

Reflections and Additional Information Concerning the History of 27 Hillside Place, New Britain, Connecticut

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*The past is a foreign country whose features are shaped by
today's predilections, its strangeness domesticated
by our own preservation of its vestiges.*

(David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*,
Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. xvii)

Although I have long studied the history of 27 Hillside Place in New Britain, Connecticut, and compiled the Early History page on the website www.hillsideplacecondo.com, reading the first edition of *The Past Is a Foreign Country* by the American historian and geographer David Lowenthal lead me further in thinking about the heritage of this remarkable building where I have lived in retirement for over twenty-two years and where I was president of the condominium executive board for over ten years.

This beautiful building, designed by architect Warren Briggs of Bridgeport, Connecticut, began its life in 1883 as the New Britain Normal School (also referred to as the State Normal School). (The term "normal school" comes from the French. Later in the U.S., they were called teachers colleges.) In addition to the increasing recognition of the need for trained teachers and a set curriculum (i.e., norms) to be used in all public schools in the State, the geographical prominence of the new Normal School ("The building stands on a high location and can be seen from Hartford and as far away as Mount Holyoke, Massachusetts." *New Britain Herald*, March 28, 1882.) was a factor in its unanticipated high enrollments. The building was designed for a maximum of 150 students. Although the



NEW NORMAL SCHOOL BUILDING, NEW BRITAIN, CONN.

initial enrollment was 100, in 1890 the entering class, alone, numbered 150, making it the largest of all normal schools in New England. Such high enrollments caused attic spaces to be used as classrooms, with students and teachers carrying candles to compensate for the lack of natural light. The south stairs to the attic were built and carpentry and plumbing work was done on the ground level. (At some time later, glass sheets were fitted into the roof to provide natural light for rooms for lecture and for modeling and drawing.) From its earliest years, with such high student demand, the

building was viewed as inadequate, and in 1891, seven years after the main building opened, an annex was added on the west side, providing four additional school rooms and a gymnasium. (Putting a gym in the annex meant that the then-current gym on the third-floor of the main building could also be used for classrooms.) A bridge connecting the annex with the main building was added for ease of movement, especially in inclement weather.

But these many changes couldn't rectify the fact that the land where the school was built was approximately two acres, allowing no space for additional constructions, such as a dormitory for women or a tennis court, items that the Normal School eagerly sought.

Some of the story of this plot of land is revealed in *Jacob Weidenmann: Pioneer Landscape Architect* by Rudy J. Favretti, Cedar Hill Cemetery Foundation, Inc., 2007. Weidenmann (1829-1893) was a prominent landscape architect who designed City Park, now named Bushnell Park, and Cedar Hill Cemetery, both in Hartford; he also worked with Frederick Law Olmsted on the landscaping of the U.S. Capitol. A four-acre estate on the east side of Walnut Hill Park was owned by Timothy W. Stanley (1817-1897). Stanley had two successful careers. He founded, with his three brothers, the Stanley Rule and Level Manufacturing Co. in New Britain and he was a successful banker, aiding in the establishment of the American Savings Bank in New Britain. Stanley engaged Weidenmann in the late 1860s to design the landscape of his estate, which enhanced his prominently placed, beautifully detailed Victorian home, and which afforded expansive views of New Britain and the valley beyond.

This land was subdivided and plotted for a private home. (That home, originally situated at what is now 27 Hillside Place, is now 1 Hillside Place, moved down the hill so the higher, more prominent lot could be sold to the State to make space for the new Normal School.)

When the Normal School was able to move in 1924 to the approximately 25 acres in the Stanley Quarter section of New Britain, 27

**NEW BRITAIN NORMAL SCHOOL
BUILT: 1881 · OPENED IN 1883
BUILT ON A "COMMANDING SITE
OVERLOOKING THE CITY AND THE
COUNTRY" (D.N. CAMP) SITE OF
FOUNDING OF ONE OF THE FIRST
KINDERGARTEN IN THE U.S.A.
BY MISS CLARA W. MINGINS
SUPERVISOR-CIRCA: 1883
(H.E. FOWLER)**



27 HILLSIDE PLACE · NEW BRITAIN, CONNECTICUT

1974

Kalman
213

Hillside Place was sold to the City of New Britain and, from 1925, used as offices by the New Britain Board of Education and School Administration. No major renovations to the buildings were made other than installing thermal-pane windows, the addition of fire escapes, and some preservation work. Even though needed maintenance was included in the city contract and it was recognized that the buildings had been steadily deteriorating, funds for major maintenance were not made available. In late 1983, bricks fell from the tower. More on this below. But first, some sunshine.

Under the headline, “An old landmark that preserves the past,” *The New Britain Herald* published on October 24, 1972, an eight-column article, including four photographs, which began:

Believe it or not, there’s one old building of great historical significance in the city that is not in the path of the highway or in a redevelopment area.

It’s the old State Normal School, built in 1882 at the foot of Walnut Hill on what is now known as Hillside Place. Present occupants? The city’s school administration.

Of great historical significance? This would soon to be so without question since New Britain is the site of the first school built to train teachers in Connecticut.

Predecessor to the existing structure was a building at the corner of Chestnut and Main streets, founded as the first State Normal School back in 1849 at a time when Americans began to realize the educational system in this country was slapdash at best.

The article continued with a summary of the history of the Normal School on Hillside Place, including the earlier location of the State Normal School from 1849 to the use of the new building on Hillside Place: a building at the corner of Chestnut and Main, previously the town hall, it was

raised to widen Chestnut as part of a redevelopment project and generally in the location of the new Police Department. The article also lists modifications to the Hillside Place Normal School that had occurred over the years:

A comparison of sketches in the old State Normal School Catalogues stored at the CCSC archives shows few changes in the brownstone and brick building.

The sharp peak on the bell tower [I have found numerous reports of a bell tower, but have yet to find any information about a bell that supposedly hung in the tower. F.S.] that originally held a weathervane has been cut off. Iron guard rails along the steep steps leading to the arched entranceway have been added. A fire escape was installed at the forefront some years ago. Paved parking lots have replaced lawns and shrubs in front and the rooftop cupola is gone.

A caption under a photo of one of the quarter-round vents on the front of the building reads as follows: “Oliver Wiard, historian, recalls that the ventilating system was considered one of the best in the country, in a day before the advent of air conditioning.”

Then on April 27, 1973 *New Britain Herald* announced, “[The] School Administration . . . building has been selected by the [New Britain Arts Festival] committee as the 1973 festival landmark. . . .”)

In these early years of the 1970s, a group of preservation-minded people banded together under the name The Historic District Study Committee, lead by the artist Kenneth A. Larson. (His 1974 woodcut “27 Hillside Place, New Britain, Connecticut” is shown above.) They launched an effort to seek National Register of Historic Places status for the School Administration Building and the entire neighborhood in which it resided on the east face of Walnut Hill. The 1973 “Walnut Hill Historic District Proposal

—New Britain, Connecticut,” the proposal for admittance to the National Register of Historic Places, showed eight pictures of the District; the picture of the Normal School was twice the size of any of the other seven. It also showed the District logo, the Normal School tower.

A publication, two years later, announced the “singular honor [that was] bestowed upon the City of New Britain when the Secretary of the Interior at Washington, D.C. accepted the . . . Proposal . . . creating the Walnut Hill National Historic Landmark District.” This brief announcement mostly described the criteria for attaining historic landmark status. Then it described Walnut Hill Park (designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvin Vaux), the neighborhood of Walnut Hill (comparing it to Brooklyn Heights, Georgetown, and Beacon Hill), and also the many important community resources within walking distance of the neighborhood. About the “Old Normal School,” it stated that its “tower is both the the focal point and the symbol of Walnut Hill” It included, as the only artwork, the logo of the “Walnut Hill Historic District, New Britain, Connecticut,” the Normal School tower. So the Normal School had once been the pride of New Britain. But not so many years later, unfortunately, the story was very different.

Because the bricks fell from the tower during the Christmas vacation, no damage was done to either persons or automobiles, But the Assistant Superintendent was quoted the following week in a January 5, 1984 article in the *New Britain Herald* stating that he “was surprised the bricks fell since the building has had no serious problems in over a century of service. . . .” and the School Plant Manager added that the building has been “steadily deteriorating” in recent years and that requests to have work done were not funded. Talk aside, the Board of Education began to look for other quarters. Although the October 24, 1972, *The New Britain Herald* article stated, “School administrators are planning to move out of the old normal school They want more space for an expanded local educational system,” they stayed on. But then the bricks fell. Their longtime plans to move took on greater urgency. By November, 1984, they were gone.

During the 101 years as a school building, this structure suffered from both delayed maintenance and needed maintenance that was never performed. Unfortunately, this is the usual plight of public schools. Even today, the State of Connecticut will provide funds to communities to build a new school, but it won't provide any funds for the repair and maintenance of an existing school building. Insight into the background of this financial situation has been provided by Christopher Collier, for about 20 years the official Connecticut State Historian, in his book *Connecticut's Public Schools: A History, 1650-2000* (Clearwater Press, 2009, Chapter XXII "Financial Frustration: Inequality and Horton v. Meskill"). As Collier reports, Connecticut's history of underfunding public education has always been a disgrace. By statute in 1868, Connecticut guaranteed free elementary schooling to all Connecticut children between the ages of four and sixteen. "The statute decreeing this benefit, however, did not make the money to implement it magically appear. Producing the cash to pay the teachers (modestly), maintain the schoolhouses (barely), and supply fuel (minimally) was going to be at least as difficult as pulling a white rabbit from a fiscal top hat. ¶ Neither the state nor the towns were putting forth much effort on behalf of good schooling" (p. 581). This wasn't just a peculiarity of the Nutmeg State, as Collier continues, "But that was the American way. In the mid-19th century, the states of the nation collectively spent, by rough estimate, less than 1 percent of the gross national product on schools" (p. 581). (Note: We await the educational aftermath in Connecticut following the January 17, 2018, ruling by the Connecticut Supreme Court that the state is providing students in Connecticut's most impoverished school districts with the minimally adequate education the state constitution mandates.)

It was now a beautiful, historic, dangerous and broken down blight, cramped on the side of Walnut Hill. Before 1985 ended, the City requested proposals for purchase of 27 Hillside Place and a buyer was chosen for the purpose of its becoming a residential condominium. However, the condominium renovation did not begin until 1989.

The conversion of the old school building into condominium housing was the work of A. Stephen Nelson, AIA, of the Wethersfield, Connecticut firm of Moser Pilon Nelson Architects. On the firm's website is the statement:

This 45,000-square-foot Victorian Gothic style building, originally designed by Warren R. Briggs as the New Britain Normal School, was completely restored and converted into 30 condominium units each with their own unique floor plan. Much of the original detailing, woodwork and lighting were preserved. Some units feature restored cathedral and vaulted ceilings. The units were designed to accommodate professional office suites as well as residential dwellings. (Living page, Hillside Place, New Britain, CT, mpn-arch.com. Their architectural drawings can be found in the Building Department, City Hall, New Britain.)

As it turned out, there never were any professional offices, only residential dwellings.

The New Britain Herald printed on August 7, 1989 an extended article, "Condos to carry an old-time feeling," on the early stages of the conversion into condominium units. This article, which includes a large photograph showing scaffolding surrounding the tower and on the south end of the east exterior, can be found in the "Housing - Condominiums Folder," Local History Room, New Britain Library.

The same article quotes Allen Picard, foreman of the contractor firm, John Gagliardi of Kensington, as follows: "The really tough part about this job is that because the building is so old you have to be constantly alert and looking up so bricks do not fall on your head." The article continues:

Picard said working inside a brick building is a challenge because walls must be broken through and that this at times can be

hazardous. In a wooden structure the walls can be cut through with saws, he added.

“This building is in fine shape for all of the over one century it has stood here,” Picard added. “They built them to stay in those days and took pride in their work. Just look at that intricate door trim.”

“We’re doing everything possible to keep the original 1880s features including the nine-foot-high solid oak doors, carved wooden doorknobs, 12-foot high ceilings and fireplaces,” said Gagliardi.

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Work began last January but Gagliardi said the project is still in what he called the “demolition” stage, although the wooden frames of some units have been erected and the layout is starting to take shape.

Meanwhile, talks are continuing with sub-contractors to “firm-up” agreements for installing central air conditioning and individually controlled gas-fired heating.

Prices for the units, which Gagliardi described as “luxury, of the high end type,” will range from \$119,000 for one-bedroom units to \$180,000 for larger two or three-bedroom units.

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The spacious third-floor gym with its 25-foot ceiling is going to be used for building four two-level units, and each two or three-room unit will have a loft, study or library area.

“We are working with the Connecticut Historical Commission and following their specifications for bringing the building back as nearly as possible to its natural state,” Gagliardi said.

The red brick exterior will be washed with a special solution but there will be no sand-blasting which, Gagliardi says, might detract from the 1880s look that is desired.

There will also be a garden-like area with benches in front, natural walkways leading to Walnut Hill Park, a rear courtyard, 24-hour security measures, elevators, fully applianced kitchens, ceramic tile bathroom floors and cathedral and vaulted ceilings.

The architectural drawings for the remodeling from school building to housing condominiums, dated “6-1-89” and titled “Hillside Place Condominiums, New Britain, Connecticut,” has the following notice on drawing number L-1:

General Notes

Applies to All Contractors, subcontractors and their workmen.

1. This is a historic register project. Every caution should be taken to avoid damage to building fabric, interior and exterior but not limited to walls, floor and ceiling surfaces and trim, doors windows, frames and trim. When working in any area of building, inside or out, all workmen must protect original fabric from damage by their work or equipment.
2. Under no circumstances is any Contractor or subcontractor or his employees to cut, drips or make any penetration to existing building structure or exterior surfaces, walls, soffits, ceiling, roof, etc., without the direct consent and advice of the Owner . . . or the

Architect . . . as to size, location and necessity. When in doubt - ask before you cut!

3. Clean, replace and tuck point all exterior masonry which has deteriorated with mortar and brick to match existing. Use mildest cleaning measures possible to clean masonry to match approved sample areas.
4. Refer to 1/4" = 1'-0" plans for all unit layout dimensions (except as noted).
5. Insulate with fiber glass insulation all interior wall and ceiling spaces to depth of cavity for unit heat and sound insulation. Interior floor cavities between dwelling units where existing ceiling is to remain, F.G. insult. batts w/ 1" air space to existing plaster ceiling.
6. Saw cut all penetrations of existing plaster ceilings for mechanical or electrical and keep to the minimum required to do installation. New 5/8" GWB (Fire Code) to be applied to all existing and removed areas of unit ceilings for a continuous 5/8" GWB membrane between units.
7. Pull existing baseboard and/or saw cut all existing plaster on masonry and plaster on wood lath at walls to install mechanical and electrical wiring and piping. Patch plaster to match existing.
8. Field verify with Owner or Architect the routing of all ductwork and the use of existing brick chimney for chases.
9. Repair all existing window sash to operate properly.
10. Close all interior transoms according to detail.

We refashion antiquities most radically, sometimes altering them beyond recognition, in adapting them to present-day purposes. But without adaptive reuse most old artifacts would soon perish. Had the Parthenon not served variously as a mosque, a harem, even as a powder magazine, it would have succumbed to plunder and decay. Prolonged survival usually requires subsequent uses utterly unlike the original one, for things normally become less and less suited to initial uses themselves often extinguished by time. . . . Few old buildings are habitable without alteration; current standards of comfort, social life, safety, and decor are bound to violate inherited integrity. While adaptation may protect and even highlight some relic features, modern appliances and furnishings conceal or replace many others.

(David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 288)

Benjamin Franklin, after the Constitutional Convention of 1787, is said to have replied to the question, “What do we have? A republic or a monarchy?” The answer Franklin is reputed to have given was “A republic, if we can keep it.”

This building, built as the State Normal School in 1882-83, is a noble and beautiful building. It was constructed with brick and lumber, the likes of which are impossible to obtain today. It is still strong and serves many people as their home and continuing delight. It will continue, if we do our part to keep it.