



WALNUT HILL HISTORIC DISTRICT PROPOSAL - NEW BRITAIN, CONNECTICUT.

The proposed Walnut Hill Historic District is approximately two city blocks east-west and five city blocks north-south, adjacent to the central business district of New Britain, Connecticut. Approximately 135 main buildings are included. Building uses today (as during the past 140 years) include institutions, offices, and multiple or single family dwellings. The buildings, the majority of wood construction, represent a homogenous blend of 19th century styles typifying the urban residential character of the city, especially during the period 1850-1900 when New Britain emerged as a city of international industrial significance.

The proposed district is bordered on the west by Walnut Hill Park, developed during the 1850's as a reserve reservoir in the city's water system, as well as a city park, has roadways designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, designer of New York City's Central Park. The western boundary also includes the land and buildings of the New Britain General Hospital and the Walnut Hill Convalescent Home, Inc. The eastern boundary is the Main-Arch Streets business center.

The creation of an historic district is a legal means of giving the people control over what will happen to the quality and appearance of their own community. Too many towns are losing or have lost their own character to interests, often from outside the area, whose only objective is profit to themselves. A district can be most effective in protecting property values by preventing deterioration of a neighborhood through incompatible intrusions which can serve to discourage individual efforts to maintain and improve the quality of the neighborhood.

The authority of a municipality to establish an historic district has been provided for in the General Statutes of Connecticut. If the standards and criteria formulated by the Connecticut Historical Commission are met, the legislative body may vote to establish within its confines an historic district or districts. The purpose of such a district is to promote the educational, cultural, economic and general welfare of the public through the preservation and protection of buildings, places and districts of historic interest. These will be maintained as landmarks in the history of architecture, of the municipality, of the State or of the nation. It is important that appropriate settings for such buildings be maintained as well.

NEW BRITAIN: AN HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

New Britain emerged as an independent community during the mid 19th century. Although the city's parent communities of Farmington and Berlin were well established during the late 1600's and both were extensively involved in trade by 1800 (Farmington: East & West India Trade; Berlin: tinware manufacture and its related metal products, i.e.: tools, wire goods, etc.); New Britain was not even established as a parish until 1754. New Britain became an independent town and borough in 1850 (from Berlin). It was incorporated as a city in 1871.

Originally New Britain was an agricultural community producing necessities for local consumption with additional kiln-dried corn for trade. However, with the influence of Berlin, local blacksmiths and others began producing small metal articles that could be merchandized by pedlars as side-lines to the tinware trade. From these early attempts developed a specialization in metal manufacturing (tools, builders' hardware, etc.) that by 1900 established New Britain as the "Hardware City of the World". This pattern of development from production for pedlars to major metal manufacturing is typical of several communities of The Greater Naugatuck Valley, including Naugatuck, Waterbury and Bristol.

THE WALNUT HILL HISTORIC DISTRICT AREA: ARCHITECTURE

No pre-1800 or Colonial Period houses remain in this area. The district typifies the residential style of professional persons in New Britain from earlier community days. Houses were homes and often times business locations to craftsmen, tradesmen, educators, etc. Also included are two school buildings and a college campus, three churches, two libraries, an armory, and a post office that all date from the late 19th-early 20th century.

The earliest architecture of the area is in the style of the Greek Revival Period—1830-1840. Several examples of this style occur throughout the district. The finest is 25 South High Street, the Smith-Flagg-Middlemas House (1830) (Map No. 1). This was purchased by Abijah Flagg from Enos Smith during the 1830's. Flagg, a magistrate of Berlin (then including New Britain) was a cabinet maker by trade. Flagg established in 1839 in New Britain the company now known as B. C. Porter Sons—one of the nation's oldest furniture merchandising firms. Flagg also manufactured tool handles and other articles for the tinware trade. Among other Greek Revival Style houses are 24 Grand and 42 Walnut Streets.

Several houses express the influence of the Gothic Revival (1840-60's). Although the Greek Revival style was felt to symbolize the nation's founding of democracy, Gothic also became a popular style. Gothic was considered more "Christian" than the "pagan Greek", hence far more appropriate, especially for churches.

Outstandingly Gothic in character is the Timothy Wadsworth Stanley Residence, 1 Hillside Place (1860) (Map No. 2). Stanley, a member of a branch of the family that established several New Britain industries, was the first president of the Union Manufacturing Company (1866). With a brother, Augustus, he co-founded the Stanley Rule & Level Company (1850; merged with The Stanley Works, 1920). Stanley was also the first vice-president of the Savings Bank of New Britain (1862). He was first Burgess of the Town and Borough of New Britain, 1850.

The Italianate Style (1850-70's), an offshoot of the Gothic Revival interests, is especially well represented. Two important buildings include 9 and 10 Camp Street (Map No. 3; No. 4). David Nelson Camp, an original State Normal School teacher (1850), built 9 Camp Street as his home between 1850-55 in the Italianate Style with Gothic Revival porch detailing. A nationally prominent educator, Camp also served as third mayor of New Britain, wrote a detailed history of New Britain (1899) and co-founded Skinner Precision Industries. In 1869 Camp built 10 Camp Street to house his private seminary (a respected boarding school for boys and girls).

Queen Anne and Eastlake Influences (1876-90's) were introduced to this country primarily through the exhibitions of the American Centennial Exposition at Philadelphia in 1876. One important example of the style is 15 Hillside Place (Map No. 6), the Charles E. Mitchell Residence. Mitchell, a distinguished New Britain lawyer and patent attorney wrote the city charter of 1871. As a state legislator Mitchell was responsible for the state funding (3/4 total costs) the Hillside Place Campus of the State Normal School (1880). Mitchell was appointed United States Patents Commissioner in Washington, D.C. by President Benjamin Harrison; later Mitchell served as president of the Stanley Rule and Level Company. Mitchell lived at 15 Hillside Place prior to the Washington appointment.

Second Empire influence (coinciding with the rebuilding of Paris by Napoleon III) in the Walnut Hill District usually consists of the addition of a Mansard or "French" roof to an otherwise flat-roof Italianate house. A more elaborate example is 18 Hart Street (Map No. 5).

The State Normal School, 27 Hillside Place (1881-83) was founded in New Britain in 1850. This was the first school in Connecticut (and sixth in the nation) to specialize in teacher education. The school building, 27 Hillside Place is a blend of Eastlake, Queen Anne, and Second Empire Influences and American architectural "poetic license", and was designed by Warren Briggs, a Connecticut architect. In this building in 1883 was founded what is probably the first American kindergarten. The college occupied this campus until 1927 when it relocated to more elaborate facilities elsewhere in New Britain. Today the State Normal School is Central Connecticut State College. Today the Hillside Place building, a commanding situated landmark, houses the administrative headquarters of the New Britain Public Schools. (Map No. 7)

The Classical Revival Styles (an outgrowth of the Ecole des Beaux Arts, Paris, and the grandiose style of the rebuilding of New York City's Fifth Avenue) characterize the buildings at High, South High, and West Main Streets. A blend of residences and institutions, the area shows the influence of two local architects, William H. Cadwell and William Brooks. Brooks designed the Hartford Municipal Building, an especially outstanding Classical Revival building.

The oldest building at this intersection is the house William H. Cadwell built for his bride in the French Chateau Style (1890) at 130 West Main Street (Map No. 8). William Brooks designed the New Britain Institute (library) (1901), at 8 High Street (Map No. 9) in yellow brick with Greco-Roman terra-cotta ornamentation. In 1930 Brooks designed the adjacent Hawley Children's Library as a companion building in English Tudor Gothic. The 1910 Greek Post Office and two Gothic churches complete the Neo-classical balance of this urban space. This cross-road typifies the conscious attempt of 19th century leaders to blend styles as compliments to a balanced total visual effect. Each building seems set apart as if on a pedestal exhibiting an individual design, yet a pleasing visual unification of Classical Revival styles is created.

SUMMARY

This neighborhood of about 150 buildings spans the period 1830-1930. It characterizes the styles typical when New Britain emerged as a city. This area, the proposed Walnut Hill Historic District, is unique in New Britain (as throughout the Greater New Britain area); for it retains its original intention—a blend of institutions, offices, and houses. It contains one of the largest clusters of historic buildings of any New Britain neighborhood. Relatively little new construction in recent years distorts the pleasing 19th century character. The proposed Walnut Hill Historic District exemplifies New Britain's and America's 19th century urban life style.

