

Not a Park or Mere Pleasure Ground: a Case Study of the New Haven Green: by James Sexton, Architectural history consultant

In a “civic oration” given on May 30, 1879 Rev. Dr. Leonard Bacon summed up the reasons behind the establishment of the New Haven Green. He described it as:

designed not as a park or mere pleasure ground, but as a place for public buildings, for military parades and exercises, for the meeting of buyers and sellers, for the concourse of the people, for all such public uses as were reserved of old by the Forum at Rome and the ‘Agora’ (called in our English bibles ‘the market’) at Athens, and in more recent times by the great Square of St. Mark in Venice; or by the ‘market place’ in many a city of those low countries, with which some of our founders had been familiar before their coming to this New World.¹

Bacon’s description highlights the place of the New Haven Green in the history of Connecticut greens: it is both similar and different. While the roles and history of the New Haven Green did not differ significantly from those of contemporary Greens, other than the fact that it was called and used as a marketplace from the beginning, there are two aspects of the central square which set it apart from others in Connecticut.² New Haven’s Green is remarkable in its plan, and in the fact that it is still controlled by a group of private citizens.

The Marketplace

New Haven was originally founded as a theocracy. But it was more than a simple “Bible Commonwealth where the Scriptures [were] the ‘only rule attended to in ordering the

¹Henry T. Blake, Chronicles of New Haven Green, (New Haven: The Tuttle, Morehouse & Taylor Press, 1898) 10, also quoted in Edward E. Atwater, The History of the City of New Haven, Part II, p. 399 (New York: W.W. Munsell & Co., 1887).

²Some autors have related this to the mercantile nature of New Haven’s earliest settlers. (Bernard Christian Steiner, A history of the Plantation of Mununkatuck and of the original town of Guilford, Connecticut, comprising the present town of Guilford and Madison, written largely from the manuscripts of the Hon. Ralph Dunning Smith, ??)

affairs of government.”³ It was also intended to be a successful mercantile city. These two elements, which are often seen to be personified in the Colony’s leaders John Davenport and Theophilus Eaton, can also be seen in the plan of the town itself.⁴ The town’s green (a name that was not to be used until over a hundred years after the founding of the community) was originally called “the market place.”⁵ Sitting in the middle of the market place was the meetinghouse. The two aims of the community were geographically (and symbolically) joined in the town’s center square.

The Central Square

New Haven was laid out in a grid with nine-squares under the supervision of the settlers’ surveyor, John Brockett, in 1641.⁶ The central section of the plan was reserved for the market place with the meetinghouse in its center. This unusually rigid plan, with the Green at its center, is one of New Haven’s identifying characteristics; its origin is a puzzle.

The source of the plan is often attributed to two interwoven ideas. The first was the reintroduction of Roman military planning ideas by the English colonizing areas of Ireland and France. It is argued that the plan of Roman military camps was adapted to the colonial strongholds of the English. This *castrum* or *bastide* plan left a central square in the grid as a seat of power in the town. Military force, in the form of barracks and artillery, would be concentrated in this central place where they could command all of the streets in the town. By also locating town hall and other civic buildings in the square, administrative power would be

³Ellis A. Johnson, “Introduction to the 1966 Edition” of Charles H. Levermore, Ph.D. The Republic of New Haven (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1966), n.p.

⁴Rollin G. Osterweis, Three Centuries of New Haven (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953) P????

⁵Rollin G. Osterwies, The New Haven Green and the American Bicentennial (Archon Books, 1976) 19.

⁶Rollin G. Osterwies, The New Haven Green and the American Bicentennial (Archon Books, 1976) 11

combined with martial might.⁷ New Haven's Green, with its military associations and hardware (such as the three canons shown in the 1748 map of the city) along with the civic buildings, followed these precepts.

A second classical source for the town's plan could be found in the work of Vitruvius. He suggested two main tenets for city planning: that a grid be used for the layout of the streets, and that the thoroughfares be oriented in such a way that the prevailing winds would not blow directly down them. The grid is readily apparent in New Haven's nine-square plan. In order to avoid winds, which were thought to carry diseases, this Roman theorist suggested that towns be oriented so that the blocks lay at an angle to the prevailing breezes. In Vitruvius's monograph winds are assumed to come from one of eight directions, corresponding to the cardinal directions and the points halfway between them (N, E, S, W, NE, SE, SW, NW). As an ideal city in Vitruvius's scheme could not be oriented with its streets aligning to any of the winds, then they must fall between the compass points from which the winds originated. This rule also seems to have been followed at New Haven.⁸

A third influence should also be considered in discussing the plan of New Haven, the religious nature of the early colony. New Haven was founded as a religious community; in its earliest years non-members of the church could not participate in ruling the town.⁹ The church was both philosophically and geographically central to the town. This centrality was both a physical statement of the community's values and a practical measure. A 1635 manuscript that provided information for settlers on how to plan and settle a town includes the following description of a hypothetical community:

⁷Anthony N.B. Garvan, Architecture and Town Planning in Colonial Connecticut (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951) 1-49.

⁸Garvan provides a detailed explanation of Vitruvius's planning conventions and the way in which they were applied in New Haven. 44-49

⁹Osterweis, Green, 22.

First. Suppose the Towne square 6 miles every waye. The Howses orderly placed about the midst, especially the Meetinghouse, the which we will suppose to be the Centor of the Wholl Circomferance.¹⁰

While New Haven's dimensions do not equal those of the tract, the planning conventions are followed, especially that the meetinghouse be at the center of the community. While the symbolic importance of this location is still clear to us today, there is also a practical aspect to this location. As attendance at services on Sunday was required, the central location meant that the journey to the meetinghouse would not be too onerous for any of the town's citizens.

The 1641 plan of the town, with the market place and meetinghouse at its center, controlled the appearance of the Green for most of its history. During the 17th and 18th centuries the land was also used as a military training ground and the location for the public punishment of criminals. (The first reference to the market place, one which predates the Brockett plan by two years, was in conjunction with the display of an executed murderer's head on a pole there.)¹¹ The Green also held the town's watch house (housing the town's night watch, and built by 1645), the prison house, and the first school (built by 1643 and enlarged in the 1660s). All three are thought to have been located near the corner of present-day College and Elm Streets.¹²

The town's first meetinghouse was replaced by a larger building in the same location in 1668. A new addition was made to the market place in 1717 when the town's status as co-capital of the colony was marked by the construction of a state house at the market place's northwest corner.¹³ The first Yale College building in New Haven, just across College Street from the Market Place, joined the state house in 1718. New Haven was beginning to change,

¹⁰Anonymous, "Essay on the Ordering of Towns," in Winthrop Papers, 5 vols. (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1929-1947), 3:181.

¹¹Osterweis, Green, 16.

¹²Osterweis, Green, 18-19, 26-27.

¹³Osterweiss, Green, 29

and these changes could be seen on the market place. Where the central square had previously been associated only with the meetinghouse and marketplace, the land was now shared with buildings representing government and higher education.

By the third quarter of the 18th century the Market Place had become even more crowded. The center of the Green, as the area was called starting in the middle of the century, was now filled with three large structures. The First Society had replaced their second meetinghouse with a brick building in 1755. This was flanked to the west by another large brick building, the State- and Courthouse of 1763. The court and the Hopkins Grammar School were now sharing the 1718 courthouse.¹⁴ To the east of the First Society's brick meetinghouse was the white painted wooden meetinghouse of the Third, of Fairhaven Society. (1775 map) Behind the Brick Meetinghouse the burial ground was enclosed by a wooden fence, with the jail and courthouse at the College Street edge of the Green. Also scattered throughout the Green were several small unidentified buildings. Paths running diagonally across the Green divided the whole square; elm and buttonwood trees, planted in 1759, encircled it.¹⁵

The next major change to the Green occurred at the beginning of the 19th century when the square was bisected by Temple St. The first decade of the 1800s also saw the enclosing of the Green (both upper and lower halves) by a wooden fence which was to remain in place until 1846, when the more familiar iron and stone barrier replaced it. A well was dug at each of the square's four corners in the period from 1784 to 1820; these may have been used to water the cattle that were allowed to graze on the Green until 1821. After the division of the Green in two by Temple Street, the next major event was the erection of the three churches, all facing the new street, in the second decade of the century. By 1815 the ecclesiastical face of the Green had taken on the appearance which makes it so famous today. This was added to by the construction of the Methodist Church on the northwest corner of the Green in 1821. (At a time

¹⁴Osterweiss, Green, 34.

when most other towns were removing religious buildings from their greens, as result of disestablishment, New Haven seems to have responded in a different way. Four, and later three, different churches – and more than one denomination-- on the green indicate that there is no established religion.) Also in the 1820s, Ithiel Town’s Greek Revival Statehouse replaced the 18th century Capital.¹⁶ This decade also saw the addition of the first town clock, made by Eli Terry, installed in Center Church. Finally, this decade saw the last public whipping on the Green, and the sale of the last slave.¹⁷

Beginning in 1839 the appearance of the Green began to change again. In this case, it was through landscaping changes, and not the addition of buildings. 150 Maple and Elm trees were planted in 1839, a paved walk was placed in front of the three churches in 1840, the wooden fence replaced by its iron and stone counterpart in 1846, gas lighting was added in 1855, and a new town clock was added in 1856.¹⁸ In 1848, the Methodist church was moved off the northwest corner of the Green, where it had stood since 1821, to its present location across Elm St. The park-like amenities of the space were being enhanced.

The Green of the mid-19th century is not much different than the green of today. The statehouse was removed in 1889, the wells were closed, and the flagpole was turned into the magnificent War Memorial and Flagstaff. Yale continued to grow along the northwestern side of the green during the 19th and early 20th centuries, while government buildings filled the southeastern side. The two remaining sides were filled with a mix of private and public, residential and commercial buildings. As the 20th century progressed modern buildings began to encroach on the edges of the central square. In the years after World War II, a proposal was made which would have allowed modernism to encroach on the Green itself; a subterranean parking garage was suggested to create more parking for those driving into the

¹⁶Osterweiss,Green, 65 and Osterweiss, Three Centuries, 192.

¹⁷Osterweiss, Three Centuries, 272-3.

¹⁸Osterweiss, Three Centuries, 272.

center of New Haven. And it is here that the second remarkable feature of New Haven's green becomes apparent -- the private citizens who guide its course, The Committee of the Proprietors of Common and Undivided Lands at New Haven.

The Committee of the Proprietors of Common and Undivided Lands at New Haven

The New Haven Green is managed by a self-electing group of private individuals. The 16-acre space in the center of New Haven is not controlled by the city, but by a small committee of its inhabitants whose power descends from the town's earliest settlers. It was these citizens who cast the deciding vote in the debate over building a parking garage under the city's central square.¹⁹

The Proprietors' Committee has its origins in the way in which the settlement of New Haven (and other Connecticut communities, as well) was financed. Shares in the community were sold to original settlers and investors. Those who were shareholders were called proprietors. As not all of the community's land was needed at the outset, only a portion of the whole was distributed with the rest being called the "Common and Undivided Lands."²⁰ As the town grew, more of the land was divided, but only to proprietors and their descendants. The proprietors and their descendants controlled the disposition of the commonage, meeting to discuss issues related to the land they oversaw. As the number of descendants increased, these meetings became less and less practical. In March of 1724 a "Standing Committee" of seven members was appointed to assume some of the powers and responsibilities of the proprietors as a whole, but the whole group still met occasionally to conduct business. As time passed more control was ceded to the committee until 1805 when it became clear that it was impossible to convene all of the proprietors. At this point a Committee of the Proprietors was

¹⁹Osterweiss, Green, 103-106

²⁰Osterweis, Green, 21.

officially established to represent all of the Proprietors. It is this self-electing body which still acts today to safeguard New Haven's Green.

Legal History of the Proprietors

The legal right of the proprietors to the Green has been affirmed on three separate occasions: 1683-88, 1723, and 1810. The first challenge to their rights occurred in the 1680s, when the English government tried to revoke the charter granted to the Colony of Connecticut (and Massachusetts) in order to establish the Royal Dominion of New England. The Connecticut General Assembly responded with a variety of laws intended to protect the rights of the colonists. Included in these defensive statutes were grants of special patents to the descendants of original Proprietors in several Connecticut town which

confirmed the rights to the soil in general and to all subdivisions which had been subsequently made by action of the planter-proprietors. This legislation appeared to give a specialized, peculiar power over "common lands" to the original proprietors and to their progeny, in perpetuity.²¹

The right of the proprietors to the undivided land was again confirmed in 1723 by a law entitled "An Act for the better establishing and confirmation of the titles of land anciently obtained in townships according to the manner of custom heretofore used, and for preventing Contentions concerning the same." The law did exactly what its name suggests. Finally, in 1810 the Connecticut State Legislature adopted a resolution which confirmed the legality of the

...Committee with power to supply vacancies in their number by death or resignation, also with power to alienate the remaining proprietary property by and with the advice of the selectmen of said town...

²¹Osterweis, Green, 31.

The Committee of the Proprietors of Common and Undivided Lands at New Haven was officially established. (Their right to exist and act on behalf of all of the descendants of the Proprietors was again confirmed in 1831.²²) Over the ensuing years the Committee would exercise their right to sell land until all that remained was under their control was the Green.

As the 20th century ends, New Haven's colonial Green is watched over and protected by a 19th century body with 17th and 18th century roots. This continuity provides a strong link to the past for all who understand the complex public space at the heart of New Haven.

The Green Today

When the New Haven Green was originally laid out it provided a diagram of the founding principals of the town's earliest settlers. The mercantile theocracy was arrayed around its central square which contained the dual symbols of the community -- its church and marketplace. As the town grew and changed the appearance of its green mirrored these changes. The present day green is in many ways as good an illustration of the modern city of New Haven as the 17th century marketplace was of the early town. Where a single meeting house was the focus of the nascent theocracy, one now sees the religious pluralism of the present city symbolized by the three churches on the Green. Where religion and commerce mingled in a community where the lines between them were faintly drawn, one now sees the many components of the city of New Haven arrayed on and around the Green -- education, represented by Yale, on one side opposite City Hall and attendant government buildings, with commercial and civic building facing each other from the other two side of the central square. While religion is still central on the Green, it is no longer the commanding presence that it was in

²²Osterweis, Green, 97.

the 17th century marketplace. Instead, today's New Haven Green mirrors the complex modern city which surrounds it.

This text is © 2001, TownGreens.com and the Connecticut Trust For Historic Preservation.

Duplication or distribution of this text without the written permission of the Connecticut Trust

For Historic Preservation is strictly forbidden.