

DETAIL OF WINDOWS, BRICKWORK, AND CORNICE OF THE PHOENIX BUILDING, 1811, STATE STREET, NEWBURYPORT

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## Newburyport and its Business District

By JOSEPHINE P. DRIVER

URBAN Renewal is threatening Newburyport and a large section of the incomparable business section of the town is condemned to be torn down. What an unfortunate loss this would be, not only to the town itself, but to all of New England, can be seen in the photographs which appear in the following pages.

These pictures are from the negatives of Mr. George E. Noyes, a Newburyport photographer, whose collection has recently been acquired by the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities. Added to Mr. Noyes's own photographs, taken for the most part in the early years of the present century, are plates from three earlier Newburyport photographers, S. C. Reed, H. P. McIntosh, and R. E. Moseley. How much older these pictures are can only be conjectured—but in some cases they date back to the 1860's.

As is evident, Mr. Noyes was interested in local scenes and his photographs preserve for us fascinating glimpses of scenes, events, and structures of bygone days.

The collection as a whole is a priceless souvenir of everyday life in the Newburyport of the middle and later years of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth.

In Newburyport, the Great Fire of 1811 occurred on a windy May evening and raced through a large section of the town, destroying homes, stores, offices, warehouses, and countinghouses. The new Baptist Church, reported to have been "a most handsome building" went up in flames, but the church of the First Religious Society, almost as new and as handsome, was spared because the wind was blowing in the opposite direction. An irreparable loss was the destruction of the Custom House and its invaluable records. Much of Colonial Newburyport vanished in that one night.

State Street, which suffered most from the fire, has from earliest times been the business street of the town. Originally it was shown on old maps and deeds as "the Way to Watts Cellar," Watts Cellar being a small indentation or cove on the river where fish was salted. Later the "Way"

became Greenleaf's Lane, leading to the shipyards, then Fish Street, and finally, after the Revolution, State Street. Under all its names it has entered the town center, Market Square. In the early days it must have been lined with an extremely heterogeneous collection of buildings and the Great Fire may have cleared out plenty of tottering old derelicts, as well as those of newer and more striking appearance.

As the inhabitants viewed the smouldering ruins the next morning, they may well have been aghast and have wondered whether the town would ever recover from such a calamity. But they were indomitable in their misfortune and it was not long before plans were made for a new town center and the carpenters and bricklayers set briskly to work on it.

Market Square was the focus of the plans, as Merrimac, Water, Liberty, Middle, and State all led into or from it. The buildings erected then and in the next ten years are the imposing and compact group of three-story brick blocks which still stand in the business section today. On one side of the Square is the handsome Market House, now the central fire station of the city; on three other sides are blocks of buildings known as "East Row," "South Row," and "West Row." On the two latter the names can still be read on plaques above the second-story windows. East Row and South Row are slated for demolition in the proposed Urban Renewal project as are several other buildings on the lower side of the Square and on Water Street where it leaves the Square.

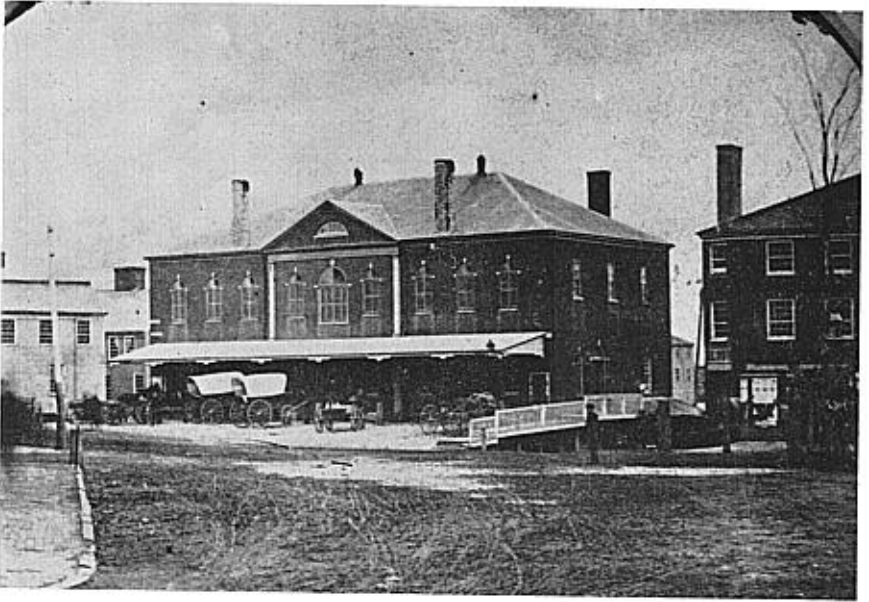
State Street also was built up in excellent style with the same type of dignified three-story brick structures that Market Square contains. These too are still standing, although the ones on the west side, from Threadneedle Alley to the Square are reported to be in poor condition and are to be demolished when the work of Urban Renewal is started. The Phoenix Building, most imposing of the group, is erected on the site of an earlier Phoenix Building, and is said to have been designed by Bulfinch.

The growth of Newburyport has been slow and largely confined to the outskirts of the city, so most of these stores and warehouses look much as they did in the 1800's, as can be seen in the photographs. In fact, the business and commercial appearance of the town has changed less than that of almost any other contemporary New England community, so that historically it is practically unique. Because of this fact the Newburyport business district has a significance altogether unrivaled by any other small city in the six-state area.

Many valuable, historic, beautiful, or merely interesting old buildings have been thoughtlessly sacrificed of late years to what we are told is the "March of Progress." The efforts to save them have been largely futile. But, when they and so many more are irrevocably lost, will the new structures, roads, and parking lots in their places be as important to our generation and to posterity as those wonderful relics of our past history now gone forever?



Tilton House (*above*), one of the few residences left on upper State Street, now sympathetically adapted to apartments. Residential upper State Street merges into the commercial (*below*). Building at left is the present Public Library in which Washington and Lafayette were once entertained. In later years, Newburyport's well-known eccentric, Lord Timothy Dexter, occupied the house for a time. Two rooms retain original paneling and fireplaces.



Early view of the Market House (*above*), preserved through adaptation as a city fire station. Behind it was the Watts Cellar of ancient times. Buying and selling in front of the Newburyport Market House (*below*), probably about 1870. "South Row" is at the left.



Mid-nineteenth-century view of Market Square, looking from Middle Street (*above*). Background buildings with early trade signs, now much changed, are still standing, but are slated for demolition. Foreground building has disappeared. Market Square looking towards Water Street and the granite-built Custom House at far left (*below*).



Store of Nathan D. Dodge occupying part of an eighteenth-century dwelling (*above*). As early as the 1880's commerce had entered the residential section of State Street. Another more modern evidence of commerce superseding the residential sections of Newburyport's State Street (*below*). George Noyes's photographic studio was located in the Greek Revival house at left center.



State Street shops about 1864 (*above*), and the same area in 1935, revealing very little basic change. This section of State Street has happily been excluded from the Newburyport Urban Renewal Plan.





Mid-nineteenth-century photograph of the west side of State Street from Threadneedle Alley to Market Square (*above*). The Phoenix Building is in the middle of the block and replaces an earlier structure of the same name burned in the fire of 1811. These buildings are scheduled to be demolished. More recent view in 1921 of the same block (*below*) showing how few have been the changes in this row of commercial buildings.



The business district of Newburyport has probably seen less change than any other similar group of early commercial buildings in New England. Merrimac Street (*above*) has been widened, with a consequent loss of some buildings shown in the photograph, but the comprehensive view with a background of church spires (*below*), taken before 1900, largely reflects what has survived, structures for which, it would seem, continuing adaptive uses could be found.