hooker in 1636 and Talcott Street in Hartford is named after him. He served as a Court Magistrate, was a Deputy from 1637 to 1652, and was Treasurer of the colony from 1654 to his death in 1660. His son, John Talcott, Jr. succeeded his father as Treasurer of the colony. Another descendant, Joseph Talcott was Governor of Connecticut from 1725 to 1742.

Samuel Talcott of West Hartford built a mill near the pottery in 1828 where he and his sons carried on a thriving wool business for years. Talcott’s sheep provided wool for his woolen business. They had a fulling shop where the cloth was made ready for market and stored. The businesses were part of his 1000 acres of land which extended from New Britain Avenue as far as Oakwood Avenue, on the west side of Quaker Lane near where Trout Brook crosses the road.

Samuel Talcott’s son Seth took over the mill and he was the father to James (remember him!). As a young man, James and his ox team had the task of bringing goods to market in Hartford. When his brother opened up a woolen knitting mill in New Britain, James got involved at the outset as a merchant. As a man of just 19, he set out for New York City in 1854, and set up shop. This was right when West Hartford became an independent town.

In the 1850s merchants were the pillars of capital and lived in the big cities. They were generally the wealthiest men and were civic leaders. As a merchant, James Talcott sold his brothers’ goods to stores like New York’s A.T. Stewart, the biggest retail merchant in the country, and Philadelphia’s Wanamakers, the country’s first department store. He was successful, according to Hillyer, because of his honesty and integrity, and because the knitted woolen goods from this brother’s factory in New Britain were so good.

Once established in New York City, James Talcott married Henrietta Francis in 1861. Her uncle had a farm in West Hartford. James probably met her on a Thanksgiving break where he spent a few days every year with his parents in West Hartford. James and Henrietta bought a house at 20 West 39th Street – a four-story

brick house. He lived there for 12 years and his three sons J. Frederick, Arthur and Frank were born there. They later had two daughters.

Every Saturday afternoon, Mrs. Talcott drove in the family carriage downtown to bring Mr. Talcott home. She never drove to the front of his building on Franklin Street because both she and Mr. Talcott believed that it would have been “unnecessarily ostentatious” for him to step into a fine carriage with a coachman and footman in front of his business.

In 1876 they bought a five story brownstone for \$90,000 cash at 7 West 57th Street. This was a new and fashionable part of the city which had become so because William H. Vanderbilt and other wealthy New Yorkers had built imposing homes there. But probably more important was the opening of Central Park where New Yorkers could skate, sleigh, ride, drive, and play outdoor games like archery, croquet, and lawn tennis. Talcott had enough money and social standing to be a part of this West Side life.

In this home, well staffed with servants, there was a routine. Mrs. Talcott served tea at five o'clock each day. Friends usually came by to visit at this time. Dinner was always served at 7:30 and Mr. Talcott always dressed “in full evening dress” for the occasion whether there were guests or not. He served no wine or liquor, but an imported sparkling mineral water.

Talcott showed a deep interest in religion and took an active part in church affairs. Talcott joined the Broadway Tabernacle Church (Congregational) and became a member of the Church Committee at age 30 when, traditionally, this group was made of the elders of the church. He found time for mission work in Bethany Parish at 34th and 10th, in one of the poorest sections of the city.

James Talcott was a Republican and he was mentioned as a candidate for Mayor of New York City in 1890, but never ran. He was a protectionist and one of the staunchest supporters of the American Protective Tariff League, a position that most merchants took. He spent time fighting Democratically controlled Tammany Hall.

As a philanthropist he gave away 10 percent of his wealth. He saw himself as a steward of his wealth. Some of his interests included a library built at the Northfield School, Massachusetts, a dormitory built at Oberlin College, the Grace Talcott Hospital at Shuntch-foo, China, planting an arboretum at Mt. Holyoke College, and endowing a professorship for religion at Barnard College. He was one of the founders of the Jerry McAuley Water Street Mission, the Cremorne Mission and the Home for Intemperate Men.

In 1897, Talcott gave books and money to help establish West Hartford's free public library. Until then, the library was part of the First Congregational Church.

In his later years, Talcott devoted his life to peace. He went to Lake Mohonk, America's peace center each fall. He supported peace in trade and in politics. Talcott was 80 when war broke out in Europe and he expressed his disapproval. He died peacefully in 1916 at Lake Mohonk, before the U.S. entered the war.

The 1920s, the post World War I era, was a time when “the business of America was business.” The town's population grew to almost 9,000 by 1920, and middle class professionals started to move to West Hartford, the streetcar suburb. James Talcott's career must have appealed to them because of his monetary success, his moral and ethical purity, and his charitable works. Many other members of the family were involved in West Hartford governmental affairs, but the town officials chose this self-made business leader, this champion of hard work, integrity, honesty and success to be a role model for the town.

Elmwood Suburbs

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, June 2011. Thank you to Jeffrey Murray, Conard High School junior, whose research paper, “Elmwood: From Rural Community to Working Class Suburb,” won the 2011 Freeman and Mary Meyer Prize for Excellence in Local History.

In the early 20th century, the Elmwood section of West Hartford developed its suburban character on a parallel to West Hartford center's development. The same ingredients nourished growth in both places:

transportation in the form of the trolley, farmers ready to sell their land to developers, real estate developers, and people looking to move out of the city. It all added up to a growth in population and an eclectic mix of residential, industrial, commercial, religious and educational institutions. This mix of buildings and people gives Elmwood the separate identity it retains today.

In 1900, when the trolley company laid a track down New Britain Avenue ending at East Street (now Quaker Lane), suburban development picked up. Before the trolley, residents could jump on the steam train running through the southeast corner of town for \$24 per year. But in 1899, the train raised the rates to \$60 per year and passengers lobbied to bring the trolley to Elmwood. Within a year the line opened.

As people moved out of Hartford and New Britain and into West Hartford, government services expanded. In 1900 the town added onto the Elmwood School, built as a two-room schoolhouse in 1888.

In 1901, the West End Land Company bought land in Elmwood on the present site of Yale and Florence Streets. Their handbills to sell the properties advertised free trolley. Four years later, F.C. Rockwell who developed the Boulevard in the Center between Main and Trout Brook, sold land on New Britain Avenue to developer Terry Chapin. This land was subdivided by 1909 into more than 60 lots.

Wallace B. Goodwin, grandson of Harvey Goodwin, the founder of Goodwin Pottery, a local industry since the early 1800s, began to develop Elmwood with small single-family homes. He wanted to sell lots to people of moderate means. Goodwin also wanted to retain the agricultural nature of the residential area. In an advertisement for "Bungalow Farms," on Newington Road he wrote, "If you could own your own home with a real little farm, where you could raise your own vegetables and chickens and be in Hartford or New Britain within fifteen or twenty minutes' ride, now wouldn't that be ideal?" He sold "acre lots and bungalows" in a "beautiful restricted section." He added that the lots were "close to Elmwood Trolley and Railroad Stations." By 1915, Goodwin sold all but six desirable.

Goodwin appeared in the ad, holding a plot of land with a bungalow, set on a country road. In 1913, Goodwin planned to develop an Elmwood that would be distinct from developments in the center of town. Mentioning New Britain in his ad and suggesting that residents could grow their own vegetables were attempts to market a suburban neighborhood with rural charm that differed from the developments in the center of town.

On April 25, 1915, the *Hartford Courant* reported that Goodwin bought land from F.W. Talcott on the east side of East Street for developing this "splendid tract" in a "restricted way." Goodwin called the area "Burgoyne Gardens." Houses built on this tract had a view of Talcott Mountain and Charter Oak Park, across Trout Brook from the development. Sewers and piped in water both served this neighborhood. Goodwin had room for about 40 homes on the plot and he planned to build both single and two-family homes.

Goodwin's development was within walking distance of a post office, library, and school with easy access to the trolley and train, which could whisk commuters into Hartford. The post office built in 1873, was a sign that Elmwood had a separate identity from West Hartford, which became independent from Hartford in 1854, just 19 years earlier. Also in 1873 the Elmwood Community Church set up a Sunday school, which met at the Elmwood School. In 1876, this group of Congregationalists built the Elmwood Chapel at New Britain Avenue and Grove Street. In 1926 this church moved to its present location on Newington Road. By the mid 1920s, the population of Elmwood stood at about 2,000.

Meanwhile, Wallace B. Goodwin continued to expand his reach from real estate developer to purveyor of insurance on furniture and buildings, mortgages, and selling ready-built sheds to be used as garages.

In 1917, the *Catholic Transcript* reported that the Elmwood church, St. Brigid, was the first Catholic Church to be erected in West Hartford. at. According to the Transcript, "The Town is fast growing and the new church, which is at the southern end, promises one day to be a considerable Catholic center." The Church started as a mission of St. Lawrence O'Toole Church, in Hartford just about a mile east of Cambridge Street and New Britain Avenue.

Elmwood continued to develop its own identity as a working class suburb with manufacturing and farms, and an active political life. The area residents saw themselves as outsiders from those who lived in the town center. In an attempt to get fire protection in Elmwood in 1919, the "Men's Union" "turned out in full battalion strength" to a special fire district meeting at the Town Hall in the center of town. They hired cars

REAL ESTATE REAL ESTATE REAL ESTATE

HAVE YOU SEEN Bungalow Farms?

Acre and half acre lots for sale on easy terms.
Near trolley in Elmwood.
All lots fronting on electric lighted macadam road.
Remaining lots to be sold before winter at low prices.
Grove of large trees on some of the lots.
Depth of lots, 400 to 650 feet deep.
Must be seen to be appreciated.
If you can't come during the week, come Sunday.
Take Elmwood car to end of line. You can't miss.

Bungalow Farms.

Wallace B. Goodwin & Co., MANAGERS.

Real Estate and Insurance.
Office, Elmwood, Conn.

Figure 5.2: Wallace B. Goodwin, in the real estate and insurance business, was a direct descendant of the founder of Goodwin Pottery. In 1936 he bought land west of Ridgewood Road to create a development around Wood Pond and Woodridge Lake, once the ice business ended. Source: Display Ad 65, The Hartford Courant, May 24, 1914.

to take them to the town hall and surprised the “unsuspecting townsmen of the north end.” Those running the meeting were met by “a storm of protest.”

The Elmwood men got their way when the Fire District voted to give fire hydrants to Elmwood by increasing the mill rate by one mill. The Men’s Union’s next step was to establish their own fire station in town which finally came to fruition in 1919. It was clear that the increased fire protection would add to the value of houses in Elmwood.

In 1922, Talcott Junior High opened on land contributed by the Talcott Estate. Talcott and Plant Junior Highs were among the first junior high schools built in Connecticut. Six years later in 1928, as the population in Elmwood grew, the town tore down the Elmwood School and replaced it with the Elmwood Grammar School fashioned after the Beach Park School on Steele Road and the Morley School on Fern Street.

The *Hartford Courant* claimed that this subdivision was “an excellent location for the suburban dweller.” By 1925, those who moved to Elmwood made a choice to live in a community proud of their factories and railroad tracks as well as the churches, schools, library and post office which helped to develop an identity that is uniquely Elmwood section of town.

The Prospect Casino

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, May 2009

An article in the *Hartford Courant* from February 25, 1901, “Casino to Close: Clubhouse on Farmington Avenue to be Leased or Sold,” caught my eye recently. The subtitle read “It has not been much patronized of late, Golf and the Country Club at Farmington Avenue proving stronger attractions—Pleasant Building, but Little Used this Winter.”

I had known the casino was on the southwest corner of Farmington Avenue and Prospect near where St. John’s Episcopal Church stands today. It struck me as not quite right that a “dry town” would have a casino, but I had never seen much more than a mention of the place in town.

The term casino did not always refer to a place for gambling and West Hartford’s casino was far from our present definition of a casino. Originally the term referred to a small Italian villa, summerhouse or pavilion built for pleasure, usually on the grounds of a larger Italian villa. Its meaning changed through the 19th century, but this original meaning seemed a better fit for the “casino” built in West Hartford in 1894.

On January 30, 1894, residents of the West End of Hartford and the east end of West Hartford met at Whiting Lane Schoolhouse to organize building “a clubhouse and casino” to act as a social club on Farmington Avenue. It was named: “The Neighborhood Club Company.” A group of 20 men paid subscriptions worth \$5,000 on the way to the needed amount of \$7,000. The purpose of the meeting was to talk about building the hall to be “suitable for such amusements as are desired.” H.C. Judd, F.G. Whitmore, Anson Brainerd, and John O. Enders were four of the founders.

The club chose among a dozen architectural plans. An 1894 *Courant* article described it:

a low pitched roof rises at the front to a height sufficient for two floors and is surmounted by a platform which is a flag staff rises to a height of fifty feet from the ground. From the roof projects a pleasing dormer balcony. The style of architecture is semi-colonial.

Inside, the clubhouse had a reception hall, an office, a ladies’ parlor, reading room, billiard room, assembly hall (66 x 44 feet) with a capacity for seating 500 people for dinner. They built a stage in this room as well. On the second floor, there was an office for the secretary, and a lounging and smoking room. In the basement they built two bowling alleys, a kitchen, dressing rooms, and baths. The building was heated by hot water, and lit, “for the present,” by gas. A wide veranda surrounded the clubhouse on two sides. In the backyard, they planned to build three tennis courts.

By time the building was finished, its costs had more than tripled to \$23,000. Of the 140 stockholders, about 60 percent of the members lived in West Hartford along Farmington Avenue and Prospect. The other 40

percent lived in the city. According to the rules of the club, “it is intended that the tone of the club life shall be at all times elevating and that nothing in the nature of gaming or carousal shall ever be allowed.” They planned for “ladies and young people” to be part of the club. Clearly built before the term casino evolved, the rules were clear: betting and gambling were prohibited by the by-laws as was selling or keeping liquor.

Members held lectures, listened to musicians, hosted theatrical performances, had fairs, and hosted balls. Members went to the casino to read, play games, and just talk. They allowed the Farmington Avenue Christian Association to hold services there until they found a permanent home.

The opening party for the club in February 1895 was a real gala! The members decorated the building in “Oriental Luxuriance” and “well-known society people (who) danced the hours away.” A *Courant* reporter wrote:

Society was out in full force and the company was brilliant in the costumes of the ladies, handsome gowns, beautiful bouquets and other accessories of charming toilets. There was a large number of well known people present, and while the chief attraction was the dancing in the ballroom there was a good deal of social chat in the spacious parlors and in the brilliant rooms.

Over time the members changed their club’s name from the Neighborhood to the Casino Club. The building was used often for theatrical performances, dances and receptions. When it was warm, the managers enclosed the verandah in cloth in the evening. Women and children came to the club frequently and it kept its reputation as a family club.

However, in 1896, the Hartford Golf Club opened. In the late 1890s, the Farmington Golf Club on Outlook Avenue opened. The Fern Street Golf Club was also a going concern at the same time. According to the *Courant*, interest in the Casino Club fell off when the golf clubs opened.

In February 1901, the members decided to close the Casino and they sold the building at a loss for \$15,000 to Dr. Naylor. He planned to convert the casino into a home, but never moved in. He leased the building for various functions including entertainment, and Miss B.A. Hollister’s ladies’ gymnastic class.

On December 18, 1902 a spectacular fire burned the casino to the ground. The fire began in the rear of the building at about 9:30 at night. Neighbors made the call to the Hartford Fire Department and several companies arrived, but they were not allowed to start fighting the fire until Chief Eaton, who was two and a third miles away, arrived and gave special orders to fight the fire across the city line.

The fire companies took more than two hours to put the fire out. Hartford residents complained about having to pay their tax money for fire protection for West Hartford. In fact, many people moved to West Hartford because the tax rate was lower. However, Hartford seemed to supply both police and fire protection to the growing suburb of just over 3,000 residents. There had been talk of a new West Hartford fire district, but the West Hartford selectmen did not vote to fund one until 1909 and the fire company was finally completed in 1915, not far from the site of the fire.

As this new upper middle class moved to West Hartford, they organized, developed, and built new ways to spend their leisure time. The Prospect Casino had a short life, but it was an important symbol of the change in West Hartford from farm town to suburb. Those who worked in Hartford’s white-collar jobs organized and joined private clubs for their recreation. These clubs, as well as their new residences in the suburbs, helped define this new middle class.

Charter Oak School

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, May 2013

In March 2013, West Hartford’s Board of Education voted to build the first new elementary school since Norfoltd School was built in 1964. A new Charter Oak School, with a price tag of \$40 million (with the town paying about \$8 million), will open in 2016. The present school houses 270 students and the new school will have room for 560 students from the neighborhood and magnet students from all over town. Charter Oak’s

scope and size has changed many times in its history. This investment in a state of the art building will help to do what Board of Education Chair Madeleine McKernan dreamed of over 40 years ago: to provide an equal opportunity for all students no matter where they live in West Hartford.

In 1884, the Common School district of West Hartford built the original elementary school in the neighborhood. The one room schoolhouse on the south side of Flatbush Avenue (near the present day Home Depot) at first housed all eight grades, but as the population grew, three more rooms were added, and only K-4 students could fit in Charter Oak. Older students went to Smith School, or the Elmwood School on New Britain Avenue. This little four room Charter Oak area school had a capacity of 100 students. The current Charter Oak School was built in 1930 to accommodate kindergarten to grade 6.

The architect, Russell Barker planned for a 15-room building for 560 students with a price tag of \$290,000. Superintendent Lloyd Bugbee planned this school as one of the first “modern” schools in the “American perpendicular” style with silver and black colors on the front of the building. One innovation in the building was the inlaid linoleum floor in the kindergarten room with inlaid children’s stories. Architects planned a library in the middle of the school.

Miss Bernice Patterson took on the role of teaching principal of the 4-room schoolhouse in 1924. In 1930, when the new school opened, she became the first principal. She served as principal for 22 years when Miss Harriet Foley replaced her.

A 2 ½ inch piece of the trunk section of the famous Charter Oak tree was displayed in the main corridor. Walter Korder, a local artist, received New Deal money in the 1930s to paint several fairy tale paintings that still hang in the building.

In 1941, the town took the playground behind the school to make fields. The school then acquired play space in the front of the school on Oakwood Avenue. In 1954, the School Board, built a cafeteria in the remodeled basement, after parents advocated for it so children would not need to walk home for lunch. Charter Oak students ate a hot lunch just like those who attended the new schools like Webster Hill (1949), Bugbee (1952), Duffy (1954), and Whiting Lane (1954).

In 1957, Building and Grounds added a fence around the entire play area. In 1958 a gym was added, again to keep up with the new schools being built. In 1963, enrollment declined as eminent domain forced families out of homes along the I-84 corridor. Charter Oak lost 60 students in that one year.

In September 1972, school administrators hoped to build a new large elementary school for 1,000 students for \$4 million to replace Smith and Charter Oak. In 1972, the Hartford Courant reported that the Board of Education wanted “to replace the aging Smith, Charter Oak and Elmwood Schools.” The Board scaled down its plans to a 700 student school to replace just Smith and Charter Oak. But a lack of parental support led the Board to drop the proposal.

According to Board Chair Madeline McKernan, the main impetus for the new school was to provide an equal education to students in all areas of town. The Board felt that Charter Oak and Smith’s buildings did not provide an equal education for students in the poorest areas of town.

Instead, in November, the Board decided to renovate the existing Charter Oak and expand it so that Smith School could be closed. Parents at Smith promptly organized a group called Save our Schools (SOS) to make sure that Smith did not get shut down. The Board of Education backed off and allowed both schools to remain open and in 1974 voted for funds to rehab each school. In 1975, the Board of Education decided to close the Elmwood School due to declining enrollment. In the early 1980s, Smith closed as well.

Since the early 1990s, West Hartford’s Board of Education has been under pressure to racially integrate its elementary schools. The 1968 Racial Balance Act requires towns to integrate within their district by making sure that no school has a racial balance that is 25% above or below the town’s percentage for students of color. The 1994-5 K-2, 3-5 plan attempted to ameliorate this racial imbalance, but public outcry led to the Board of Education rescinding the program which led to three magnet elementary schools instead, hoping for voluntary integration. Charter Oak became one of those magnets.

In March 2013, a 20-member committee decided to build a new Charter Oak School rather than revamp the

old. New diversity school legislation, designed by the West Hartford legislative delegation and passed in 2012, allows for the town to receive up to 80 percent construction cost for reimbursement if the school is being built with a plan to reach racial balance goals. Regular construction reimbursement for West Hartford is 40%.

The story of Charter Oak School, a school named after a rebellious Connecticut event to protect democracy in the 1600s, represents much about our town. It was the third elementary school, after Beach Park and Morley, to be built in town. Its original architectural plan broke new ground and its changing demographics point to the change in West Hartford's population in the past 40 years. Though the housing stock in its neighborhood has changed little, the skin color and languages of those who live in these houses has changed. The parents' desire for a state of the art school to provide the best environment for their children, on the drawing board for the second time in 40 years, will soon become a reality.

West Hartford in 1896

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, January 2009. Thanks to Dick Kreitner for the atlas.

This fall a friend passed along a real treasure to me in my role as the Town Historian: a 112-year-old atlas of Hartford and West Hartford. The atlas provides unique information. It opens up a world to me that newspaper articles and even photographs cannot engender. The *Atlas of the City of Hartford Connecticut, including also the Town of West Hartford* tells me much about the economic world of West Hartford over a century ago. It defines the town of West Hartford as a town that supported agriculture and industry, as it became a suburb of Hartford, on which it depended for its economic well-being.

In 1896, West Hartford had about 2,500 residents and was just starting to move from farm town to suburb. L.J. Richards & Co. of Springfield, Massachusetts published the atlas based on records from Hartford and West Hartford municipal engineers and some of the publisher's own engineers. There are 30 Plates in the book, 26 from Hartford, and four from West Hartford. You can browse through this atlas in the Local History Room in West Hartford's Noah Webster Public Library, or their historical maps online page.

Plate 27 is a map of the entire town, showing every dwelling in town. The mapmakers delineated whether buildings were brick, wood, brick and wood, stone, iron, whether it was a barn stable or shed, or a greenhouse. The atlas includes the owners' names for each dwelling and piece of land.

The map marks sewers under Park Street from Prospect past South Main, and on Fern, Quaker Lane, and the south end of Steele Road, a sure sign of the infrastructure built for residential neighborhoods. The street railway that traversed Farmington Avenue spanned the town from east to west. The Hartford and West Hartford Horse Railroad Company, incorporated in 1863 sent the line out to West Hartford in 1889.

By the 1890s, West Hartford's farmers specialized in dairy. The two creameries in town, Highland Creamery on the southwest corner of Albany Avenue and Mountain Road and the Elmwood Creamery owned by C.M. Beach, now part of Beachland Park, were important parts of this agricultural base. According to William H. Hall in his *West Hartford* (1930), the creamery was supplied by the farms that surrounded each dairy.

On Plate 27, the publishers named two farms in town: Boswell Farm on the westside of South Main where Rockledge is today, and Maplewood owned by F.A. Thomson across the street. These farms were just to the north of the Vine Hill Farm and Grist Mill which included land on three corners of New Britain Avenue and South Main Street.

Gristmills in town at the time are a reflection of the continued agricultural base. There were the Trout Brook Grist Mill on North Main where Trout Brook crosses near American School for the Deaf, and the grist mill next to the Elmwood Creamery in today's Beachland Park. Daniels Mill Company owned a gristmill on the corner of Simsbury Road and Bloomfield Avenue. Daniels Mill Co. was established in 1835, according to the directory at the back of the atlas. Here, the publishers listed "well-known citizens, representing the business, professional and educational interest of the city, through whose hearty support alone the completion of this volume has been made possible." Daniels Mill sold wholesale and retail flour, feed, grain, hay and straw.



Figure 5.3: Wallace Thomson founded the W.W. Thomson Company at 146 South Main Street in 1899. Originally they grew vegetables and produce that they sold to farmer's markets in the region. His son, W. Pomeroy Thomson, produced over 30 new varieties of carnations between 1958 and 1988 in West Hartford, Florida, and Bogota, Colombia. Source: Noah Webster House & West Hartford Historical Society.

"Grain by the carload" was their specialty. Their headquarters at 40 Elm Street in Hartford represented the close connection between the economies of Hartford and West Hartford.

Farmers specialized in greenhouse grown plants as well. There were greenhouses on Whiting Lane owned by Alfred Whiting. Next to the Hartford Brick Company on New Park Avenue stood the greenhouses of Charles K. Swenson, one of the many Swedish immigrants who worked with plants. W.E. Wallace sold nursery goods on the corner of Farmington Avenue and Quaker Lane from his greenhouse. According to Hall's book, Wales Andrews had four greenhouses on the corner of New Britain Avenue and Grove Street where he specialized in growing cucumbers.

Many successful businessmen who worked in Hartford, lived in West Hartford and supported the making of the Atlas are listed in the directory in the back of the book. Charles M. Beach of the Beach Dye Works, J.J. Enders of State Savings Bank, J. L English, secretary of Aetna Life who lived on Fern Street, and Bernard Caya, contractor lived on Prospect Avenue. F.C. Rockwell, who was the head of the Bonsilate Box Co. lived on Prospect Avenue. He subdivided the land along the Boulevard as he looked forward to one of the first suburban developments in town.

E.H. Arnold & Sons used the pond from the dammed up Trout Brook at Farmington Avenue to harvest ice. His Trout Brook Ice and Feed Company needed five buildings to take care of its business. Headquarters for Arnold's building were on Asylum Avenue downtown. His company was both wholesale and retail selling ice and grain.

By 1896, West Hartford also had its share of industry. The clay soil led to brick making as a lucrative



Figure 5.4: Brickmakers used the clay soil in the southeast section of town to build several lucrative businesses. The Phoenix Brick Company, Park Brick Company, and the brickyards of Michael Kane lined the railroad line in the industrial section of town. Source: Noah Webster House & West Hartford Historical Society.

business. There were three brick companies in town. On New Park Avenue, with railroad spurs right into their yards were the Hartford Brick Company and across the tracks, the Charter Oak Brick Company. On the corner of Prospect and Caya Avenue was the Dennis & Co. Brick Manufacturers.

Along the railroad tracks in the southeast section of town industry grew. The Whitlock Coil and Pipe Company was across the tracks from the Goodwin Brothers Pottery. Whitlock Coil and Pipe opened its doors in 1892 and manufactured coiled pipe used for use with steam boilers. The Goodwin Brothers began the pottery business to take advantage of the clay, just as the brickmakers did. They sold their jugs and jars across the continent.

For entertainment, on the corner of Prospect and Farmington where St. John's Episcopal Church stands today, was the Prospect Casino. On Prospect and New Park, race enthusiasts could go to the Charter Oak Driving Park. There was a bandstand, a grandstand, and a half-mile track. Both of these establishments depended on Hartford residents for their success.

The center was beginning to be a retail center. Where the present day library sits was the Carriage Repository and Hardware Store. Buckland's Store and Post Office stood at the corner of Main and Farmington. But, these are the only two retail establishments in the center. The real growth came in the 1930s.

Economically, West Hartford continued to depend on Hartford. Farmers sold their produce to Hartford residents, the railroad that passed through the southeast corner of town connected goods to the city center, and Hartford businessmen brought value as they began to settle in the residential suburb. L.J. Richards' *Atlas* confirms that West Hartford's prosperity depended on Hartford's economy. Back then, residents and businesses knew that their prosperity depended on the city. Today, many West Hartford residents continue to understand how West Hartford's economy is tied to that of Hartford and the region that surrounds it.

A Day in This Town's History: August 10, 1899

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, July 2009

An August 10, 1899 news brief from the *Hartford Courant* opens a window into West Hartford at the turn of the 20th century. This seven-paragraph article has 272 words and provides a sense of the fabric of a town changing from a farm town into a suburb.

Item one: Mrs. F.H. Stadtmueller as a 'Ceres' presided at the meeting of the Grange Tuesday evening. The hall was prettily decorated with stalks of corn and golden rod. Papers upon grains were read by Mrs. S.P. Griswold, D.G. Francis, Dr. Ganunack, Mrs. P.R. Day and Mrs. Paullson. It has been decided to postpone the matter of an excursion for the present.

Imagine Mrs. Stadtmueller dressed like the Roman goddess of agriculture, wearing a garland of ears of corn. Ceres was an elected position in the Grange, which started as a secret organization in town in 1887 with 32 charter members. The purpose of the Grange was to improve social connections and fight the economic backwardness of farmers.

The interests of West Hartford Grange 58 included education, improvement in public highways, rural mail delivery and town affairs. Yearly, they prepared exhibits for the annual state fairs at Charter Oak Park. According to Hall's History of West Hartford, even in 1930, the Grange continued "its organization and its interest in the town."

Stadtmueller presided over the meeting, introducing the five speakers, three of whom were women. In 1900, as this town's population topped 3,000, some suburban developments like Buena Vista and West Hartford Heights were beginning as the trolley made transportation to Hartford easier.

While "grains" were being celebrated, however, the production of grain acreage in New England dwindled. Between 1880 and 1930, almost 19 million acres in New England were taken out of farming, and the number of farms declined by 31 percent.

The surviving farms in town specialized in dairy and market gardens providing plantings for suburban homes. Mrs. Stadtmueller was the wife of Frank E. Stadtmueller, who from 1885 to 1907 managed the Beach's Vine Hill Farm, which occupied acreage from New Britain Avenue to South Main Street to South Quaker Lane. This dairy farm was a model for the state in producing "baby's milk." While Vine Hill continued to prosper for another two decades, farmland was becoming more valuable for residential housing than for farming. Perhaps the Grange was glorifying an agricultural life that they saw slipping away.

Item two: The Rev. John Freeborg held a meeting for the Swedish people at the Baptist Church. A considerable number of Swedes are employed in town and they are interested to hear preaching in their own language and attend the meetings as well.

By 1900, Swedes were one of the largest immigrant groups in town. Between 1851 and 1930 as much as 25 percent of the Swedish population emigrated to the United States. A second wave of immigration in the 1880s and 1890s found young Swedes settling in Connecticut near urban areas.

In 1970, this town had the highest percentage of people of Swedish background in the state. Swedes settled in the Park Road area, building two- and three-family houses and starting businesses.

At one time, the building owned by Bazilians was a Swedish grocery store. Still remaining on Park Road are Hall's Market, where you can still buy Swedish sausage called korv, and A.C. Petersen's.

According to Butterworth, Grant and Woodworth in *Celebrate! West Hartford* (2003), 20 Swedish immigrants from West Hartford, New Britain and Hartford formed a Methodist church in 1895. They built their first church on the corner of Lockwood Terrace and the Boulevard in 1921. Today that church is the Boulevard Baptist Church. The Swedish Methodist Church finally moved to Berkshire Road and New Britain Avenue and today is known as the West Hartford United Methodist Church.

The ability of a Swede who was probably a Methodist to speak at a Baptist Church speaks to the interdenominational sharing in our town. The town's many denominations have shared pulpits in times of disaster

and overcrowding.

Item three: Millie Fulton, youngest daughter of C.W. Fulton, received a bad cut just below the knee from a piece of glass while playing about the mill pond the other day. Dr. Alcott, who was called, was obliged to sew up the wound.

The mill pond on Trout Brook was on the north side of Farmington Avenue. This pond was used in the winters to harvest ice, but in the summer must have been a great place, except for the glass, to go for a swim.

Dr. Ralph W.E. Alcott was one of the doctors in town at the turn of the century. In the birth records, his name appears as attending to the delivery of babies in people's homes before the advent of having babies in hospitals. He was involved in promoting the development of a sewer system here at the turn of the century as an important development to protect against the spread of disease.

Item four: Misses Helen and Elizabeth Hubbard are at Branford for a week. Mrs. E.M. Peck is visiting relatives in West Haven. A daughter was born recently to Mr. and Mrs. John Hoye.

These three tidbits of information reflect on the small town that this was in 1899. Vacations and visits were noted weekly. A trip to Branford was not so difficult for residents because of the train lines that ran to the shore. By the 1880s, with the rise of factories, taking a week-long vacation became popular. Many residents owned or rented cottages on the Connecticut shore.

Item five: A resident of Charter Oak was before Justice A.C. Sternberg last night charged with stealing corn from the garden of Mrs. E.A. Talcott near East Street, Elmwood. The accused was found in the corn after dark by Herbert Talcott, but claimed that he was there for other purposes and was an honest man. Bags found on the ground he disclaimed owning. The accused was supported in his testimony by Mrs. Teresa Buck of Charter Oak. As the theft was not proved, the case was nulled. There has been considerable complaint of the theft of garden truck from the region bordering on Charter Oak.

In the alleged burglary in the 1899 paper, a frustrated farmer, Mrs. E.A. Talcott, tried to find who was stealing her corn. A character witness, vouching for the innocence of the accused, helped to get the case nulled. There was no lack of tension in turn of the century West Hartford.

Judge Adolph C. Sternberg served in the state legislature from 1895-96. He was a German immigrant and the son of a highly educated man who moved here in 1854. He grew up with seven brothers and one sister on the southern end of Mountain Road where it meets Sedgwick Road.

Sternberg, as well as being a judge, helped move this town from the town meeting to the town council manager system of government. In 1916, there was so much controversy over the valuation of agricultural and residential land between farmers and suburbanites that residents rejected the assessment list and the town could collect no taxes for that year, having to borrow to pay its expenses. This controversy moved the town to adopt a new town charter in 1919 that made it the first town in the state to adopt this progressive form of government.

This news from the summer of 1899 describes a farm town with community organizations, immigrants, people wealthy enough to go on week-long vacations and law breaking. The *Hartford Courant* kept people apprised of not only the political and organizational news, but also of the social fabric of the town that helped to stitch us into a community.

Abraham Janes, Blacksmith

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, February 2012

My article this month started by researching what was happening in Town 100 years ago. That search took me to the *Historical Hartford Courant*, just a click away through the West Hartford Public Library online service. There, I found that a January 14, 1912 fire raged for five hours at Abraham Janes' Blacksmith and

Carriage Shop, 921 Farmington Avenue. The fire displaced two families, and destroyed over \$12,000 worth of property. Janes would later rebuild his carriage and blacksmith shop and run it well into the 1920s.

That sounded like a story to me: perseverance and grit with community support. So, I'd write about the fire and how the Janes business was rebuilt. Initially, I found two articles on the fire and thought I was set.

At the time of the fire, Mr. Janes, his wife, their six children and an apprentice lived over the repository of his blacksmith shop. Walter Payne, an employee of the Hartford Water Board and his wife and three children lived over the blacksmith shop. The first floor of the building was a paint shop, blacksmith shop, the repository and an office. The basement had two forges, wood working machinery and storage booths.

When the fire broke out, Mr. Janes and two others rescued the eight sleeping children just before they were consumed by fire. West Hartford's volunteer Fountain Hose Company rushed to put out the fire. The nearby Congregational Church's bell called the volunteer firemen who rushed to the scene. The row of houses on Nichols Court that ran parallel to Raymond Road, (then School Street), did not catch fire because the night was so still. Reports claimed the temperature was 16 below zero.

Janes had insured the property for \$11,000. The loss was close to \$12,000. The Payne family was only able to save a small trunk of clothing and a few bedclothes. Several wagons and sleighs and three cars were saved, but another car burned. A month later, the insurance company had still not paid Janes. This stopped Janes' attempts to build a temporary shed to continue jobbing and horseshoeing. Janes, according to the *Courant*, had not been idle, attending to his customers at their homes or elsewhere as soon as he got the materials needed to shoe. His plans were to rebuild a one-story shop on the foundation of the burned building. Still, he took a loss and had to borrow money to keep his son in college.

Part of the story about fires is not just about how the victims reacted, but how the community kicked in. According to the *Courant*, the response was "generous." The women of the First Church met in the parlor the next Monday morning to work on articles of clothing for the Janes children. The pastor of the Paynes South Park Methodist Church asked for help for their 6, 4, and 2 year old children. Congregants donated \$75 to the Paynes.

But who was this man, Janes? Like most life stories, his was complicated. There were articles about him running afoul of the law – passing a standing trolley, trying to collect money from customers who stiffed him, and in 1931, having his house on Quaker Lane go into foreclosure.

A continued search led me to more features on Janes. As cars became the mode of transportation, and as the role of a blacksmith changed from shoeing horses to specialty work, the *Courant* memorialized him in one article "Childhood Trade Brings Him Fame: Abraham Janes of West Hartford Follows Art of Smithy His Father Taught Him As A Boy in Newfoundland," (1927) and a year later, "Abraham Janes, Artist in Wrought Iron Work: Sparks Fly From the Anvil Where, Under an Expert's Hands, Modern Iron Becomes Latches, Grills, and Lanterns in the Style of Other Days" (1928).

In these articles I found out that Abraham Janes was born in 1872 in Brigus, Newfoundland, and grew up there where he apprenticed to his blacksmith father for 10 years. At age 17 Janes went to the Arctic on Peary's first polar expedition. He set up a forge on Turnavik Island, mending the dog sleds and iron needed for exploration over the northern ice and for the ship. In 1898, at age 26, he emigrated to Hartford and opened his shop on Farmington Avenue. For the 27 years of his traditional blacksmith shop, he claimed, he made 53 vehicles per year and shod hundreds of horses. One day he shod a pair of horses in 34 minutes without assistance. On another day, in 18 hours, he shod 53 horses. When there was a strike and riot in Ansonia in 1901, the cavalry was called out to stop the strike. Janes and an assistant went to the stables and, working under pressure, shod 43 horses between 2am and 7am.

Janes got involved in the community as well. After the shop burned, he moved to Quaker Lane between Farmington and Park. In 1912, he joined on with Theodore Roosevelt's Bull Moose Party, attending a local convention. In 1913 he was elected gatekeeper of the Grange. He served as a member of the Fountain Hose Company No. 1 apparatus committee, being part of rebuilding the combination truck to equip it for fire fighting. He was the head of the committee to build a new firehouse shed a few years after the fire burned his place of work.

And, the *Courant* reported, that Janes' work changed with the times. By the late 1920s, Janes, at age 56, still worked at the shop, but made thumb latches, butterfly hinges, grills, and balcony railings for bars and clubs as far away as New York and New Jersey. Janes fashioned all the hand-wrought iron at the Hartford Theological Seminary (now the University of Connecticut Law School), the window grills on the Fire Department in Hartford, the balconies and stair rail at the Fuller Brush building, the Spanish Balconies at the Hartford Club dining rooms, and iron work on West Hartford homes on Sycamore, Albany Avenue, and Whiting Lane.

As I searched for Janes' obituary, to round out his story, it was not in the *Courant*. One of his 10 siblings died in 1940 and Abraham Janes was listed as living in Memphis, Tennessee. His wife, Lillian Janes died in 1957 at age 84, while living on Lancaster Road and her obituary claimed she died a widow. She left four sons and three daughters, three of whom lived in West Hartford.

Janes' story was more of a puzzle than I thought. Where he was between 1931 and 1957 is not clear. In a Google search I found a family genealogy website produced by one of his 37 grandchildren. Several comments under his photograph helped to put flesh on his bones. One grandchild said:

Grandpa Janes (Abraham) was a good looking man, my Dad once said he didn't smoke, drink or swear and had only one weakness: women. My Dad was attending Norwich University when the separation occurred between our grandparents. He left school and went home to help support the family.

I'm left to speculate that Abraham left Lillian sometime during the Depression, perhaps as the house went into foreclosure. Perhaps his trips to New York City to sell his specialized wares opened up new horizons. Losing his house to foreclosure might have been too much for his pride to stay in West Hartford. Or maybe, like his grandson suggested, there was another woman that drew him away from his adopted town. I think there are some readers who may remember his shop on Farmington Avenue or knew his family. Can you help me fill in the story? Research that started with a fire 100 years ago led to a master craftsman who changed with the times but whose full story is still not complete.

Henry Selden: A Man Who Changed with the Times

Originally appeared in Hartford Life, December 2001. Thank you to Bob Strickland, a long time resident of Selden Hill, who wants to keep the memory of the Seldens alive, and lent me several articles.

The life of West Hartford resident Henry Hezekiah Selden (1854-1932), symbolizes the sweeping changes in the United States as the economy and technology modernized our nation. Historians have described how the Second Industrial Revolution in the post Civil War period revolutionized the lives of average Americans. How did a man like Selden adapt to these changes while he retained his life as a traditional dairy farmer?

In 1776, the Selden family moved to Great Hill in what was then Farmington. When Henry Selden was five, in 1859, about 330 acres known as Selden Hill and now known as Buena Vista, West Hartford annexed this area in response to a petition by Henry's uncle, Hezekiah Selden. This section of land is bounded by the reservoir on the north, Farmington on the west, West Farms Mall on the south, and Cornerstone Pool and the skating rink on the east.

By the mid-1800s, most New England farms had become dairy farms. With the new Erie Canal and railroad transportation, the opening of fertile land in Ohio, and the move westward, it was no longer profitable to grow wheat here. In the 1850s, some farmers in West Hartford grazed sheep, but the Seldens chose to keep cows.

Henry attended the West School, a one-room schoolhouse that still stands on Mountain Road and now houses the West Hartford Art League. In the early 1870s, he spent a semester or two at Williston Academy in central Massachusetts to complete his education. He returned to the farm at Selden Hill to work for his father.

As a dairy farmer, Henry cut and delivered hay in the summer, cut ice on Wood Pond in the winter, mended fences, and cared for livestock. The farm had 25 to 30 head of cattle, four horses and 150 acres of farmland. Their property had eight outbuildings and a 12-room farmhouse. A farmer who held 50 acres of land could live a good life.

Henry's interest in new inventions started early. In the mid-1860s, when Henry was still a child, he watched men build the reservoir across Farmington Avenue from his parents' dairy farm. Some of the workmen stayed at the Selden Farm while on the project. One of these workman's jobs was to feed the horses and young Henry was fascinated by the small Seth Thomas alarm clock, which awakened him every morning. According to his granddaughter Dorothy Selden, the young worker was willing to trade the clock to Henry for some useless trinkets.

Henry's fascination with things mechanical must have been piqued by the new pump organ at the First Congregational Church in the center of town. This church, the third building, was on the northwest corner of Farmington and Main and stood until 1957. Henry got a job in the church as the first boy to pump the new organ.

Henry's interest in things technological continued into early adulthood. In 1876, when he was 22, he and his mother, father, aunt and uncle made the journey, by rail to Philadelphia, to celebrate the centennial of the United States. On August 21, the group of five set off for this city on the train from Hartford to New Haven. They boarded a boat in New Haven for New York City where they again boarded the train to Germantown Junction, Pennsylvania where they checked in at a hotel opposite the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. They stayed in Philadelphia for five days and Henry kept a diary of his visit. The exhibits from China, the Sandwich Islands, Belgium, and England intrigued him.

But he was most interested in Machinery Hall, the Saw Mill, the railroad exhibit and a printing shop. When his parents and aunt and uncle returned to the hotel, Henry stayed and rode the cars around the Centennial Exhibition. The next day they toured again, and Henry returned to Machinery Hall. He was so intrigued by the building, that in later years he named one of the buildings on his farm Machinery Hall. After a five-day visit, the Seldens took the 7:10 train out of Philadelphia, arrived in New York City at 10:30, hired a carriage, drove through the botanical gardens there, and arrived in Hartford by train by 9:30 p.m. The technology in Philadelphia intrigued the young farmer from West Hartford.

Henry, according to his granddaughter, preferred to work with machines rather than the soil. His interest in machines led him to build a mill on his property where he cut lumber for himself and his neighbors. He built a lathe powered by horses on a treadmill and he had his own repair shop and blacksmith shop.

Henry married Sarah Whiting in 1888 when he was an established bachelor at the age of 34. They went on to have eight children, and Henry taught them how to work on the farm. At the age of five, they started to do jobs on what was a prosperous farm. Most of Henry's income came from milk, butter, and hay. There were times when he allowed his six and seven year olds to take his hay by themselves with their wagon to Hartford. His daughter, Rilla Selden (b. 1898) remembers wrapping pounds of butter in parchment and sitting high on the horse-drawn wagon with her father as he traveled his delivery route and getting down at each house to deliver the fresh butter at 25 cents per pound.

Henry was always looking for something new. Between 1898 and 1902, he and his sister-in-law opened the Selden Ice Cream Parlor in West Hartford Center at the present location of the Treva Restaurant. It was at the end of the trolley line that made it from Hartford to the center by 1889. According to Selden's granddaughter Dorothy, the ice cream parlor was the first to use fresh fruit in their ice cream. The store closed when a nearby drug store began to serve ice cream

Henry Selden bought his first car in 1918 when he was 64. He enjoyed riding in it, but decided not to drive it because he was so hard of hearing by that time that he couldn't tell whether the motor was running. Once, when he did decide to drive it on the farm, he was heard yelling "Whoa! Whoa!" to stop it.

In 1926, 50 years after his trip to Philadelphia to celebrate the U.S. Centennial, Henry and two of his sons, Irving and Roland, took their Model T to Philadelphia for the U.S. Sesquicentennial. The fact that Henry enjoyed this celebration as much as he did as a young man is a testament to his willingness to use and learn about modern technology. He learned how to integrate it into the workings of his already established farm.



Figure 5.5: Henry Selden ran his ice cream parlor in West Hartford Center between 1898 and 1902 where LaSalle Road intersects with Farmington Avenue. Source: Selden Family.



Figure 5.6: Stadtmueller is most well known for being the originator of the certified milk business in Connecticut, between 1890 and 1920. His work force at Vine Hill farm is dressed in whites with caps carrying covered buckets of milk. Their attempt to improve the sanitation milking cows led to advertising this milk for babies as “Clinical Nursery Milk.” Source: Noah Webster House & West Hartford Historical Society.

Elmwood’s Frank Stadtmueller

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, May 2006

Frank Stadtmueller came to public prominence as West Hartford was changing from a rural town to a suburb. He was a progressive farmer who advocated a role for farming in 20th century Connecticut and West Hartford.

As a Democrat in an overwhelmingly Republican town, Stadtmueller held positions as Justice of the Peace, a member of the school committee, head of the West Hartford Democratic Caucus, Town Selectman, Vestryman at St. John’s Episcopal Church, West Hartford’s Building Inspector, and West Hartford’s Health Officer. In the state, he served as the President of the Sheepbreeder’s Association, President of the Connecticut Dairymen’s Association, and the State Agricultural Commissioner. Stadtmueller always listed his place of residence as Elmwood.

Stadtmueller was born in 1861 on the Vine Hill Farm owned by Charles Mason Beach. His father Louis Stadtmueller was a German immigrant who worked for the Beaches. At age 6, the family moved to New Haven and Stadtmueller grew up there and graduated from Yale. He returned to Vine Hill in 1885 and, at age 24, took over the management of the farm for the next 30 years. He worked hand in hand with Beach’s son, Charles Edward who was one year younger than Stadtmueller.

Stadtmueller championed progressive farming. He and Charles Beach were the “inventors” of “baby’s milk” or what was known as “sanitary milk” in Connecticut. To produce baby’s milk, they kept the cows clean and the milkers free from disease. Each day, they tested the milk in the lab. Before the 1890s, infants only drank mother’s milk. Beach and Stadtmueller marketed cow’s milk to children.

Stadtmueller was a businessman and an advocate as well as a farmer. He believed that milk had to be marketed and he believed the state had a role to play in doing this by inspecting milk, certifying its cleanliness, and providing price supports. In 1907, at a meeting of the Connecticut Dairymen’s Association, Stadtmueller gave a talk on problems with the low market price of milk.

However, having regulations and enforcement were two different things. At the state dairymen's convention in 1913, the president of the group, Warren Davis, said that municipal milk inspection was "a joke." He argued that the legislature would not appropriate enough money for inspection and that the inspection should be done by the State Health Department, rather than local health officers.

Stadtmueller believed that when each municipality inspected milk, the standards varied a great deal. The producer who lived closest to the point of distribution was inspected much more than the one further away and he believed that a state standard would help the situation. In 1917, as the State Dairy and Food Commissioner, he arrested the First Selectman of Southbury and four others for selling "watered milk." These men felt the pressure of the cost of producing milk. Stadtmueller could use these men both as an example of the need for standards and the hard time that milk producers had producing a profit of any kind.

In 1914, in a speech before a meeting of the Men's Union of the First Congregational Church, Stadtmueller decried the plight of the farmer in Connecticut, claiming that many of their problems were based on poor distribution of goods and the lack of cooperation between farmers. He also believed that the price of milk had to go up two cents per quart or even more men would give up dairy farming.

In that same year, as President of the Hartford County Rural Improvement Association, Stadtmueller encouraged those in attendance to value agriculture. Hartford County in 1909 produced \$6 million worth of agricultural goods. He knew of large areas of "wasteland" that had gone to brush that could double Hartford County's agricultural production. He urged "the children to stay on the farm instead of flocking to the city." Cooperation among producers, he said, would lead to success.

Stadtmueller's idea of an organization came to fruition in 1915 when his Hartford Country Rural Improvement Association (of which he was President) and the Board of Trade came together to discuss how they could help each other to save agriculture for the county. The amount of farmland decreased every decade, farmers moved west, and the many no longer thought of New England as an agricultural region. Stadtmueller seemed at his best when he used his position in various agencies to bring people together.

Stadtmueller also helped found and lead the West Hartford Business Men's Association. In November 1910, they held a meeting on the subject of a public utilities commission. Stadtmueller's Association called in two speakers from Hartford, Normand Allen and Ralph O. Wells, who explained the reasons that a commission was needed to control the "great public service corporations." Allen, the owner of the Sage Allen Department Store explained that there "was no opposition to the great corporations." He believed that there needed to be a way to secure the safety of employees on railways, to be sure that electric and gas meters measured use fairly, and that rates for electric and gas be controlled because they were unfair.

Allen proposed a public utilities commission of three to five men being paid \$7,500 a piece to regulate the industry. The other speaker, Ralph O. Wells was concerned with the "baleful influence of the lobby in Connecticut legislation." He believed that the Legislature was not controlled by reason but by corporations trading votes and "log rolling" to get what they needed. He believed that the electric and gas corporations had much too much power.

Stadtmueller believed that government regulation and associational cooperation could improve life for farmers and consumers. During the 1930s, with Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, the federal government, for the first time introduced price supports for agricultural products and established a "cost yardstick" for the cost of electrical power. In the 1910s, Elmwood's Frank Stadtmueller (1861-1918) already brought these issues to the public's eyes. Where many historians argue that the push for more government intervention in the economy came from the federal level, in fact the ideas were brewing on the local level right here in West Hartford a quarter of a century earlier, during the Progressive Era.

The Site that Became Blue Back Square

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, December 2007

Noah Webster's statue, complete with a new finger, is repositioned in the town's center and the three square



Figure 5.7: Hayes-Vellege American Legion Hall sat at the corner of Raymond Road and Memorial Drive. It was one of the casualties of Blue Back Square when it was taken down in 2005 for the new development. Both Hayes and Velhage died in World War I. Grody Chevrolet car dealership appears behind on Raymond Road. Source: Noah Webster House & West Hartford Historical Society.

blocks that are Blue Back Square have come to life in a mix of retail, restaurants, office space and housing. It is already difficult to remember what used to be in these lots. A look back 100 years gives a window into how much and how often land use changes.

Blue Back Square occupies twenty acres with 200,000 square feet of retail space, 200,000 square feet of office space, two parking garages with about 1,000 spaces, apartments, condominiums, a renovated public library, and a passive public park on the southeast corner of Raymond and Memorial Drives. Just two years ago, it included the Grody car dealership, which was a toxic site, three 3-family houses, the Hayes-Velhage American Legion post, a town parking lot, the Board of Education building, and green space.

When the developers and the Town of West Hartford first put together their development plans, Blue Back's 20 acres were taxed at a value of \$3.5 million. Completed, the developers believed the market value would reach \$110 million. Already by 2006, Blue Back became the single largest taxpayer in town.

How else has this site changed in a century? A look at the *Atlas of the City of Hartford, Connecticut, including, also, the town of West Hartford*, 1896 and 1909 shows the plot of land which is now Blue Back Square. You can go online to the West Hartford Public Library site, click on Local History, then West Hartford Historical Maps.

On the edge of Goodman Green, on the land which is now the public library, was the Masonic Hall. The Masonic Hall is now on the west side of Goodman Green. South of the Masonic Hall was W.A. Burr's Carriage Repository & Hardware Store. What is now Memorial Drive was a road with no name. On the site of the present Hartford Hospital and New York Sports Club building stood the town's second Center School, built in 1896. Until this school was built, high school students attended the first Center School at 14 North Main Street

In 1896, at the site of the present Town Hall, there were four residences: Mrs. Margaret W. Seyms, Mrs. Charles Cain, and J. P. Oviatt all who had houses made of wood. Mrs. Seyms had four out buildings on her property. Asher Rogers owned a very small plot and small house, carved out of the lot of the Oviatt's. W.A. Burr owned the land on the southside of the block bounded on the south by what is now Burr Street. In 1896, the land was subdivided, with no houses yet built.

Not too much changed on this block in the next 13 years even though West Hartford's population nearly

tripled from around 1,800 to about 4,800 by 1909. The buildings and owners showed continuity. On the southeast edge of Goodman Green stood the Masonic Hall and W.A. Burr's Carriage and Hardware Store remained. The town added another brick building to the schoolyard at the corner of Raymond Road and School Street (now Memorial Drive). High and elementary school students shared the new school building until 1910 when the high school took over the whole Center School building and the elementary school children went into the new Whitman School built right next door. This building appeared on the 1909 map. This site now includes the parking garage, the condominiums and the Hartford Hospital building.

In 1924, the new high school, named after William H. Hall opened on the west side of the block right along South Main Street. The Center School became known as the Rutherford Building and was kept as a town building and in the 1940s and 1950s served as an annex for Hall High. Take a look at the name of the Hartford Hospital building in Blue Back Square – over the main entrance appears the name “Rutherford Building.”

W.A. Burr continued to own the south side of the block. The Seyms property had been transferred from Margaret to G. H. Seyms. Three of the outbuildings were subdivided into two separate lots. C.F. Scarborough owned the Cain property. There were three buildings on his property. John Gridley purchased the Asher Rogers house and lot. Along Burr Street, three houses were built and there were owners for six of the 11 subdivided lots.

In 1936, the town used federal funds provided through the PWA to build both the Noah Webster Library and the Town Hall. The library, built in 1918 on the corner of North Main and Brace Road, lasted only 18 years. The new Town Hall building replaced the third building of First Congregational Church which stood at the site of the veteran's memorial. The Town Hall, with its grand gold cupola, served that purpose from 1936 until 1987 when the former Hall High was renovated and the town offices moved there. At the same time, the town sold its education building on Steele Road and the education offices moved into the former Town Hall. As the town tried to consolidate its services, and with the push of the Blue Back Square developers, the education offices moved into the Town Hall in 2006. The old Town Hall serves as Fleming's Steak House and the Bow Tie Cinemas.

Those who have visited Blue Back Square, will recognize the familiar Noah Webster statue and the cupola and front entrance on a new building at the site of the old Town Hall. The four and five story buildings down the hill give the new three-block area a very different feel. The streets are alive with shoppers and workers and a new Rutherford Building replaces one on the same site named over 80 years ago. The change seems drastic when you stand at the corner of Memorial and Isham Roads. Do you think the sense of loss and gain match what people thought 70 years ago when the library and town hall replaced Burr's Carriage and Hardware Store?

Alfred Plant

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, May 2012

On April 20, 1921, businessman and community leader Alfred E. Plant died at age 48. Within three weeks, the Board of Education, of which he had been a part for at least 11 years decided to name the new junior high school after him.

When the school board voted to name the new Junior High Building after him, they cited his “faithful service as a member of the board. . .” and that “his interest in the welfare of the schools was unfailing and the action by the school board will meet with general favor by the residents of the town.” Plant Junior High opened in 1922 as one of the first junior high schools in the state.

Alfred E. Plant was born in 1873 in the northwestern part of England. His hometown Macclesfield, was most known for manufacturing silk. At age 23, Plant married Hannah Grimshaw and six years later in 1902, they emigrated from England to Hartford.

Plant got a job at Aetna in that year. He joined the Accident and Liability Department when it was formed

and at his early death, was one of its oldest members. He served as secretary to two successive vice presidents of the company. Plant was an insurance man on the ground floor of Hartford's growth as the insurance capital. Plant moved to the United States during the Progressive Era when reformers began to question the power of industrial capitalists. This new Aetna department handled the new business of employers' liability and workmen's compensation insurance.

As Plant settled into town, he got involved in community activities. By 1909, Plant was elected secretary of the West Hartford Republican Party. Republicans controlled the politics of the town in the Progressive Era. Republicans were the party of Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt and a party that had begun to regulate business to protect consumers.

He joined the First Congregational Church in the town's center and by 1911 was a leader in the Men and Religion Forward Movement, an attempt by men across the country to increase the number of male churchgoers. Plant ran monthly meetings that attracted more than 60 men from around town. The minister of the First Congregational Church Rev. T. M. Hodgdon spoke and the West Hartford Glee Club sang to attract men back to the fold.

Plant also served as a master of Wyllys Lodge, No. 99 and was a charter member of the Syria Grotto. Masons founded West Hartford's Wyllys Lodge in 1866. The Masons were a fraternal organization with their roots in 18th century England. Before the Masonic Temple was built on South Main Street just South of Farmington Avenue, they met in the old high school building on North Main Street near the Old Burial Ground. When Plant died, plans were in the works to build the new Temple that opened in 1923.

Plant served his community as an appointed member of the Town School Committee. He quickly became the clerk/secretary and served until his death. In the 1910s when the population grew from 5,000 to 9,000 over the decade, the school population grew just as fast. From 1915 with a school population of 1,350 to 1925 with a school population of 3,250, the school committee was busy. Superintendent William Hall oversaw the building of eight new buildings over this period of time. School committee members sat on committees, which dealt with the nuts and bolts of supplies and the library, as only a few people worked for pay in the central office.

In 1911, Plant and his wife bought a lot and built a home on the outskirts of the center on Pleasant Street, off Farmington Avenue halfway between Main Street and Mountain Road. They raised their son and two daughters there. In 1918 during World War I, their son Alfred G. Plant enlisted in the Army. The son continued to live in West Hartford after his father died and had a long career at the Aetna.

Plant's death at age 48 left his widow Hannah and three children just coming to adulthood. His commitment to his community clear, the school committee named the new school after him.

Fifty-seven years later, when Plant Junior High closed in 1979, the PTO moved to re-name King Philip Junior High after Alfred Plant, but those efforts did not come to fruition.

It took over three years for the town to decide what to do with the school after it closed. But, in October 1982 after a 41-month discussion, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development approved a grant of \$6 million for the West Hartford Housing Authority to develop 100 low-income units for the poor.

The West Hartford Housing Authority formed as a non-profit in 1942 when the town, funded by the federal government, built 300 housing units for defense workers during World War II. The housing authority manages and rehabilitates affordable housing and develops and operates programs for low-income residents.

In 1982, the average family income in town stood at \$30,000, giving West Hartford a reputation of being wealthy. Average home prices were about \$80,000. But almost 30 percent of the 61,000 residents were older than 60. In 1982, second to Hartford, West Hartford had the most elderly poor in the region. Almost 800 West Hartford residents lived on less than \$6,000 a year.

In 1982, there were three places in West Hartford where the poor elderly could live: privately owned Federation Square with 85 units, and the publicly owned Fellowship Housing with 170 units and Elm Grove housing with 40 units.

Over the next six years, builders reconfigured the junior high into housing for the elderly and those with disabilities. Federal, state, and local dignitaries dedicated the new facility in January 1986.

In April 2012, officials re-christened the Alfred E. Plant Building with 42 new housing units added to the original 95. The Plant project began in the fall of 2010 with a price tag of \$21 million. Alfred E. Plant would be proud.

West Hartford governments have long named their public places after local people. Kennedy and Eisenhower Parks aside, local names adorn the schools, parks and public buildings of the town. Knowing the history behind the names reinforces the civic engagement of West Hartford residents; our citizens argue it is this engagement that makes our town so vibrant.

William H. Hall and West Hartford in 1902

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, April 2009

When the Rutherford Building opened in West Hartford Center in 1902, William Hall presented an “Historical Sketch of West Hartford” at the dedication of the building. Hall served as Superintendent and was the unofficial Town Historian. His 28-page speech describes a town based on democracy and cooperation, a town beholden to its forefathers with education as its highest calling.

His dedication began with the story of the arrival of the first English settlers to Hartford in 1636. He said that these settlers not only found a beautiful location, but also established a true republic with its Fundamental Orders written in 1638, established by “the people themselves.” Hall knew why Connecticut was called the Constitution State.

Hall used Lincoln’s words “of the people, by the people, and for the people” to describe the use of the Town Meeting which worked so well in our community. Hall made a point to recognize the vote by the Hartford settlers to set aside common land for the benefit of all between Quaker Lane and Prospect Avenue. In 1902, Hall marveled that on this stretch of land that large portions of the territory were being used by the Hartford Golf Club, Elizabeth Park and Charter Oak Park, for “the use and benefit of the public.”

Hall was interested in civic virtue. Each section of his speech outlined an inheritance of public service, or actions that were for the good of all, not the aggrandizement of the individual. The first government of the town came out of the church. At the annual meeting, a Society Committee of three church members was chosen to run the town. Soon a committee of five took charge of the schools. They later became the Board of School Visitors, and then the Board of Education. The minister was always a member of the school visitors. According to Hall the five Visitors went to a school and then made a “call at one of the taverns for a mug of flip” before moving on to the next school.

Hall believed he could characterize West Hartford residents as industrious and thrifty based on the lack of a poor house. Only a few needed public aid each year.

Hall editorialized that “the worship of God, and the instruction and training of the children, are fundamental principles in all good government and society.” He believed that there were public schools here as early 1713 when the first church was built. When the town met to build three new school buildings in 1745, the meeting minutes recorded that the committee dispose of the old school houses. One of these buildings was the “old gambrel roofed brick school house,” built around 1745 near the Old Burial Ground on North Main Street. In Hall’s words, “within its walls, on side benches, often in a crowded condition, successive generations of noble and worthy citizens were trained.” On Sundays, the schoolhouse was used for Sunday School classes. “There is no doubt” according to Hall, “that the people of West Hartford, in those days, as in our own time, were public spirited, conformed to good customs, obeyed the laws and improved their privileges, and therefore established schools very early.”

Until 1795, the ecclesiastical society took care of the schools. By 1780, there were five schools in town, all on Main Street. Hall believed that one was located in the south end, one near the residence of Paul Thomson (near Park Road) and called the Popple School, because of the numbers of poplar trees, one in the Center,

another called the Chestnut Hill School, and finally one in the north end. There were also schools in West Lane, Mountain Street, Prospect Hill and the Quakers ran one school. At that time, West Hartford had a population of about 1000 people, about 125 families.

From 1796 until 1855, a School Society, established by the General Assembly to separate church and state, managed the schools. The School Society broke the town into nine school districts. Each one had meetings each year to establish the policy and kept records of those meetings. In West Hartford, citizens actively participated in running the schools. Hall documents that the West District held eight meetings in one year to decide where to build a new schoolhouse. Because students were required to pay for their schooling with wood, the purchase of wood stoves was a big event. The South School District established a committee of three to discuss the purchase of one of these stoves.

Schools were open for eleven months a year, in the winter run by male teachers and in the summer by dames or female teachers. Hall records the pay for the men at \$42 for 16 weeks and that for a dame (usually the best female scholar at the school) at \$9 for nine weeks.

In 1845, shareholders started the West Hartford Academy. The 58 stockholders operated a flourishing school through 1865 whose pupils included boarders from out of town.

Hall pushed the school district to consolidate and it did so in 1885. Subsequently, the town began to manage the schools. Hall argued that this consolidation led to a marked improvement in the schools. Hall continued to praise the democratic process and the participation of townspeople in the workings of the schools. In his speech's conclusion he proclaims:

Let us not forget, however, that our highest duty, our noblest endeavor, our grandest opportunity and our true success as a community are to be found in such use and improvement of all these advantages and blessings as will result in the training of our children and youth in character and life so that they may most worthily serve God and their fellow men in their day and generation.

Hall's focus on community, hard work, education, and democracy continue to drive the town today when its population is twenty times larger than in 1902. Though the physical manifestations of these values have changed with 15 public school buildings and a Town Council rather than Town Meeting form of government, their importance to the community continue with an active citizenry imbued with civic virtue and education at their core.

West Hartford 1905

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, May 2014

Between 1885 and 1925, more than 80 percent of West Hartford residents had jobs that were not based on farming. The economic nature of the town changed as farming became more specialized, transportation to Hartford improved with the horse trolley, and developers began buying up land and luring Hartford residents out to the suburbs. Yet, even though West Hartford was changing from a farm town to a suburb by 1905, farmers, as well as florists, and gardeners who made their living off the land continued to play a significant role running the town. While it may seem that farmers would carry traditional political and economic values, in fact, those in West Hartford helped to reshape our community.

The town grew in the 1890s from 1,920 to 3,186 in 1900 and increased another 60% by 1910 to 4,806. While the town retained its rural look with plenty of land still farmed, the types of farms and variety of jobs of the newcomers to town helped change the character of the town.

In 1905, *Geer's City Directory* collected information on West Hartford residents, listing their place of residence, their job and its location, and whether they owned their own home. West Hartford's labor force worked as clerks in Hartford's insurance industry, as machinists at Pratt and Whitney and as carpenters, civil engineers, and Charter Oak Bank cashiers. The Arnolds ran the Trout Brook Ice and Feed Company on Farmington Avenue and many women worked at St. Mary's Home on Steele Road. West Hartford residents did white collar work, worked in manufacturing in both Hartford and West Hartford, did artisanal work as harness

makers, blacksmiths, masons, and hostlers and did service work as butlers, domestics, drivers, and coachmen. This wide variety of occupations reflected a town making the shift from farm to suburb and in a town in which the wealthier residents employed service workers.

The most surprising part of the data is the number of people still involved in working off the land. But, the type of land use varied more as those working the land specialized. Data from the directory reveals that about 12 percent of the workers listed were farmers. In the United States, farmers made up about 38 percent of the workforce in 1900 and 31 percent in 1910. West Hartford was moving away from its rural roots, to a mixed economy.

At the same time, those living off the land included gardeners, vegetable gardeners, landscape gardeners, milk dealers and peddlers, florists, farm hands, and tobacco workers.

The son of German immigrants, Frank Stadtmueller, was a progressive farmer who advocated a role for farming in 20th century Connecticut and West Hartford. He managed Vine Hill Farm owned by Charles Beach from 1885 to 1915 and invented the idea of “baby’s milk” by testing milk in the lab each day and keeping the cows clean and milkers free from disease. Stadtmueller, who lived on the farm, encouraged farming in West Hartford and encouraged farmers to also run efficient businesses. On his dairy farm, he marketed his product, and he believed that the state played a role as well in inspecting milk, certifying cleanliness, and providing price supports. These changes show that, though there were still many farmers in town, some farmers, at least, saw the benefits of government support and modern marketing techniques.

Stadtmueller, in his second role as State Dairy and Food Commissioner, urged farmers to improve distribution of their goods and to cooperate. He urged the government to provide price supports for milk, so that farmers did not give up dairy farming, and sell their lucrative farmland to developers.

The Thomson family, James, Paul, Wallace and Jennette owned all four corners of the intersection of Park and South Main where they established a florist business. Paul Thomson was listed as florist at the corner of Park and Main. James, who died by 1909, was the founder of Hartford’s Brown-Thomson department store, and like some other industrialists, moved to what was becoming the suburbs, to establish a “gentleman’s farm.” Wallace Thomson, his son, established the family greenhouses in 1899, providing vegetables and produce to the farmer’s markets throughout the Hartford area. Wallace’s son Pomeroy, went on to Cornell and came back to the West Hartford greenhouses in the early 1930s to grow carnations that sold wholesale and to supply the florist trade. Adjoining the greenhouses, was Thomson’s florist shop. Wallace Thomson, like Stadtmueller, was also involved in town government and served on West Hartford’s first Town Council from 1921 to 1931.

Frederick Duffy moved to town in 1900 and bought the old John Whitman House on North Main near Asylum Avenue. Listed as a farmer, Duffy studied and developed a herd of Jersey cows which produced a superior quality of milk and cream. He had these dairy products delivered each day to Hartford families. At the same time, Duffy promoted agriculture in the state and served as a judge at stock exhibits across the country. Duffy served on West Hartford’s School Board and as a member of the first Town Council in 1921. In the 1940s, he headed the West Hartford Housing Authority.

A.C. Sternberg and his son farmed at the corner of Sedgwick Road and Mountain Road. He owned the area to the east of the West District School. He had five barns and several houses on his property. From 1895 to 1896 A.C. Sternberg served as the representative to the Connecticut General Assembly from West Hartford.

In 1916, a contentious quarrel between farmers and suburbanites over the value of land led to taxpayers rejecting the assessment list. The town could not collect its taxes and had to borrow a year’s expenses. Sternberg headed a seven-member committee which studied the problem and recommended that the town move from the town meeting form of government to a council manager system with a zoning plan to control and encourage development on farmland being put up for sale.

While the number of farmers in the country, in Connecticut, and in West Hartford declined, they retained political power. Stadtmueller, Thomson, Duffy and Sternberg all served in elective office in the town and seemed to be a progressive force in the politics of the town. Their dedication to working the land did not necessarily mean their politics were traditional as they were elected to a Town Council manager system of

government which was the first in the state of Connecticut.

Recalling the Days of Luna Park

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, May 2008

Imagine yourself in West Hartford on June 23, 1906. Luna Park, an amusement park, is set to open on New Park and Flatbush Avenues.

You've watched the construction and the hiring of more than 100 employees to run the park. You'd heard about the Columbia Exposition in 1893, Coney Island's Luna Park that opened in 1904, and the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904.

This opening is not on that grand a scale, but news articles from the *Hartford Courant* make allusions to these events.

At 2 p.m. on that Saturday afternoon, Governor Henry Roberts officially opened the park, flanked by Hartford's Mayor Henney and West Hartford's town selectmen. The Colt Band kicked off the celebration, playing the "Star Spangled Banner," followed by exploding cannons.

There you were, in your hometown of about 5,000 people. Luna Park was Greater Hartford's "first big metropolitan outdoor place of entertainment" and likely you would have been part of this opening celebration.

The Chatford Construction Company from New Haven invested \$200,000 to build the park, starting in March 1906. At least 150 workmen built the midway, concessions and rides.

The day before the park opened, the men worked until 8 at night when, for the first time, they turned on the 50,000 lights. The *Courant* said "the illumination was spectacular in the extreme and the White City stood out in the darkness like some magic city flashed into being by the wave of a wizard's wand." A crowd had gathered both from the city and surrounding neighborhoods to witness the final touches on the amusement park. The park of pleasure offered a host of entertainment.

After paying a 5 cent entrance fee, you could see the Old Mill, Palace of Fun, Fatal Wedding, Streets of India, Ferris Wheel, Photograph Gallery, Snake Charmers, Temple of Mirth, Circle Swing, Penny Arcade, Miniature Railway, Pony Circus, Mammoth Carnival, Helter Skelter, Fortune Tellers, San Francisco Disaster, Rifle Gallery, Japanese Tea Room, Glass Blowers and a big ballroom, the biggest building on the grounds.

West Hartford residents were thrilled with the number of construction jobs and then with the work at the park. A May 6, 1906 help wanted ad in the *Courant* called for 109 employees to be hired at the park including female cashiers, male ticket takers, guides, ticket sellers, scenic car brakemen, Old Mill employees, property men, circus ring employees, hostlers (stablemen), garage men, engineers, electricians, gardeners, watchmen, police, musicians, lecturers, cooks and "colored" nurses.

Luna Park shared the property with the Charter Oak Park race track that opened in 1873 at the corner of Flatbush and Oakwood avenues. The 120-acre park, bounded by Flatbush Avenue, Quaker Lane, Prospect Avenue, Talcott Road and Oakwood Avenue, had a one-mile horse racing track.

This park put West Hartford on the map of harness racing. Daily trotting races, which climaxed with Race Week over Labor Day, drew thousands to town for the daily summer trotting races and betting ranging from \$100 to \$20,000.

Luna Park drew people to town, too. But the shining new park brought with it problems as well.

At the end of May 1906, the Consolidated Railways Company asked the town to make the trolley to Luna Park a double track. The selectmen authorized the company to construct a double track, but it wasn't ready for the park opening in late June.

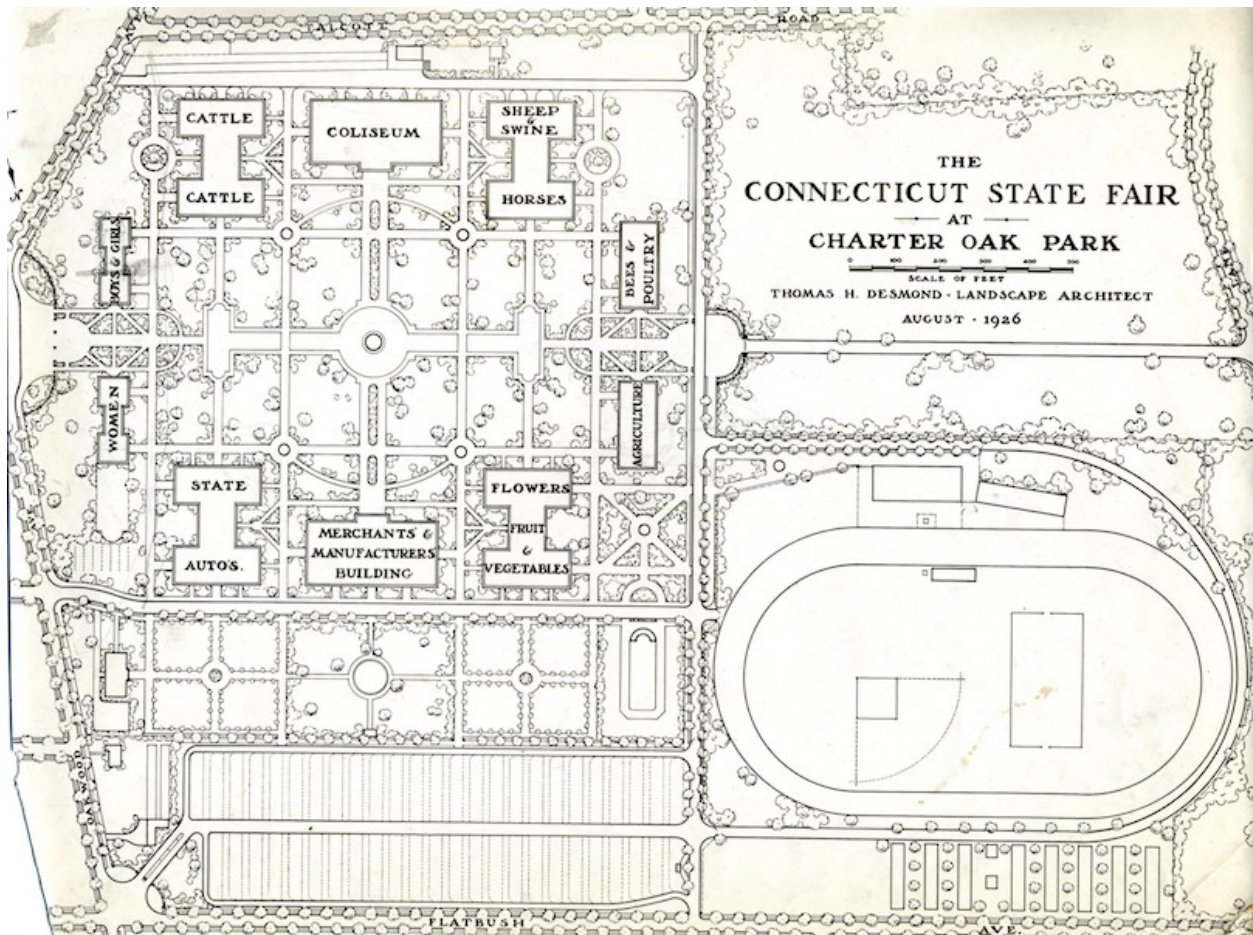


Figure 5.8: This 1926 map shows signs that the Horse Race Track is no longer in use, and Luna Amusement Park has gone out of business. Its main purpose was for the Connecticut State Agricultural Fair. Source: Noah Webster House & West Hartford Historical Society.

When the park opened on June 23, there was trouble. On June 26, police discovered three cases of pickpockets who got \$75 from their victims. As the Courant put it, “the opening of a large place of amusement like Luna Park naturally draws some from the underworld.”

Just three weeks after the park opened on July 15, the Rev. T.M. Hodgdon from the First Church of Christ Congregational, “preached a forceful sermon upon the desecration of the Lord’s Day at Luna Park.” Reverend Hodgdon argued that West Hartford was humiliated in the eyes of neighboring towns for letting Luna Park open on Sunday.

Management of the park, he believed, was happy to pay a \$50 fine per week. Reverend Hodgdon believed the park could be open on Sunday, but they could not charge admissions fees or run the amusements because the law prohibited the doing of “any secular business or labor, except works of necessity or mercy.”

He referred to reports of liquor sales in this dry town and gambling in the neighborhood. According to the newspaper report, while peanut vendors were prosecuted for trespassing at the park, police did not enforce the laws against liquor or gambling.

On July 18, Louis Dubrowski was found guilty of trespassing with his peanut and popcorn wagon, which he set up on New Park Avenue at the front of the park property. The rule was that he could not have his cart in one place for more than five minutes. Witnesses claimed he was there from three to five minutes. A court interpreter, who translated from Polish for “the prisoner,” as he was called in the newspaper article, addressed the court saying “the Constitution of the United States allowed everyone to make an honest living and inquired why the gamblers who frequented the Luna Park region were not arrested instead of a poor man with a family to support.”

The prisoner was set free as long as he agreed not to go back to Luna Park.

Just two days later, a near riot erupted among the immigrant workers trying to finish the trolley tracks. The work to double track the trolley had moved slowly and park officials put pressure on the trolley company to finish their work because it affected the attendance.

The trolley company imported a gang of Italians, Hungarians, and Poles from New Haven to work on the Luna Park end of the track while local immigrant men worked on the Sisson Avenue end. The company paid the New Haven men \$1.75 per hour while paying the local men \$1.50.

When the local men did not get a raise, they threatened the New Haven men with violence and there were rumors that the Hartford men had guns. The New Haven men refused to go back to work for fear of their safety.

The general manager of New Haven’s Consolidated Railway Company came to the scene accompanied by the West Hartford’s Deputy Sheriff Foote and seven policemen from the Hartford police and surrounded the New Haven workers, making it safe for them to go back to work.

If the Hartford men did not go back to work at the old rate, they were told they would lose their jobs. About 30 men returned. The local men not only called for a raise in their pay, but also a decrease in the work day from 10 to 9 hours. The local men did not go to work on July 19. In response, the trolley company brought up another gang of workers from New Haven to complete the job.

Was this park “good” for West Hartford? If you were there, you would have felt the excitement of manufactured fun, big crowds and city lights.

For town officials, it wasn’t as simple as that. Workers, peanut vendors, immigrant laborers and Sunday amusement seekers pressed the bounds of what was acceptable in a 1906 suburban town.

Troup 12

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, July 2010

In June 2010, Adam Brown and Jeremy Schmitt both earned their Eagle Scout Award from Troop 12 at the First Congregational Church of Christ. Their journey, through more than 20 merit badges, countless weekends of camping, weekly meetings, popcorn sales, weeks at Yawgoog Summer Camp in Rhode Island and the demand to “do a good deed daily” added two more young men to the roster of about 1.8 million who have received this award since 1910. Four percent of those who start in scouting finally earn the award.

Jeremy and Adam are part of a strong scouting tradition in West Hartford. Troop 12 was founded in 1910 at the First Church. In 1936, the Universalist Church started Troop 44. Troop 136 is attached to the Westminster Presbyterian Church. Troop 146 began at the Methodist Church in 1941.

William H. Hall in his book *West Hartford* (1930) devoted three pages to “The Boys Brigade and Boy Scout Troop 12.” Minister Thomas Hodgdon of the Congregational Church organized the forerunner of Boy Scout Troop 12, the Boys Brigade, as part of an international organization started in Scotland in 1883. The activities included a mix of military drill, Bible study and camping. By 1905, about 14,000 12 to 18 year old boys across the United States joined the organization.

West Hartford’s group was called Company C. The impetus for the group back in Scotland came from a man who had trouble keeping order in his Sunday School classes and who believed that discipline instilled in the young men would help keep them in the church and out of trouble.

The original purpose of the Boys Brigade was “the advancement of Christ’s Kingdom among Boys and the promotion of habits of Reverence, Discipline, Self-Respect, and all that tends toward a true Christian Manliness.”

Reverend Thomas Hodgdon started the group and 30 boys joined. To be a member, boys had to swear off alcohol, tobacco, and obscene language. They wore military uniforms. Hodgdon met with the boys weekly; the first part of each meeting was religious. Then the boys marched to the old Town Hall on the northwest corner of Main and Farmington, where they performed military drills with dummy rifles.

In May, the boys performed their Annual Exhibition Drill and the townspeople came to watch. The best “driller” won a prize after keen competition. On Memorial Day they escorted the veterans to the cemetery.

Camping was an important part of the Boys Brigade in Scotland and in West Hartford as well. The boys went to camp for two weeks each June. Two years they went to the Aqueduct on the Farmington River. In 1909 they camped at the Connecticut shore for two weeks. Campers conducted mock battles, played sports and stood guard at night.

British Army Maj. Gen. Robert S.S. Baden-Powell, who fought in the war against the Boers in South Africa (1899-1902), saw 7,000 Boys Brigaders drill in Glasgow. He was impressed by their enthusiasm but believed the program could be expanded to include more of what he defined as scouting. When he formed the Boy Scouts in 1910, many Boys Brigades, like West Hartford’s Company C, transformed into Boy Scout troops.

Between 1910 and 1913, Connecticut Boy Scout Troop 12 raised \$600 to buy lumber and supplies to build a cabin on the old Porter estate on the eastern slope of Talcott Mountain, just west of the Canal Road. Samuel Valentine owned the land and he allowed the boys to build on his property. The cabin had a sleeping loft and a stone fireplace and became known as Camp Valentine.

On the 200th anniversary of the First Church in May 1913, officials dedicated the cabin. The cabin was built by the labor of scoutmasters and the Boy Scouts. 150 people gathered including parents and friends of scouts, Campfire Girls and other bicentennial guests. Twenty-two Boy Scouts in uniform lined the veranda of the camp as their leaders related the short history of the troop. Though the Scouts are a religious organization, Troop 12 was established as a non-denominational troop.

Reverend Henry B. Roberts dedicated the cabin with the following words: “We dedicate this house for noble uses of the Boy Scouts, their parents, and friends; for the cultivation of the pleasures of comradeship and friendship, for the increase of our knowledge of the birds, the trees, the rocks and the precious things of the earth; for the promotion of mutual helpfulness and the cultivation of deftness of hand, and readiness of heart, to give help and succor to those who are in need of our kindness and assistance; for the honor of our church, the good name of our town, and the increase of true patriotism”

At the camp, activities included first aid to the injured, swimming, and hiking all to build character, independence and perseverance.

The moving force behind the troop was Rev. Hodgdon who had a son who was a patrol leader. Arthur R. Thompson was appointed scoutmaster in 1911 when the troop formed. Thompson was an explorer and naturalist. In the summer of 1894, he traveled with a group toward the North Pole. He was shipwrecked on the coast of Greenland. In 1898, he took an extended trip to Alaska where he panned for gold. Thompson wrote two books about his adventures and encouraged his troop to have an adventurous spirit.

From 1915 to 1928, Dr. Edwin H. Munger served as scoutmaster. He was an enthusiastic leader who trained and drilled the boys efficiently. He studied nature and took the boys on hikes exploring the birds, flowers, trees, ferns, and rocks. On his death, the man who became scoutmaster eulogized Munger by saying

“The Town of West Hartford has been exceedingly fortunate in having had a real Scoutmaster in the late Dr. E.H. Munger, for under his guidance Scouting in the Town has taken a very high rank. Troop 12 has been, since its organization in 1911, one of the leading troops in the East, with an average of 31 boys each year registered.”

By 1928, 17 years after its founding, Troop 12 had produced 40 Eagle Scouts, an average of more than two per year. Though Camp Valentine is gone, Troop 12 lives on. Their first Eagle Scout ceremony in six years was performed at the church in late June, promoting two scouts to Eagle, one being my son. These boys are part of a long line of young men who persevered to earn the Eagle Scout badge.

William Howard Taft comes to West Hartford

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, July 2011

What would you do if the President came to town? The people in West Hartford were faced with that very question in the summer of 1911. William Howard Taft’s visit to the Connecticut State Fair on September 7 mobilized the West Hartford Grange selectmen led by Frederick E. Duffy, the Hartford police and city council, Governor Simeon Baldwin, local citizens and peace activists looking to arbitrate rather than fight about diplomatic issues.

Every September, starting in the early 20th century, the Connecticut Fair Association held its harvest fair on the grounds of the Charter Oak Race Track on New Park Avenue. The Fair ran concurrently with Race Week, which started on Labor Day when the most important horse races were run. Luna Park opened on the site in 1906 and attracted the amusement park crowd, who also attended the State Fair. The three attractions pulled in tens of thousands of visitors.

Each year, the Connecticut Fair, a private venture established for profit, named one day as Grange Day and encouraged the Grange to find a nationally known speaker.

When September 7 was set for Grange Day in 1911, the Connecticut Fair went ahead and secured President William Howard Taft as the speaker. The Grange said that the fair had broken its agreement and declared the engagement off.

Taft was in his third year as president, after serving as Teddy Roosevelt’s Vice-President for four years. Taft was a Republican who believed in Progressive ideas. He opposed trusts, and in 1911 brought suits against American Tobacco, Standard Oil, and US Steel. Taft also supported a protective tariff, which the conservative wing of the party supported.

For the Grange leadership, Taft’s invitation was anathema. On August 2, West Hartford’s Frederick E. Duffy, a Democrat and executive officer of the State Grange was quoted in the *Hartford Times* saying “the Grange cannot consistently participate in the reception to be tendered for President Taft when he comes to Hartford. The Grange is opposed to the Reciprocity Idea in all its aspects, and as President Taft has been the leader in that movement the Grange does not care to take part in any event in which he is a guest.”

Duffy, who owned Meadowbrook Farm in West Hartford, traveled to Washington earlier in the year to testify in hearings against the Reciprocity Treaty. The 1911 treaty negotiated with Canada's Liberal government provided for free trade in natural products and the reduction of duties on a variety of other products. In August 1911, the US Congress ratified the treaty but when Canada's Liberal Government lost the general election in September 1911, the Canadian government never ratified the treaty. When Taft planned his trip to Connecticut, this treaty was much in the news.

Duffy believed that free trade would hurt U.S. farmers and Taft should know just how strongly the farmers felt. Duffy said that they meant no slur on Taft, but that Duffy was "very much opposed to the President's stand on reciprocity."

Most of all, the Grange, who had been representing farmers for over 35 years, believed reciprocity would help the middleman, those who would trade in the increased volume of goods, much more than it would help the farmer. The Connecticut Grange, which began in 1876, tried to support and protect small farmers in their relationship to the state and federal governments. By 1910, there were 25,00 Grangers in Connecticut.

But just like in unions, the rank and file did not always agree with the leadership. On the reciprocity question, many Grangers were able to separate their beliefs about Reciprocity and the visit of the President to their town. In local politics, however, Democrat Duffy would not relent. His position led L.J. Masury to resign from the West Hartford Board of Education rather than serve on the board with Duffy because of his active stand against President Taft and his visit.

Grangers who went to a Field Day at Lake Compounce on August 25 also expressed their opinion about Taft coming to the Connecticut State Fair. Some in the Grange wanted to boycott the Fair because of Taft's presence but many claimed not to be opposed to the President himself.

Meanwhile, town and city governments rolled into action. On August 8, Hartford's Board of Police Commissioners discussed Taft's visit to the Connecticut Fair. The Hartford Police Department had jurisdiction over Charter Oak Park even though it was in West Hartford. The police regularly stood at the gates and patrolled inside the park. With the President's planned visit, the cost of police protection at the West Hartford site increased even more. Hartford's Board of Commissioners questioned their role in West Hartford. Newspaper articles claimed that other for-profit organizations had to pay for their own police protection, but not the Connecticut Fair Association. This issue would not be resolved until West Hartford had its first paid police eight years later.

Just ten days before Taft's arrival, West Hartford's selectmen resolved that they should develop a committee whose purpose it was to prepare the town to officially welcome Taft. The Selectmen named Judge William Case the chairman of the committee of 192 men. Frederick Duffy was notably missing from the list of the town elite. By time September rolled around, West Hartford closed schools for the Thursday Taft visited to allow the children to visit the Connecticut Fair and see the President.

On September 7, Taft arrived in Hartford's Union Station from Boston on his private railway car. Democratic Governor Simeon Baldwin met him and led the opening ceremonies and the parade as they rode in an automobile from the train station to the newly opened Supreme Court and State Library building where he had lunch among Connecticut's finest.

The car then took he and his entourage including U.S. Attorney General George Wickersham to the Fair where Taft delivered his speech to an estimated 30,000 people who completely filled the Charter Oak Race Track from fence to fence.

Taft made a nod to those at the fair, saying that farmers increasingly needed to use the scientific principles in farming to increase the value of farmland. He noted that in Connecticut with two representatives from each town in the General Assembly that farmers had a particular hold on political power.

Then he moved into the topic of his speech: the "duty of the American nation to promote worldwide peace." On August 3, 1911, the United States, France and Britain signed a series of treaties on international arbitration to settle international disputes. Taft's excitement and interest in this topic came at a time of militarization in Europe, and imperialism in Central and Latin America. In Taft's speech he used arguments that would appear again eight years later when the Senate debated the Versailles Treaty.

Taft spoke of permanent peace to relieve nations of preparation for war. He believed tariffs could be arbitrated and that these negotiations would not take away power from the U.S. Senate. Just three years later a “war to end all wars” broke out in Europe.

For September 7, 1911, West Hartford focused on the visit of the President. As Taft was whisked back to his personal train car, and taken back to Boston and then his summer home in Beverly, Massachusetts, West Hartford’s residents were left to mend their political disagreements, think about a professional police force, enjoy the rest of Race Week, and perhaps, dream of international peace.

Mary Beach’s trip to the Mediterranean

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, August 2001

Just back from a classical tour of Greece, I was fascinated to reach back in the files of the Noah Webster House and find Mary Beach’s 102-page diary of a tour she took in the Mediterranean in early 1912. Mary, born in 1858, was the third of three daughters and two sons of Charles M. Beach, a Hartford merchant in dyes and chemicals and a gentleman farmer in West Hartford.

Mary’s ability to take a three-month trip to Europe in 1912 at age 54, rested to a great degree on the business accomplishments of her father. Charles M. Beach’s success allowed him to move to West Hartford in 1859 when he bought the land on the northeast corner of New Britain Avenue and South Main Street, stretching east to Quaker Lane. He established a farm, run scientifically, that produced the first sterilized cow’s milk suitable for babies, called “babies’ milk.” Charles M.’s success on Vine Hill Farm in business and agriculture led to a very comfortable life for him and his family.

Mary took her first trip to Europe at age 20, in 1878. Though we have no written record from this trip, her 1912 diary notes that she was at Solfaterra, Italy at the site of an active volcano which she found “much more wonderful than when I was here 34 yrs. ago – and even more scary!” Her trip at age 20 was part of a new movement among the upper class to send daughters on the grand tour to complete their education.

We often think that “in the old days” people were not as mobile as we are today with airplanes, busses, and high-speed ferries, but Mary’s trip from January 10 to April 30, 1912 constituted a grand tour of the Mediterranean, the envy of any modern traveler.

Tourism as an industry began to appear in the United States in the late 19th century. As wealth accumulated with industrialization and people were able to separate work from family, the middle and upper classes had distinct periods of vacation time. In 1910, President Taft suggested that a vacation should be two to three months long. People agreed that the pressures of modern life necessitated an annual vacation. Spurred by paintings and photographs of the west and the growth of national parks, and the transcontinental railroad completed in 1869, travel in the United States grew into an industry.

In the two decades before World War I, an estimated 200,000 upper class Americans traveled to Europe each year. Travel agencies could be counted on to make all the necessary arrangements for transatlantic crossings and Continental tours that cost between \$400 and \$600. At this time, an average male factory worker made, at most, \$1,000 per year.

Mary Beach’s trip began in New York City on January 10, 1912 aboard the SS Adriatic. She traveled with a group that included her sisters Edith and Frances. After nine days on the Atlantic, they arrived in the Azores where she was “delighted with the quaint town — so clean & fresh & yet so mediaeval with many town street gates and arches, & elaborate stucco doorways.”

The group then went to Madeira, Gibraltar, Algiers, Nice, Genoa, Naples, Cairo and the Aswan Dam, Jerusalem, Constantinople, Athens, Corinth, Naples, Pompeii, Amalfi, Sorrento, Rome (at Easter), and northern Italy before returning home after a full three months.

Mary’s trip, like those in the 21st century, included sightseeing, shopping, and learning. When she left Egypt, she noted, “None of us cared for Alexandria nor for Port Said, except that at the latter shopping was good

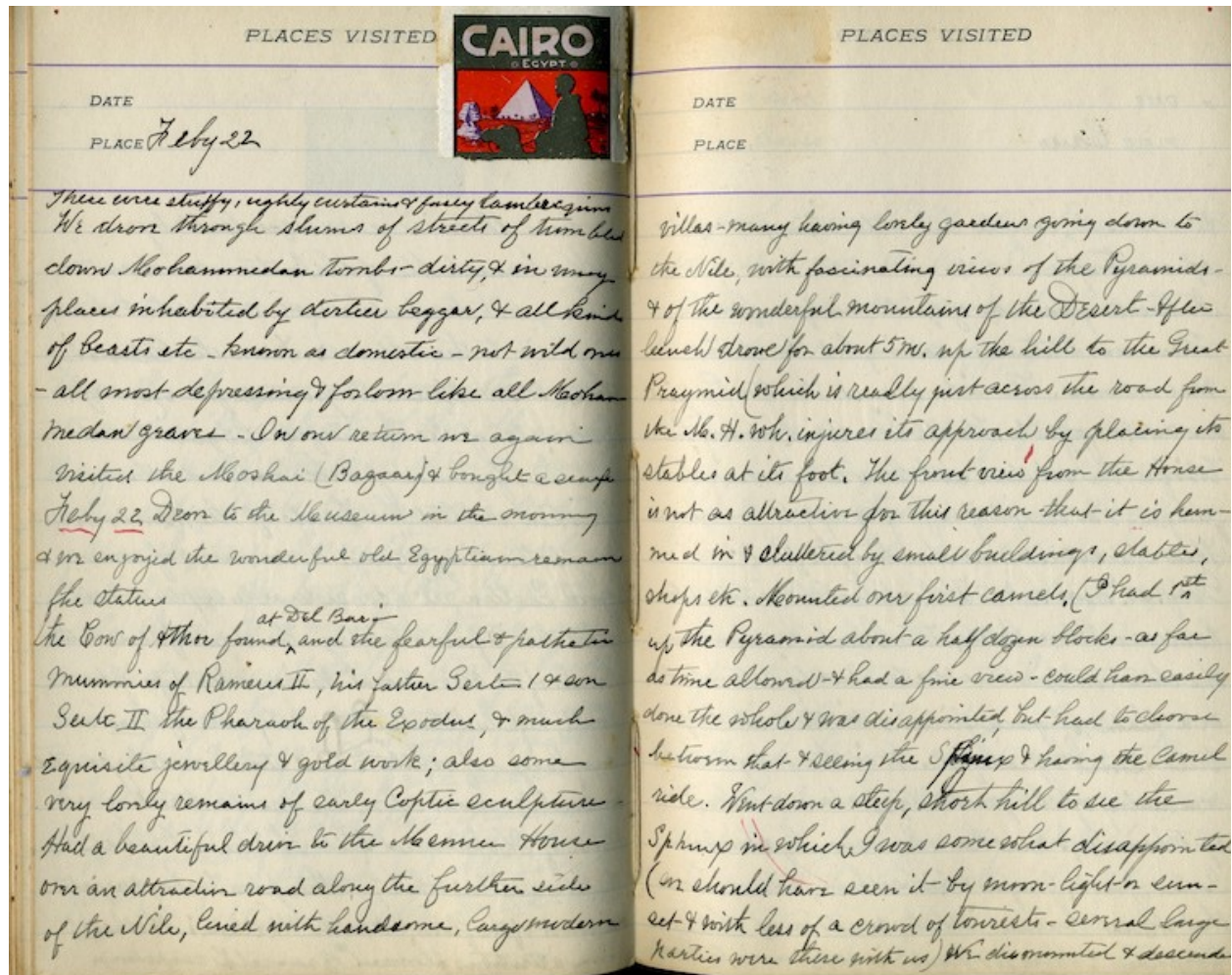


Figure 5.9: Mary Beach's diary entry of February 22, 1912 describes her visit to Cairo – which she found depressing. She tells of visiting the mummies of Rameses II and a drive along the side of the Nile with views of the Pyramids. She describes riding a camel for the first time. Source: Noah Webster House & West Hartford Historical Society.

and reasonable.”

At Constantinople, Mary noted that at the Hippodrome she saw a “broken twisted bronze column, which once supported the famous tripod of the Priestess of Delphi of which Miss Hamilton [Edith Hamilton’s *Mythology*] had told me when I was a child of 8 or 9.” Mary’s classical education was reinforced by her travel.

On trips like Mary’s, the sites were important, but the dynamics of the group also added to the trip. “The next morning March 8 we reached Piraeus and just after lunch E.B. (Edith, her sister) and I took a run up to Athens and photographed the Acropolis from the street on the further side. Had not time to climb. On my return I bought Mr. O. a 3p. box of matches with a picture on it of the Acropolis, etc. and found he had bought me a jar of honey from Hymettus (strained) which is very delicate and yet highly flavored and which we are greatly enjoying. It is not overrated at all. Thought continually of F.B. White and his love of the place.” Traveling provided a milieu in which to build relationships, which she might not have back home.

On returning to Athens after visiting Constantinople, the tour took them to the Acropolis as well as to the countryside. Mary was interested in both antiquities and the present day situation in Greece. Upon arriving, she wrote “Drove this morning & saw modern Athens with its handsome public building copying the ancient style; one of the finest cities we have seen, Byron’s monument, the beautiful modern stadium (for the 1896 Olympics).” She noted the ongoing archaeological work: “excavations are begun on the Roman market place [next] to the Forum which are to extend to the base of the Acropolis and to be turned into a public park. The Archaeological Soc. have both and expect to pull down all the modern houses (all of a humble sort) in this portion of the city to carry out this place.”

She also noted the quaintness of what she considered traditional life. “On the edge of the sea, we saw a most picturesque sight of a peasant and his wife and daughters with a large herd of goats, sheep, 2 donkeys and sheep herder dogs. The man with his short petticoats, the woman and girls with crooks and yellow handkerchiefs, trying to make a goat give its newborn twin kids their dinner. We tumbled out of the carriage and tried to get photos. The family were very fine & noble looking, with attractive manners, at first even refusing the money we offered after posing for us. We were delighted with them.”

Mary Beach’s tour must have made West Hartford look new and small when she returned. The town had about 5,000 people and was becoming more of a suburb, but its oldest buildings were but 250 years old. She did not feel that she would keep up with any of the “fellow travelers” in her group when she got home, but her outlook on the world must have been altered by these three months.

In the past 50 years, travel has been democratized by being more accessible to more of the population, but trips like that of Mary Beach in 1878 and 1912 set a standard for vacations and tourism.

Women Win the Right to Vote

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, January 2010

On November 12, 1920, just after the first national election in which all United States women had the right to vote, Katherine Ludington, President of the Connecticut Woman Suffrage Association spoke at a meeting commemorating 50 years of activism. With the national suffrage amendment just three months old, she proclaimed “not paper imitations of citizens but women of purpose and practical information will be the result of the citizenship campaign the association is to conduct.” She proclaimed that the CWSA would build a state organization that would be a “non-partisan civic organization—a league of women voters.”

West Hartford women in the late 1910s and 1920s got involved in the Connecticut Woman Suffrage Association and the newly formed League. West Hartford was a rapidly developing suburban town of about 9,000 people, the population almost doubling in the previous World War I decade. Many of the families who moved from Hartford to West Hartford during this time period held white-collar jobs at Hartford’s growing insurance companies.

West Hartford’s Mary S. Deming held leadership roles in the suffrage movement and the League of Women Voters and ran for election to West Hartford’s new Town Council in 1922. Like most women involved in

women's rights, she took her role as citizen seriously, and got involved in many different issues between 1918 and 1922.

Mary E. Smith married William Deming sometime between 1916 and 1918. William became a secretary of Connecticut Mutual Life Insurance Company in 1906 at age 49. He had been employed since 1875 when he first got a job, straight from high school, as a clerk. He belonged to the Hartford Golf Club, the Hartford Club, the Twentieth Century Club, the Republican Club, and the Hartford Yacht Club. His first wife died in 1909 of typhoid fever at age 52 at their summer home in Sachem's Head, Guilford. He owned a home at 47 Highland Street in West Hartford.

Mary Deming's first mention in the *Hartford Courant* is on July 30, 1918, 14 months after the United States entered World War I. She was in charge of enrolling the first group of women as nurses to enlist at Liberty College in Hartford's City Hall Square. The *Hartford Courant* noted that some women were married, most were employed, and the women represented many ethnic and socio-economic groups. Deming was in charge of the booth that recruited the nurses.

When the United States entered World War I, suffragists around the country wondered if they should jump into the war effort if they themselves were denied the rights of citizenship. In Connecticut, the great majority of women involved in the suffrage movement believed that their aid in the war effort would help change President Woodrow Wilson's mind about woman suffrage and speed along the movement. Deming knew that citizenship included more than the vote and she jumped into the war effort at the very start.

In April 1919, Mary Deming appeared in a *Hartford Courant* photograph with eleven other women as one of the "Suffrage Workers for Liberty Loan." Even after the war ended in November 1918, the federal government needed to borrow money from its citizens to pay for the war through the sale of liberty bonds.

In January 1919, the Social and Personal section of the *Courant* showed Mrs. Deming resuming her Monday, Wednesday Friday Red Cross classes in First Aid. Her interest in health was useful during wartime.

Mary S. Deming, also written about as Mrs. William H. Deming, was involved in the leadership of the suffrage movement. She led fundraising in Hartford County and raised \$100,000 in May 1919. The point of the campaign was to raise money for citizenship work and public services to be offered by the Connecticut Woman Suffrage Association. Many men and women not actively involved in the suffrage movement jumped in to help out. Deming helped to formulate the campaign that sought subscriptions from individuals from every community in the state during the second week of June 1919. Team captains reported daily on their progress. She helped organize each county for the work. This type of grassroots campaigning continues to mark the work of the League of Women Voters.

Right after this campaign, Mr. Deming died at the end of June 1919. He was 61 years old. Mary, now a widow, continued her political work.

When women won the right to vote in August 1920, Mary continued her political work. She moved, as most women did, to affiliate with the League of Women Voters. She became chair of the Legislative Committee, and spent much time at the state capitol, following bills through hearings. Authors Nicholas Kristoff and Shirley WuDunn in their new book, *Half the Sky* (2009), argue that the woman's right to vote, led to a elected officials paying attention to their new female constituents. They particularly point to the passage of the Shepard-Towner Act (1922) for maternal and infant care as part of their evidence.

Deming was part of these new voters. On March 18, 1922, she wrote a letter to the *Hartford Courant* in support of the Shepard-Towner Bill, which would provide federal moneys for maternal and infant health. The *Courant*, a Republican newspaper, opposed the Act, worried about federal intrusion into what they considered to be a local issue. Deming countered by using statistics that 200,000 babies died in 1919 in the United States and 20,000 mothers died in childbirth. She called this a "national disgrace." The United States ranked 7th among 20 developed nations in the death rate of children under one and 17th on the list of maternal mortality.

Deming countered the *Courant* editors' fear of federal aid saying that it was a 50:50 proposition with the federal government and state governments splitting the cost. She argued that the *Courant* supported the Good Roads Act under which Connecticut accepted over two million dollars for good roads, and she believed

that the state should be willing to accept money for maternal and infant health. Connecticut stood to gain \$45,000 for maternal and infant health over the period of two years. She assured readers that a state agency would administer the act.

Later in 1922, Deming and one other woman were candidates running for Town Council. According to the *Courant*, “she has been interested in politics for some time and attended sessions of the Legislature as chairman of the legislative committee of the League of Women Voters.” Though neither woman won, they exercised their rights as a citizen in getting in the race. Like the first women who were finally elected in West Hartford in the 1960s, her League experience pushed her to take part in the public world.

The League of Women Voters of Greater Hartford has been working feverishly over the past six months to put together a display on the 90-year history of the Connecticut League since it began November 1920. Go visit the Legislative Office Building in the month of January 2010 and you will learn how the League defined active citizenship. The Greater Hartford Chapter has been active over the past 90 years. They work to be sure that women do not just exercise their right of citizenship at the ballot box. They work to insure that voters, both men and women, are informed, run for office, and lobby their representatives. Their issues change with the times, but their bipartisan movement, remains to make people good citizens and make sure government is of, by, and for the people. Look at Mary Deming’s example 90 years ago.

American School for the Deaf

Originally appeared in West Hartford Life, October 2011

After ten years of discussions, the American School for the Deaf is razing its iconic Gallaudet Hall and erecting a new building in its place. Since 2009, the main building at the American School for the Deaf, with its 175,000 square feet of space, was limited by health and safety officials because it had deteriorated to a point where it was unsafe for students. Executive Director Ed Pelletier wants to build a new 60,000 square foot facility for \$20 million that will better serve the needs of the school. Pelletier argued that rehabbing Gallaudet Hall will cost \$45 million.

In 1914, officials from the American School for the Deaf began to plan the new building which became Gallaudet Hall. The buildings on Asylum Avenue in Hartford were old and not fireproof and the directors of the school worried about getting students out in case of a fire. They were concerned about the mobility of the “defective children” who could not hear.

When they looked for a new site, they wanted it to be big enough to teach the boys how to farm, which according to a *Hartford Courant* article in November 1920, was a “vocation which as deaf mutes, they were most fitted to follow.”

On August 4, 1917, officials from the American School for the Deaf recorded the transfer of 92 acres of land on North Main Street just north of Fern Street for \$30,000. On May 10, 1918, the *Hartford Courant* reported that the school would not move from its 690 Asylum Avenue (where Asylum and Farmington split) location until after the Great War ended.

When the land was bought in 1917, the directors estimated it would cost \$350,000 to build the new building, based on labor and building conditions. They planned to build it for 200 students.

On March 12, 1919, representatives of ASD in Hartford appeared before the Appropriations Committee to get their support for \$300,000 to build the Hall. The American School for the Deaf was incorporated in 1816 after a petition signed by 63 citizens made its way to the legislature. In 1816, the state gave the school \$5,000. The school opened in 1817 with seven students and became the first permanent school for deaf in the United States. In 1819, Congress gave ASD 22,000 acres of land, which they sold to build the school on Asylum Avenue. The original building was completed in 1821. At its original site, the school was “in the country.” But by 1919, it was surrounded by buildings. The school planned to sell its building and land in Hartford, to build Gallaudet Hall at an estimated cost of \$500,000. According to Trinity Professor Henry A. Perkins, who was President of ASD, “the present ones [buildings] are antiquated, the new buildings will be

fireproof. Other states will probably withdraw their pupils as they build schools of their own,” if the state would not appropriate the money.

On May 13, 1919, Governor Marcus Holcomb signed a bill to provide \$250,000 to build the school and to equip it. Two days later, the Hartford Fire Insurance Company bought the Asylum Avenue building from ASD directors for \$250,000. Hartford Fire planned to raze the building within four months.

When the state appropriated the \$250,000 for building the new school, they had to approve the plans that included a fireproof brick building, with a “maximum of light and convenience.” According to Professor Perkins from Trinity who was chair of the ASD Board, the “new building will be of attractive appearance, although it will not be ornamental to any great extent.” The architectural firm Isaac A. Allen, Inc. of Hartford designed a colonial style building. It set a trend for the buildings later built in the center of town including Hall High School, which is the present town hall building built in 1924, the Town Hall and Noah Webster Library built in the mid 1930s and the First Congregational Church built in the 1940s.

The cornerstone was laid on July 22, 1920. As they built the building, right at the end of World War I, they had much difficulty getting materials. Tile ordered in June 1919 arrived 10 months later. In March 1921, the trustees asked the legislature for an additional \$100,000 because of cost overruns.

The building committee wanted the new building to be “substantial, durable, and reasonably attractive.” The architects planned for an imposing three-storied administration building with 286 feet frontage, and 40-foot depth. The two wings of three stories held classroom buildings and the south wing had a covered passageway to connect it to a separate building for the primary grades. Attached to the north wing were the heating plant, boilers, workshops, and laundry. The structure included two grassy courtyards between the two wings of the main building, which separated the dining room. The kitchen was built as a separate building. The administrative building had a reception room, executive offices, library, 11 classrooms, a club room (one for girls and one for boys), locker rooms, and toilet facilities.

The second floor included 14 classrooms, a study hall for girls and one for boys, a room for a supervisor and a matron, and the girls’ dorms in the south and the boys’ dorms in the north wing. The assembly hall over the dining hall was two stories, had a stage, was set up to show movies, and could seat 250 people. Above the kitchen were “women servants” quarters.

On the third floor was an infirmary, and living quarters for nurses and attendants. It included an art room, three sewing rooms, a room for a cooking class, and six more dorm rooms for teachers or students.

In March 22, 1922, Governor Templeton dedicated the buildings which served the school well for almost 90 years.

In 2011, architect Tai Soo Kim will design the new building which will be located to the east of Gallaudet Hall. When it is completed, Gallaudet Hall will be taken down and architects and landscapers will design a quad in between the new building and the gym. The cupola from Gallaudet Hall will sit in the middle of this quad.

For members of the ASD community, the decision to raze Gallaudet Hall has been long and agonizing. But the realities of the 21st century technology and the changes in ASD students have led them to this decision.

When Gallaudet Hall was built in 1921, most of the students who attended the school became deaf after they learned language. In the 21st century, almost all ASD students are born deaf with multiple obstacles to learning added onto their deafness. This new building will be able to serve these students more effectively.

Chapter 6

World War I Era

Chapter 7

Development and Reform

Chapter 8

World War II Era

Chapter 9

Post-World War II Era

Chapter 10

Inner Ring Suburb

Chapter 11

The Fight for Justice

Chapter 12

Afterword

Speech delivered at Ceremony for Dedication of Tracey's Tree, October 9, 2017

This speech tells much about my work as Town Historian and the power of history in our lives. Delivered at Burgoyne Park in Elmwood on the occasion of planting an elm tree, now known as Tracey's Tree. See local news: <http://we-ha.com/traceys-tree-dedicated-honor-west-hartford-historian-retired-teacher-dr-tracey-wilson/>

Good Afternoon!

Thank you so much for this ceremony. I am humbled and honored to have this elm tree planted in my name. Who gets to have something like this? . . .and especially when I can appreciate it. In these days of consciously thinking about who should be commemorated and what statues can stand, I feel even more honored that there was consensus that I'm one for the ages.

First I want to thank Rick Liftig who was the mastermind of this whole thing – and then Jenn DiCola Matos and Pam and Charlie Hilborn who helped carry out the plan. Thanks too, to the Governor's Foot Guard - which was formed in 1771 and joined the march to the Battle of Saratoga in 1777, for adding to this celebration. And all of you who came - family Beth and Adam and Peter (and Brittany Caroline and Billie who couldn't be here) and my brother Dave, friends, teacher colleagues, and particularly my retiree partner Liz Devine, former students, the Solidarity Sisters, Katherine who helped me pick the apples yesterday, elected officials and those of you running for elected office and members of the Universalist Church all members of this community for whom I am so grateful to be a part.

Many of you gave money in my name to benefit two of my favorite non-profits – the Noah Webster House and Knox, Inc. - history and gardens are two of my favorite things! Thank you.

To me, the planting of this elm tree represents

- a symbol in history,
- a community event, and
- a tool for educating us about liberty in a democracy.

You see, trees have special significance

- in our environment and also
- as symbols – Marcus Garvey, the great black nationalist, proclaimed 100 years ago,

A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin, and culture, is like a tree without roots.

He knew the power that history can have in people's lives - that knowing our history cannot only keep us rooted, but history can also give us a firm footing to branch out - to give shade, to reach the sky. And as we are seeing in Puerto Rico, even as soon as a week after the hurricane, those trees whose roots held, already have leaves sprouting.

Our celebration today is about history and it coincides with the day 240 years ago in Saratoga, when American General Benedict Arnold's troops repulsed British General Johnny Burgoyne's troops in the Second Battle at Saratoga. This battle turned out to be a turning point in the Revolutionary War. Ten days later, General Burgoyne surrendered 5,000 British and Hessian troops to American General Horatio Gates.

This battle reverberated in France, when the French told American envoy Benjamin Franklin that they would become an ally to the Americans in their fight for independence against the British.

When word got back to the West Division of Hartford, Ebenezer Faxon whose homestead was on this corner, planted a small grove of elms right here, on the corner of Quaker Lane - then known as East Street and New Britain Avenue, then known as South Street. They grew and became a town landmark known as the Burgoyne Elms – properly known as the Victory over Burgoyne Elms.

The idea of a regular everyday tree being a symbol is powerful. I dare say that most of us like trees – they give shade and sometimes fruit, they produce beauty when their leaves change, and they help turn carbon dioxide into oxygen. Yet these elm trees became much more.

The history of the elm as a liberty tree began in 1765 as a protest to the British-imposed Stamp Act. In 1765, when the British Parliament passed the Stamp Act, Boston Patriots hung a British tax collector in effigy from an elm tree. This Stamp Act put taxes on newspapers, printed materials and college diplomas - so the protest of hanging the tax collector in effigy symbolized a desire of these Patriots for access to information, access to an education, rule by law, and individual liberty. Most historians argue that the protest was not so much about the tax, but it was more about having representation in a government that raised that tax. And I agree.

So, this Liberty Tree had branches which could be used for political purposes or some might say for social change. This idea of a tree representing liberty, representing a fight against tyranny and oppression, led Faxon to plant them here on this plot of land, in what for over 200 years has been known as – Victory over Burgoyne Park.

That protest demonstrated support for liberty - that we define in two ways:

1. liberty from government tyranny and coercion
2. liberty to participate in government

I want you to try, like the Governor's Foot Guard must every time they put on their uniforms, to think back 240 years and wonder

- What did liberty mean to the people who lived here 240 years ago?
- Was it so different from what we yearn for today?
- Would we understand each other's ideal?

COMMUNITY

These elm trees represent these historical questions and they represent the kind of community in which we live.

Faxon planted elm trees and we plant elm trees as a symbol of liberty and also a way to gather our community, to remind us that we are not just 63,000 individuals, living out our daily lives in isolation, but that our lives are made better by living in community - and by celebrating and enjoying the community in which we live.

In a lot of ways a community - like Elmwood, like West Hartford - is a covenant. It is an agreement to live together – and in a covenantal relationship we ask, not what we get, but what we can give. Here many of you have given time to set up this ceremony, given money to these two great organizations, Knox and Noah Webster. I have worked to give back to the community through the writing of its history, through many years of Empty Bowls banquets, my work with the Noah Webster House, and through my leadership in the Universalist Church on Fern Street.

The second definition of liberty - is the liberty to participate in government. I urge you to get involved in public service – this could mean, like my wife Beth, that you run and serve in elective office. Though politicians are criticized continuously, they are who translate and safeguard and put these ideas of liberty

into action. They represent us as we relay our ideas to them for what we want government to do. Beth would tell you that as a Senator from West Hartford, she gets 2 to 3 times as many calls from constituents than other Senators. Our community's hyper-engagement helps define our aspirations through peaceful civic engagement. That is one of the reasons we love this community so much - because its citizenry is enfranchised and empowered to make government work, something for which the Patriots fought.

Being civically involved also means getting involved in organizations like the Noah Webster House and Knox Inc., the Elmwood Business Association, and the Black Lives Matter Movement. It could also mean being on the Library Board, coaching a youth sports league, advocating, like Mary Ellen Thibodeau does for safer streets for bicyclists and pedestrians, or organizing a block party in your neighborhood, or helping to organize hurricane relief for Puerto Rico.

And in Elmwood and West Hartford, we celebrate this engagement. The names of our schools honor local heroes who were involved in our community. This park is now known as Blanchfield Park as a tribute to Bill Blanchfield who worked in this community and came here everyday to raise the flag. Behind us is the former Talcott Jr. High, named after James A. Talcott, a businessman who donated money and books to start our town library in 1897. Conard High School was named after Frederick U. Conard, President of Niles-Bement-Pond in Elmwood and the Chair of our Board of Education.

So, I challenge you,

- How do you participate in your community? Not just in the past, but also today.
- What is your covenant with this town, your town?
- How do you help people make connections and build local institutions and get involved in civic life like this tree planting ceremony is doing today?

EDUCATION

And finally, this elm tree, I hope can be a symbol for the importance of education in our community that helps students understand what liberty is.

I'd like all the teachers who are here to raise their hands and stand. I believe it is the teachers who keep our country safe, who protect our democracy, and are our biggest defenders of liberty. All teachers are models for democracy, civic discourse and critical thinking by the way they model those values in their classrooms, regardless of subject matter. And, when our Social Studies teachers teach our history and the principles of American government, students learn what freedom is. Please give them a round of applause.

I feel so lucky to have had the chance to be your colleague and to serve this community as a teacher, starting right here at Talcott Jr. High in 1977 and then at Conard until 2015.

As you know, I love **history**. I studied women's history, African American History and Labor History in school. What all those fields have in common is that they are not the people who "won" and often their voices were not heard in the standard narrative of US History. My job, I thought, was to make their stories come alive – to give a voice to the voiceless and to try to complicate a narrative that mostly focused on men and political history.

As teachers, we tell local and national stories that help us get at the historian's enterprise:

- What causes change?
- How does an event compare to what happened in another time and place?
- What is the context of the event? and
- What changes and what remains the same?

West Hartford has stories: of the Beach sisters, Bristow, Luna Park, and World War II housing, and an individual teacher's vision all help define a community

- where the Beach sisters could be leaders and drive their own cars as early as 1905,
- where an enslaved man who bought his freedom, right before these elms were planted could get a school, Bristow, named after him in 2004,
- where people came by trolley to Luna Park for manufactured fun in a city of lights,

- where Frederick Duffy, the head of the housing authority successfully banned African Americans from living in federal housing built right near here during World War II, ironically, our 20th century fight for democracy;
- where in the 1970s and 80s, a school teacher, Eve Soumerai, who survived the Holocaust, even before there was Unified Theater, integrated students with disabilities into her musical theater productions.

Each of these stories helps us understand the texture of our town today - and provides multiple narratives that continue in this complex inner ring suburb that we call home.

These stories themselves become symbols, like this tree, of values that matter to our community. They are a way to break into student's certainty of a single narrative, and to raise questions about who had power, and finally I hope they help give agency and voice to those who study the past.

I like to think that I have lived up to the aspirations of Ebenezer Faxon, 240 years ago when he showed with his action of planting elm trees, that they would be a symbol to safeguard liberty. I believe safeguarding liberty happens in the political realm, and in our schools. I take pride in former students who chose to run for elected office including State Rep Joe Verrengia, Town Councillors Dallas Dodge and Chris Williams - and Ryan Langan who is running for office. And, when I find out one of my former students has become a teacher my heart jumps. I think of Katy Worth McCarthy, Kevin Liftig, Diana Coyne, Melissa Behrens, Anne McKernan, Leslie Hadra, Steve O'Meara, Emily Goetz, Kelly McCormick Brouse, Anna Bennett, Michael Bennett, Ebony Jones, Morgan Reed, big Carl Johnson, and many more. This job of teaching students how to live an examined life is passed from one generation to the next. Like the idea of liberty embodied in these elm trees, our teaching reverberates beyond our classroom.

So thanks once again for this great honor. I am so happy to have moved to this community 40 years ago and today to feel rooted in this place - You have allowed me to branch out, to plant seeds, and to provide shade for students and people who needed it. And in this past year and a half as I have had to learn to live with cancer, I have been so grateful to my family, friends, and this community for your support. Without you, I don't think I'd be here today, basking in this day, on this busy corner, just aching to get to the apples and doughnut holes!

Thank you!