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

Litchfield's present green is a part of a town-wide effort, begun in the last quarter of the 19th century, to re-invent the image of the community. The townspeople sought to recast the community as it was at the time of its greatest prosperity while also making it a modern country town. This is the third incarnation that the green has had. It began as a wide uncleared/ungraded area at the intersection of the town's two main streets. In the 1830's this area was divided into two of the three current parks (the central park was added in the 1850s), graded and enclosed.[1] This first park was soon to follow the taste of the day, being planted to evoke landscape architect Andrew Jackson Downing's vision of the "picturesque." Finally, as the country's centennial approached the townspeople, as many Americans did at this time, "discovered that we too have a past worthy of study" and began to recreate their town's central space in the form of an imagined past.[2]

The Changing Image of the Green

The image of the New England green changed dramatically during the 19th century. At the opening of this period greens were seen as eyesores; they greeted visitors with mud, trash, and stray animals. Various commentators over the years have described early greens as "wild common [s] over which the November wind swept with a pestilent force,"[3] or containing "unsightly wrecks of vehicles, offensive piles of rubbish,"[4] as "bare, ugly sights"[5] or "Brush,

---

[1]Kilbourne, 257; White, 171.

[2]Robert Swain Peabody, "Georgian Houses of New England," American Architect and Building News 2 (October 20, 1877) 338.

[3]Donald Grant Mitchel, Rural Studies (New York: Charles Scribner and Company, 1867) 1-14.

[4]Josiah D. Holland, "Village improvement Societies," Scribner's Monthly vol. 12 (September 1876) 750-51.

stumps, stones, rubbish, dead trees, and stagnant pools, swarming in summer with disease-carrying insects, typified a great many meetinghouse lots...."[6] Few had anything complimentary to say about most town commons. By the end of the century the New England green had become a symbol of rural beauty, America's colonial past, and her earliest settlers. As the country began its second century, images of elm lined squares with white church steeples filled the imagination of all Americans.

Litchfield went through a similar transition in the 19th century. In 1803 the Litchfield Monitor reported that the green was strewn with

> fragments of old fences, boards, woodpiles, heaps of chips, old sleds bottom upward, carts, casks, weeds, and loose stones lying along in wild confusion... [with] ruts and gutters with stones at every step ..., [and] deep gullies in front of every house....droves of sheep and hogs infest the green...[7]

The geologic underpinnings of Litchfield's green may also have added to the trouble. An impervious layer of rock under the surface of the common led to drainage problems. Inadequate drainage led to thickets of alder and whortleberry bushes. It was in the alder swamp where children and strangers were said, perhaps apocryphally, to have gotten lost.[8] And Oliver Wolcott, Jr. remembered the whortleberry bushes for sheltering truants from school[9]. The common was, at this point in its history, a wasteland in the middle of the town.

---

[5]Albert Fein, "The American City: The Ideal and the Real," in The Rise of an American Architecture, Edgar Kaufmanns, Jr., ed. (New York: Praeger Publishers in association with the Metropolitan Museum of Art) 63

[6]John D. Cushing, "Town Commons of New England," Old-Time New England, vol. 51 (Winter 1961) 86-92.

[7]CLoues,101-102

[8]Local History; Smith, The Housatonic, 86-87.

[9]History of Litch., 175

By the 20th century the green had been transformed; it became a symbol of a "colonial" beauty. Sinclair Lewis is said to have remarked that the "only street in America more beautiful that North Street in Litchfield was South Street in Litchfield."[10] Images of the town and its buildings were used to sell everything from white paint to white pine building lumber.[11] The town's Congregational church and green were chosen by Samuel Chamberlain, champion of "colonial" New England, for the cover of his The New England Image. It epitomized Chamberlain's definition of

> "The perfect New England village.... built around a common or green which faces the town hall, the village schoolhouse, and the old white meeting house, together with a few sedate wooden and brick houses set behind prim white fences with ornamental posts."[12]

The transformation from eyesore to symbol was accompanied by a physical reformation of the green. While the 20th century green was celebrated as the symbol of a colonial New England town, the rubbish-covered lot of the 1803 more closely matched the 18th century town center. The transition from midden to park demonstrates the impact of two national movements on a single Connecticut Village: the Village Improvement Society movement and the Colonial Revival.

The 18th Century Green

Litchfield was founded in 1719 as a frontier farming community. As the initial settlers were seeking large lots, only ten families settled on the green. The rest were spread out

---

[10]William Butler relates the origin of this statement in "Another City Upon a Hill: Litchfield, Connecticut, and the Colonial Revival," in The Colonial Revival in America ed. IAN M.G. QUIMBY? (Winterthur, 19XX)21

[11]William Butler "Another City Upon a Hill: Litchfield, Connecticut, and the Colonial Revival," in The Colonial Revival in America ed. IAN M.G. QUIMBY? (Winterthur, 19XX) 21 and C. Matlack Price, "Historic Houses of Litchfield," The White Pine Series of Architectural Monographs Vol. V, no. 3 (June, 1919) 3-14.

[12]Chamberlain The New England Image, 14

throughout the ten square mile settlement.[13] The green began as little more than a crossroads with four streets intersected at a widening in the road. The community slowly grew in importance, becoming the shiretown for Litchfield County in 1751. As the town grew in importance the green began to fill with buildings. It eventually held the meetinghouse, courthouse, jail, tavern, schoolhouse and several Sabbath-day houses.[14] Still, the central part of the town contained only about thirty families when Ezra Stiles recorded it in 1762, over forty years after the town was settled. Even in the last two decades of the 18th century the green remained utilitarian and unornamented. Contemporary writers described it simply as an open "area," "square," or "space" used to hold market stalls, hitching posts, and animal pens in addition to the garbage heap and woodpiles already mentioned.

The Years of Prosperity

During the Revolution Litchfield began to achieve prominence in the state. It was located on the crucial route between Boston, Hartford, Albany, and New York. Native sons such as Oliver Wolcott, a Brigadier General, signer of the Declaration of Independence and Governor of the State, and Ethan Allen helped bring fame to the town. Visits from Washington also raised Litchfield's profile. In addition, it was a legal and cultural hub for the northwestern corner of the state. Tapping Reeve founded the first private law school in America in Litchfield in 1784 and Sarah Pierce began a girls school as well. As the town prospered, it took on a more urban appearance. Buildings filled the center of the town and trees were removed to

---

[13]Butler, 23

[14]Kilbourne, 74-5; Butler, 27. William Butler provides a concise definition of a Sabbath Day house:

> "Sabba-day," or nooning, houses, common in the eighteenth century, were extinct by the early ninetheenth. These buildings were small one- or two-room impermanent structures that farmers who lived on the outskirts of town used for warmth and noonday meals between religious services on the Sabbath.

"Another City upon a Hill: Litchfield, Connecticut, and the Colonial Revival," The Colonial Revival in America (Winterthur, Delaware: The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, 1985)25-26.

make the town more convenient for commercial uses. While the town's center had only thirty or so houses in the middle of the century, it now contained over 125 buildings.[15] As the town center argued in its petition for incorporation "the houses are as contiguous as they are in many of our cities..."[16] It was a commercial, cultural, and social hub for the Northwestern corner of the state, but it was not built around a picturesque green; this remained an unimproved open space.

Litchfield's place of prominence was closely tied to the presence of Tapping Reeve's law school. When this closed in 1830s the fortunes of the town changed. In addition to losing prominence in legal circles, the town also began to lose its manufacturing businesses. As factories and mills increased in size Litchfield's rivers could no longer supply sufficient waterpower. Finally the railroad bypassed the community because of its location on top of a ridge. Litchfield was not to participate in the economic growth associated with manufacturing in so many other Connecticut communities.[17] While the absence of industry led to a depopulation of the community in the 1830s and 40s, this economic reversal was ultimately to prove to be a blessing for Litchfield. Litchfield's isolation and absence of manufacturing plants allowed the town to become a resort. And the growth of the resort, with its emphasis on natural beauty and the picturesque led to the beginning of the transformation of the green.

Beautification

Litchfield's residents had begun to be concerned with the appearance of their community as early the late 18th century. At that time Oliver Wolcott, Jr. began planting trees, apparently influenced by James Hillhouse's tree planting in New Haven. The Litchfield Monitor

---

[15]Butler, 30.

[16]Kilbourne, 250.

[17]Butler, 34.

added its voice to the tree-planting movement in 1798.[18] Tree planting continued sporadically through the beginning decades of the 19th century. In 1824 Catherine Beecher wrote to her brother Edward:

> Yesterday I heard two of father's very best sermons. The afternoon sermon perfectly electrified me. I wish it could be heard by all young men in the country. Among other things, he exhibited the ways in which they might do good, and the blessedness of it. We saw a small specimen of its effect this afternoon, when, in playful obedience to some exhortations to a laudable public spirit, a party of our young townsmen turned out to transplant forest trees wherever they are needed through our streets.[19]

By the mid-1830s the absence of industry combined with the growing summer population to begin the transformation of the town into a picturesque resort.[20]

The first step in the process on the green had been undertaken with the removal of the buildings between 1820 and 1827.[21] Next was the creation of the three parks that currently occupy the land of the former green or common. Money for the grading, fencing, and the planting of trees was raised in 1835 and the work was completed by 1836.[22] (Trees continue to be planted, including a series of plantings undertaken in the 1990s (?))[23] Many of these improvements can be seen in the illustration of the celebration of the County's centennial in

---

[18]January 3, 1798.

[19]Autobiography, Vol. II, 15. This is a curious reversal from the religious imperative to clear the land that so influenced the 17th century settlers.

[20]Butler, 34.

[21]White, 171, 175

[22]White, 171, 175. Kilbourne indicates that the central park was not created until 1858, when "the inhabitants of this village ... [were given] leave to construct, without expense to the town, a Park in the common ground between East and West Parks, in such suitable place as a committee appointed by this meeting shall designate, in such way as shall not materially interfere with travel." (257)

[23]Check plan in town hall.

1851.[24] The area is level, filled with trees of varying heights, and enclosed by a substantial fence, apparently of iron and stone. As William Butler describes it:

> Beautification efforts continued... and the once-barren colonial village became a carefully landscaped Victorian resort. Residents planted irregular, overgrown greenery after Andrew Jackson Downing's "picturesque" fashion.

The picturesque resort and its central parks had replaced the bustling town of the turn of the century, with its crossroads common.

The Village Improvement Society

The next step in the transformation of the green was the formation in 1875 of the Litchfield Village Improvement Society.[25] This society, like the one founded in 1853 by the citizens of Stockbridge, Massachusetts sought to modernize and beautify Litchfield. Their projects included: the laying of concrete sidewalks and paths, putting up seats in the public parks, the building of wooden bridges, the removal of trash, and the repair of fencing.[26] The Village Improvement Society's work around the town refocused the community on the importance of their community's appearance. The birth of this organization also roughly coincided with the interest in colonial America that was spurred by the country's centennial. These two movements were to combine in the beginning of the 20th century to have a profound impact on the appearance of Litchfield's green and the image of the town in general.

---

[24]Kilbourne, 255.

[25]The group is called by three names: the Association (American Agriculturist, "A Village Improvement Association -- What Has Been Done in Litchfield, Ct.," Volume XXXVII, no. 8 (February, 1878) 59), the Litchfield Village Improvement Company (American Agriculturist, 59) and the Village Improvement Society (Butler, 49). Check with someone at the Historical Society to see which is correct?

[26]American Agriculturist, "A Village Improvement Association -- What Has Been Done in Litchfield, Ct.," Volume XXXVII, no. 8 (February, 1878) 59

The Colonial Revival

The forces which shaped America and Litchfield's interest in the Colonial Revival are many, and they are often difficult to define. America's interest in, and celebration of, her past may have been a response to increased immigration, the negative effects of modernization, or a sense of the moral and physical lessons that could be learned from a study of early America. Whatever the motivation, Litchfield's residents at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century embraced the colonial revival. They replanted street trees to replicate what they felt had been there earlier in the town's history, they remodeled houses and stores so that they appeared more colonial, and they studiously avoided intrusions which they felt would detract from this appearance.[27] Litchfield's Village Improvement Society also chose to remodel the green so that it appeared "as it was 100 years ago."[28] The residents did not want the Green of 1813, only ten years after the Litchfield Observer described rubbish strewn green patrolled by stray animals, recreated -- they wanted a pretty park in the colonial revival style. This is what John Charles Olmsted and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. provided them: "an idealized composite of several non-colonial New England greens."[29] It is this vision of

---

[27]Butler, 45-46 quotes Litchfield Enquirer (July 24, 1902; November 12, 1903; November 19, 1903). A plan to remodel the town's commercial buildings in a colonial style was also sold along economic lines. A pamphlet describing these proposals included the following paragraphs:

> Litchfield is famed for its beautiful houses. As it is now, the town has few peers in New England. If we remodel our business buildings in Colonial design, the entire village will be homogenous in architecture, and its beauty will be unrivalled.
>
> We feel that the proposed changes are going to be of utilitarian, as well as artistic benefit. Such improvements cannot fail to raise Real Estate values. ["Colonial Plans for Litchfield," second un-numbered page. In the Collection of the Litchfield Historical Society.]

[28]Letter from F. Kingsbury Bull to Frederick Law Olmsted [Jr.] March 12th, 1913. Collection of the Litchfield Historical Society.

[29]Butler, 49.

Litchfield, its green with its "overarching elms" and surrounded by "unpretending houses of other years," which has come down to us as a model of a colonial town and its green.[30] While one resident of Litchfield commented, "The village looked more colonial in 1930 than it *ever* did in the colonial era,"[31] the simple charm of the green and its surroundings, regardless of its historical accuracy, has made it an enduring image of Connecticut's beauty.

[30]C. Matlack Price, "Historic Houses of Litchfield," The White Pine Series of Architectural Monographs, Vol. V, no. 3 (June, 1919) 3.

[31]Butler, 23.