

Norwich Greens: a case study by James Sexton, Architectural history consultant

Norwich, like many towns in Connecticut, has several greens. All four greens will be considered in this work because they are more informative when viewed as an aggregate, rather than singly. Two of the greens, Norwichtown and Bean Hill, were established during the early years of the town. The other two greens, Chelsea Parade and Little Plain Green, were established in the early federal period. The greens are quite similar when compared to their contemporaries, and quite different when compared to those not from their period.

Norwichtown and Bean Hill follow the developmental patterns of many of Connecticut's 17th century greens. They began as part of the common and undivided land of the town, assumed roles in the civic and religious life of their respective communities, and eventually became park-like green spaces that fulfilled the recreational needs of the community.

Chelsea Parade and Little Plain Green had a quite different history. Each of these greens was the result of a philanthropic gift to the community. These greens were always parks, green spaces without a public function other than recreation and respite.

Norwichtown and Bean Hill

The settlement of Norwich began in 1659 with the purchase by 35 Saybrook men (and their families) of a nine-mile square from the Mohegan sachems Uncas, Owaneco, and Attawanahood.¹ The early settlement was divided into two parts, the East Plot and the West Plot. These two areas were divided by one of the town's most distinctive features: Meetinghouse Rock. This outcropping formed the edge of the Norwichtown green, which lay in

¹Perkins, 1-2; Caulkins, 71.

the East Plot. At the northwestern edge of settlement lay Bean Hill. Sitting atop this rise was the second early green, Bean Hill Green.²

Norwichtown Green began as the location of the town's meetinghouse.³ This use, and others, were reflected in the various names applied to the area: "the green", "the meetinghouse green", "the parade", "the training field", "the plain", and the "meetinghouse plain."⁴ While subsequent meetinghouses were not sited in the green this name continued to be applied. The names indicate that the militia also used the site as a parade and training ground. As early as 1666 references are made in the town records to military training on the green.⁵ These continued throughout the 18th century.⁶

For the first 75 years of its existence the shape and size of the green was not fixed. As with the other common and undivided land in the town, the community could decide to divide the green. This happened at least once: in 1684 a "considerable slice" of the green's southeast corner was given to James Fitch's son. It was not until 1729 that the boundaries of the green were legally solidified.

At a meeting of the Proprietors of the Common land within the Township of Norwich held April 29th, 1729. The Proprietors do now Agree, Vote & Grant that the plain in the Town plot called the meetinghouse plain, with all Contents and Elements of it as it now Lieth Shall be and Remain to be and Lye Common for publick life for the whole Town forever hereafter without alteration: Voted and Granted by a Large large majority...⁷

While the shape and size of the Norwichtown green was now fixed for eternity, its uses continued to change.

²Caulkins, 21.

³Caulkins, 63

⁴ *Plain* is a both a response to the riverine nature of the lands, and perhaps a different term for green. It is applied to many of the flat areas in town, such as the sheep common.

⁵Perkins, 395.

⁶See "Norwich City Greens," 16 and Perkins, 396.

⁷1729 resolution from Town Records.

In 1737 the town responded to a petition from Nathan Lathrop to build a shop upon the green by declaring that

there shall no shop, barn, house, or any other building be erected, built, or sett [sic] up in or upon the above sd [sic] plain of any part thereof without special liberty from this Town.⁸

In spite of their resolution against it, the town seems to have allowed Lathrop to build upon the green. In 1757 it was voted to “remove all incumbrances off the land late in possession of Nathaniel Lothrop [sic], on the west side of the meetinghouse plain that the land may be fit for public use.”⁹

While the town may not have wanted private buildings on the green, public structures were deemed appropriate. The earliest jail stood on the southeast corner of the green before being moved to a site behind the town’s schoolhouse. The courthouse was built on the green in 1762; it remained in place until 1798. A liberty pole was erected on the green during the stamp act controversy and lasted for several years, perhaps even through the Revolution.¹⁰ Caulkins describes the role that the green and surrounding buildings had in the life of the 18th century town:

The town green, with its meeting-house, court-house, post office, jail, flag-staff or liberty tree, three tavern, and four or five stores was the center where all the excitements...culminated...On or near the green were also two printing offices, each with a book-shop and bindery annexed and each issuing a weekly newspaper.¹¹

It was clearly the center of the colonial community.

By 1840 both the town and its green had begun to change. Commercial and civic activity had moved from the uptown area, Norwichtown, to Chelsea Landing at the confluence

⁸Perkins, 396

⁹Perkins, 396

¹⁰Caulkins, 368; Perkins, 396

¹¹Caulkins, 511.

of the Yantic, Shetucket, and Thames. The changes were marked first by the moving of the town government's offices and the courts and jail to the landing (all of which had been on or around the green), and then by the official separation of the city of Norwich, i.e. the settlement around the landing, from the rest of the town. Three illustrations of the Norwichtown green, Donald Grant Mitchell's "Norwich Circ. 1830, A Boyish Remembrance," Barber's 1838 woodcut of the northeastern corner of the green, and the ca. 1840 pencil sketch reproduced in Perkins, show what the area looked like at this time. The green had been cleared of buildings earlier in the 19th century, and it was a cleared field with a few trees and perhaps hitching posts on it. (Mitchell's map seems to indicate three buildings on the green – it is unclear if these were mistakes or faulty memories, were removed from the green during the 1830s, or were simply out of the pictures. There is no reference to them other than Mitchell's map.) The green had become little more than a playground for children.¹²

The next image of the green, a photo from 1895 reproduced in Perkins's book, demonstrate that many changes have taken place. The impetus for these changes, as in many Connecticut towns, was a village improvement society. Norwich's society was called the Norwich Rural Association. Work on the green was recounted in a history of the group:

The uptown green soon received attention; it was cleared [possibly cleaned – handwriting is indistinct] up and graded, and provided with receptacles for rubbish¹³

In addition to these changes the group is credited with planting trees along the edges of the green.¹⁴ During the twentieth century the changes to the green have been few: it was used during the middle of the century as a ball field; a cyclone fence was installed on the green in 1957 (its purpose is unclear); a plaque was installed in 1971 by the Connecticut Historical Commission to commemorate the settlement of Norwich.¹⁵

¹² This assertion is made in "Norwich City Greens" referring to "historic accounts from the mid-1800s and early 1900s" but citing only to Perkins, 401.

¹³ "Norwich City Greens," 19.

¹⁴ "Norwich City Greens," 19

¹⁵ "Norwich City Greens," 29.

Bean Hill

Bean Hill's green followed the development of the Norwichtown green, although in a less formal way. It was laid out during the early years of settlement in the center of the houselots at the northwestern end of the original town plot. This area was originally called the West Plot, and later became known as Bean Hill, in part because the area was at the crest of a hill. Caulkins describes the role that the clearing on top of the hill played in this part of Norwich:

...in former times when Bean Hill was noted for its business and gaiety, tables were spread, speeches were made, and sermons preached.

Here neighbors gathered to hear the news, and teamsters loitered in the heat of the day.¹⁶

These activities mirror, in an informal way, those that took place more formally on and around Norwichtown green. The preaching of sermons mirrored the more formal worship in the meetinghouse on Norwichtown green. (A Methodist church was built facing the green in 1833.)¹⁷ The loitering of teamsters was similar to the lodging of travelers that occurred at Peck's tavern on the southern side of the Norwichtown green. And the sharing of news recalled the scene on Norwichtown green after the Battle of Bunker Hill when the townspeople

...rushed out upon the Green and gathered around to hear the courier read the dispatches from the seat of war. That evening the bell was rung, cannons were fired, bonfires blazed, speeches were made and many pledged themselves to join the army.

Bean Hill Green was also apparently used for training, although its size limited it to less elaborate military exercises than Norwichtown.

Chelsea Parade and Little Plain Green

Chelsea Parade and Little Plain Green have their beginnings in the philanthropic gifts of local citizens. While this sort of donation was not unheard of, the two gifts are unusual because

¹⁶Caulkins, 21

¹⁷"Norwich City Greens," 35

of the way in which they were to be used. Previous donations of land had been recorded -- West Hartford (1712), West Haven (1719), Thompson (1728), and Willington (1757 and 1762) had all received gifts of land for the construction of meetinghouses, while Goodman's Green in West Hartford was donated as a parade ground (1747).¹⁸ The situation in Norwich was different. In 1797, Thomas Fanning and Joseph Perkins presented the town with Chelsea Parade. Thirteen years later Deacon Jabez Huntington and Hezekiah Perkins, "following the example of the donors of Chelsea Parade," gave Little Plain "to the city, on condition that it should be used only as a park."¹⁹

Chelsea Parade

The conveyance for Chelsea Parade from Thomas Fanning and Joseph Perkins to the Town of Norwich read, in part

in consideration of the desire we have that said inhabitants may continually and at all times be furnished and accommodated with a free, open, unincumbered piece of land or ground, convenient for a public *Parade* or *Walk*, do give, grant, remise, release and forever quit claim unto Doctor Joshua Lathrop, one of the principal inhabitants of said town, and to all the rest of the inhabitants of said Town of Norwich in their corporate capacity, and to their successors forever, for the use and purpose of a Public Parade or open Walk, to be unencumbered with any kind of building or buildings, public or private, or nuisance whatever, and for no other purpose.²⁰

The intent of Fanning and Perkins could not have been clearer -- they wanted to give the town open space, and they wanted it to remain that way forever. There is however some ambiguity about how they intended the land to be used. The use of the term *parade* brings to mind military displays and training. Gen. William Williams used the land in this way in 1798; Col.

¹⁸Collier notes, "Greens donated by private individuals (for ch. site)," copy located at the CT Trust.

¹⁹Gillman, 37. Caulkins, 536.

²⁰Caulkins, 534.

Elisha Edgerton's cavalry regiment repeated this in 1811.²¹ Caulkins remarks that this use was short lived, and that “of late years it has acquired more of the character of a park.”²² (During the middle of the 19th century the area was called Williams Park) The area has change little since Fanning and Perkins set it aside as open space.²³

Chelsea Parade is marked by two landmarks: the Uncas monument and the Academy. The Uncas monument was erected in 1833 to demonstrate the town’s “respect for their ‘Old Friend’” from whom they had purchased the land for the town.²⁴ An obelisk was erected within a fence, on the site of the old Indian burial ground, coincidentally within the confines of Chelsea Parade. In 1854 the Academy was established facing Chelsea Parade.

Little Plain Green

The ambiguity in the deed from Thomas Fanning and Joseph Perkins to the town of Norwich was not present in the gift of the Little Plain Green from Deacon Jabez Huntington and Hezekiah Perkins to the town. Little Plain was to be used “only as a park.” The gift of Huntington and Perkins was added to by George B. Ripley, who “outlined the park with young trees, thus beautifying [it],” at some point in the early years of the park.²⁵ Little is known about the changes made in the park before the first photographic views of it, thought to be from the 1860s. By this time the east and west sides of the triangular lot were lined with trees, apparently elms.²⁶ The park is separated from the surrounding streets by a curb, sidewalk, and iron fence with stone posts. (It is unclear whether the sidewalks encircle the lot, or only line two of its sides.) Later in the 1860s locals sought to modify Little Plain Green: with one petition to

²¹Caulkins, 534.

²²Caulkins, 534.

²³It was lined with Lombardy poplars in 1801 but as these did not prosper in the climate, elms and maples replaced them in the 1820s. (Caulkins, 534)

²⁴ Caulkins, 585.

²⁵“Norwich City Greens,” 44; Gilman, 90.

²⁶“Norwich City Greens,” 44.

widen a street at the southern end, and with another requesting that the trees be pruned and thinned. It is unclear whether either of these changes took place. Some of the townspeople fought changes to the green, albeit of different types. An 1875 petition was filed “asking that the Police Department be instructed to prevent all ball playing and concerts, or erection of a music stand on the Park, called “the Little Plain.”²⁷

The beginning of the twentieth century also saw the beginning of changes to Little Plain Green. In 1902 the first major change to the park occurred with the erection of the Soldier’s Monument. This addition was accompanied by a change in the name of the area to “Union Square Park,” a change that was not accepted by the citizens and subsequently disappeared. In 1909 the Daughters of the American Revolution, in preparation of the town’s sesquicentennial revived the park, which had lost many of its trees through age and blight. In addition to the new trees, a “granite fountain with bubbling drinking tubes and with drinking bowls on the lower sides for dogs and birds” was constructed so that “not only mankind but also the small animal [could] slake his thirst.”²⁸ The dedication of the fountain summed up the place of the park in the eyes of the town’s early 20th century inhabitants. They wanted their fountain to act:

...like this open space and these trees, prove a blessing to the children who play here from early spring to late fall; to the visitors who come in increasing numbers to our city and loiter in this park; to the lovers who occupy its benches, and to those who come from the heated quarters of the town and spend their summer evenings here.²⁹

The wish of the DAR has come true for all of Norwich's greens: they have become public parks in the 20th century.

What is a green?

²⁷Gilman, 13.

²⁸Gilman, 91.

²⁹Gilman, 91.

Norwich's greens demonstrate how the understanding and use of greens has changed over time. To modern users of the spaces they are all the same. But to the men who founded the city and gave the land there were vast differences. Norwichtown and Bean Hill greens were carved out of the communal "undivided" lands; Chelsea Parade and Little Plain were gifts from private citizens. The origin of the lands seems to have made a difference to the contemporary townspeople -- the names of the two different types of space underscore this. And the intended use of the land was dramatically different -- the earlier lands had a multitude of uses while the later areas were limited to recreation or perhaps military training. This change reflects an increased ability for at least a portion of Norwich's residents to spend some of their time in leisure activities. There is time to stroll through a park. A second change is that nature had been civilized. It was no longer the wilderness which early settlers had needed to subdue. It had been changed into an enticing locale for recreation. The creation of parkland also implies a sense of abundance -- land could be enjoyed simply for itself; it did not need to be functional. It may also suggest a conflicting sense of the disappearance of "uncultivated" lands, and a desire to preserve a small "natural" area in increasingly urbanized Norwich. Finally, the creation of these spaces from private land may also have been for private gain -- in New Haven the creation of Wooster Square is clearly undertaken as part of a money making real estate venture. It was deeded to the city in 1825 by a group of citizens led by Abraham Bishop. While the gift was "ostensibly intended as a public ornament, the square was also seen as the focus for a new boom in real estate which the promoters expected would follow the opening of the Farmington

Canal.”³⁰ The coincidence of gift and building boom in New Haven seems similar to what was happening in Norwich around the turn of the beginning of the 19th century.

The evidence from Norwich suggests that the understanding of the term green has shifted over the years. In the earliest days it was a central piece of the common and undivided lands, often used for a meetinghouse, occasional grazing, military training and a host of other uses. At the beginning of the 19th century a new type of open space developed: the park. This was a green space with a much more limited use, primarily recreation. It was a difference that was apparent to the men of this time. But as the 19th century progressed this distinction seems to have waned. By the twentieth century the greens and parks had all assumed the same recreational role. With this merging of roles the words became interchangeable. Today *green*, *park*, and *common* all have similar definitions.

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³⁰Brown, 184.