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An Historic District Discovered: The Enduring Colonial Image in Newbury, Massachusetts

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Newbury, Massachusetts, though less celebrated than such North Shore towns as Ipswich and Salem, nonetheless represents a stunning example of residual Colonial imagery enduring over four centuries of architectural development. Today, however, most travelers journeying along routes 1A and 113 pass through Newbury unaware that this Colonial town with the ubiquitous village green, meetinghouse and burying ground once spawned the better known coastal community of Newburyport. The nucleus of the venerable town of Newbury is now the object of a preservation effort with the designation this year of the Newbury Historic District to the National Register of Historic Places. It is therefore an appropriate time to look back on the planning of this district nomination and ask two questions: what is the meaning of an historic district and what characteristics make Newbury a candidate?

At the request of the Massachusetts Historical Commission, SPNEA undertook the research and preparation of the Newbury Historic District nomination. The Society initiated the project because no local historical commission existed to do so, and SPNEA had a strong commitment to the nomination since it owns and manages three historic house museums located within the District: Tristram Coffin House, Swett-Ilsley House, and Short House.

The Newbury Historic District is composed of forty properties of diverse functions, all of which face either High Road, the main thoroughfare, or the town common, known as the Upper Green. The District extends south from Marlboro Street near the Newbury town line for a distance of about one-half mile. Because an assessor's map of the area has not yet been completed, a sketch map has been drawn to approximate the boundary lines

of the District and to indicate the siting of buildings in relation to them (Figure 1).

The approach to a "district" nomination differs from that of a building or structure. What gives any district its identity and what makes it a discrete unit singled out for preservation are questions dealt with in a recent publication of the Massachusetts Historical Commission, the *National Register Application Manual*.^{*} Here, a district is broadly determined by a common identity of the elements within it:

A district may be loosely defined as an area in which there is a "sense of place," a feeling of historical or physical continuity. Buildings within a district may exhibit a sense of cohesiveness through similarity in design, materials, scale, workmanship, association, use, etc.

In a district, no one building is "monumentalized," nor is any one isolated from its environmental context. Conversely, undistinguished buildings or modern intrusions are not excluded when their character is not deleterious to that sense of unity. The quality of the district depends on the quality of the whole.

The Newbury Historic District accomplishes all these, for the unity which it achieves is a product of many factors coming together in one area. In terms of its plan, for example, the Newbury District presents a cohesive unit where its green spaces, both the Upper Green and the First Parish Church Burying Ground, act as pastoral linkages. When the town was incorporated in 1635, its first settlement was located at the mouth of the Parker River, around the Lower Green. In the next decade a second settlement was established on higher ground. The Upper

Green, originally known as the "trayneing green," was a triangular plot laid out in 1642 to serve the First Parish of this new settlement. During the Revolutionary War, on September 18 and 19, 1775, the Upper Green was the site of a troop encampment under the command of a general, now persona non grata in this year of the Bicentennial — Benedict Arnold. There, a stone boulder, the Arnold Monument, commemorates the encampment. Today the Upper Green is used continuously for sports, recreation and holiday celebrations.

The other green space, the First Parish Burying Ground, similarly acts as an integral unit. The First Parish was established in 1646; the following year, a meetinghouse was erected at the north-west corner of the Burying Ground. Successive meetinghouses were built on this site in 1661, 1700 and 1806. When a fire destroyed this last church building in 1868, another site was chosen for the erection of a new structure on the west side of High Road, directly across from the old meetinghouse and Burying Ground. Now edged by a stone wall, the First Parish Burying Ground is punctuated with markers designating the graves of such early Newbury settlers as Tristram Coffin and Henry Sewall. Sewall, owner of one of the oldest dwellings in the District (#31 on the sketch map), was the father of Samuel Sewall, Chief Justice of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. A plan and inventory of the Burying Ground were completed in July 1975 and remain on file at the Town Hall.

Like the town plan, the siting of buildings also reflects an evolutionary development. Today, most properties have a common focus, oriented inwardly to High Road and the Upper Green. This was not

^{*}Copies of the *Manual* are available on request from the Massachusetts Historical Commission.



FIG. 2. HIGH ROAD, NEWBURY, FROM THE SOUTHEAST. From left to right: Hale-Knight House, 1880; The First Parish Church, Newbury, 1869; Luther Dame House, 1876; Tristram Coffin House, c. 1654. (Photo by Mardges Bacon.)

always so. Many of those houses whose earliest portions date from the seventeenth century originally faced south. Such is the case of the Tristram Coffin House (Figure 2; #36) which is set back from High Road, for it did not bear a direct relationship to the road until a mid-eighteenth century addition changed its orientation to face east. Other houses meet High Road. The proximity of the Swett-Ilisley House (#40) to High Road accommodated this building to commercial functions. Although the original portion (c. 1670) faced south, subsequent additions and alterations (c. 1740) re-orienting the house to face east were accompanied by successive changes in use: first by a tobacconist, then as a chocolate mill and later as a tavern. It has

served as an historic house museum since 1911, when it became the first property to be acquired by SPNEA.*

Chance events also contribute to the harmonious cohesion of the Newbury District, effecting strong reciprocal relationships among the buildings within it. The original portion of the house at 12 Green Street, for example, is actually the former blacksmith shop known as the "Corner House" (Figure 3; #25). It was moved to its present site across the Upper Green in 1946. Deeds indicate that this house was originally built by Nicholas

*(Ed. note: An illustration of the Swett-Ilisley House appears as Figure 4 in the article "Beacon" by Katharine Rich which appears elsewhere in this issue.)



FIG. 3. "CORNER HOUSE," 12 GREEN STREET, NEWBURY, c. 1768. (Photo by Mardges Bacon.)



FIG. 4. SHORT HOUSE, 36 HIGH ROAD, NEWBURY, c. 1732. (Photo by Mardges Bacon.)

Pettingill, a local blacksmith who first occupied the north half of the Short House in 1767-8 (Figure 4; #15). The shop once stood on that lot at the corner of Rolfe Lane and High Road.

The buildings within the district have maintained the same proportion of domestic, civil, educational and religious buildings as existed in the Colonial period.

While the majority of the structures in the District are houses, there are only one school, one church, one parsonage, one town hall and one restricted commercial center. All are adjusted to the dimensions commensurate with the District's sense of the past, both in terms of the limited number of buildings represented and their continuing domestic scale.

Yet while plan, siting and scale are indeed unifying factors, the identity of the District ultimately rests in the enduring Colonial image. This image conditions virtually every structure from meeting-house to gas station, from a First Period dwelling to relatively recent house construction. The unusually high concentration of early buildings — the original portions of nearly a quarter of them predate 1776 — and their high rate of survival account for the subsequent interpretations of Colonial forms. Spanning four centuries of development, the buildings reflect an indigenous tradition so strongly rooted in seventeenth and eighteenth century architectural precedents that succeeding periods never effectively thwarted that Colonial tradition. Thus, unlike most American towns where a vigorous half-century interlude of Victorian building overtook the established architectural tradition, the Colonial precedent in Newbury was too concentrated, too reinforced in subsequent periods for the Victorian influence to have had the impact it exerted in other towns.

Both the composition and ornament as well as the structure and materials of seventeenth and eighteenth century building conditioned the character of subsequent architecture and effectively diluted the impact of Victorian taste. The First Parish Church, Newbury, built in 1869 following the destruction by fire of the previous meetinghouse, amply illustrates this point (Figure 2; #34). According to church records, the design is the work of a local architect, Col. Fred J. Coffin. Despite a “colonial” white clapboarded exterior today, its style is a curious nineteenth century interpretation of combined Colonial and Romanesque forms. This Victorian hybrid is also present in a strikingly similar church in Newburyport, the North Congregational

Church. Built in 1861, the North Congregational Church (originally Second Congregational Society of Newburyport) is a prototype in red brick with timber clock tower of the Colonial-Romanesque forms of the Newbury church. Both churches, in effect, may be considered directly or indirectly inspired by the designs of a Boston architect, John D. Towle, to whom the hybrid idiom is attributed. The firm of Towle and Foster was responsible for the designs of a number of churches in this eclectic style, most notably the Shawmut Congregational Church, Boston (1852).

The house located directly south of the First Parish Church further illustrates the survival in Newbury of eighteenth century Colonial forms in an era when High Victorian building dominated nearly all the rest of the country. The date of the Hale-Knight House (Figure 2; #33) is known from an inscription carved in the timber frame of the porch, “House Built 1879 finished January 1880 by Chal. R. Hale.” Only its scale, subtle eave projection at the gable end, its more geometric massing and prominent siting indicate the influence of Greek Revival architecture commensurate with its late date, for the image of the New England Georgian house is undeniably present. Further, the restrained character of the exterior indicates that the builder did not exploit the possibilities of the balloon frame.

More apparent than the Colonial basis of the Hale-Knight House is a specificity of classical motifs incorporated in the Woodbridge School, an example of Colonial Revival architecture (Figure 5; #12). Built in 1898 as a two-room structure, this frame building was enlarged to its present size and cruciform plan in 1908. Its projecting entrance enclosed within the wall plane reflects an American interpretation of the ubiquitous Palladian



FIG. 5. WOODBRIDGE SCHOOL, HIGH ROAD, NEWBURY, 1898, ENLARGED 1908. (Photo by Mardges Bacon.)

front. Flanking the entrance, columns are set *in antis*. An oculus punctuates the pediment above, suggesting the influence of Asher Benjamin. Further, the application of white classical ornament on the yellow clapboarded exterior, a Wedgwood motif, indicates a sophisticated interpretation of Colonial precedents.

But the Colonial image does not stop there. The most recent buildings in the District are also affected. The house at 2 Green Street (Figure 6; #29), for example, a two-story structure with gambrel roof and weathered shingles, appears unconsciously to reconstitute the composition and materials of the Dr. Peter Toppan House (Figure 7; #2), an early eighteenth century dwelling with a late seventeenth century core. Even the local gas station whose streamlined design would appear at first to be mean and intrusive reveals, on closer observation, the presence of a classical lintel over its entrance, conveying a remarkable sensitivity to the town's Colonial theme.

Placement of the Newbury Historic District on the National Register makes it eligible to receive the same recognition,

protection and funding that have been granted to other districts and single designations since the National Historic Preservation Act was established in 1966. In general, designation of properties to the National Register provides protection from federally funded projects including highway construction and urban renewal. There are, however, specific rights and voluntary responsibilities for participants which are outlined in the *National Register Application Manual*:

When a property is listed in the National Register, a private property owner in no way gives up his rights of ownership nor is his treatment or use of the property restricted. However, if the property is altered so that it loses the qualities which made it significant, it is removed from the Register.

In a district especially, where each property contributes to the quality of the whole, all owners are encouraged to preserve the present condition of their properties. District designation, as with other categories, further makes all property owners eligible to apply for matching grants for up to 50% of the cost of acquisition or preservation of the property. While these federal funds



FIG. 6. 2 GREEN STREET, NEWBURY, 1924. (Photo by Mardges Bacon.)



FIG. 7. DR. PETER TOPPAN HOUSE, 5 HIGH ROAD, NEWBURY. (Photo by Mardges Bacon.)

are administered by the National Park Service in Washington, they are made available to local communities through their allocation and administration at the

state level. Applications for eligibility to the National Register of Historic Places should be forwarded directly to the state historical commissions.