

Norwich Heritage Trust is a nonprofit Corporation formed to promote preservation and awareness of the city's heritage - architecture, streetscapes and neighborhoods - through education, design, planning and rehabilitation



Norwich Heritage Trust

Norwich, CT

June 1991

Greeneville, an Early Planned Community, Described by Jan Cunningham at 1991 Annual Meeting

Norwich Heritage Trust attended the Annual Meeting on May 29 at the Greeneville Congregation Church to hear Jan Cunningham outline the social and architectural history of the Greeneville section of Norwich.

Cunningham showed slides of 80 Greeneville structures, representing 19th and early 20th century architectural styles starting with Greek Revival and ending with Colonial Revival and American four square. Most of the buildings, she noted, were well preserved examples of their style, marred only by occasional lack of paint or, in a few instances, aluminum siding.

Project Director of Norwich Heritage Trust's grant for \$20,000 to survey the Greeneville area, Cunningham spoke without notes, saying she had studied the buildings for so long that she knew them like friends. As a result of deed research and examination of the Norwich City Directories for those years, Cunningham learned of the buildings' original owners and their occupations.

Not only were private homes shown in the lecture, but also institutions such as the Greeneville Congregational Church and

Mary's Church, as well as the factories which employed Greeneville residents.

Greeneville was a planned community, according to Cunningham, with only three buildings extant at the time Greene decided to develop the area. Greene planned factories, housing, schools, and stores for his workers -the first self-contained village in the area where residents would not need to leave the village to conduct their daily lives.

The Greeneville survey, which Cunningham and Associates worked on for an entire year, covered 340 structures in Greeneville and part of Boswell Avenue. Funded by a \$10,000 grant from the Connecticut Historical Commission and \$10,000 in matching funds from the city of Norwich, the survey includes photos of all the structures, as well as research into the ownership, occupancy, and architecture of the structures and the area surrounding them.

Norwich Heritage Trust has applied for another grant to survey the central area of Norwich in 1991-92. The city of Norwich has already awarded \$10,000 from Community Development Funds which NHT can now use as a match for the \$10,000 we are requesting from the Connecticut Historical Commission.

Downtown Norwich Named to List of Most Important Threatened Sites in Connecticut by CTHP

Calling Norwich "a town that seems oblivious of better ways to revitalize main streets and urban centers by capitalizing on historic assets," Connecticut Preservation News, in its May/June issue, placed Downtown Norwich third on its list of the most important threatened sites in Connecticut.

The Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation, which publishes Connecticut Preservation News, regards Downtown as unique because Norwich never suffered the bulldozers of urban renewal. "Into the 1990's, Norwich retained its rich heritage of cast iron facades, Art Deco stores, and other well designed and decorated structures clustered around its towering Victorian town hall," said the article.

The Trust's designation not only drew notice of preservationists, but also of the general public. Both *The Day* and the *Norwich Bulletin* ran front pages stories about Norwich's presence on the list. The *Bulletin* interviewed City Council President Charles Witt, for its May 23, 1991 story in which Witt said "In all fairness, if

those buildings were in any good or decent shape they would have been utilized a long time ago."

In *The Day's* front page article on May 24, 1991, Earnest Zymslinski, City Manager, defended the city's record on preserving old buildings, pointing to the facade restoration program, Church St. renovations, the Terraces, and the new City Hall renovations.

In the same story, Downtown property owner Edward lord explained that high taxes on downtown buildings make it hard for owners to make a profit on their buildings. If they raise rents, lord said, the tenants will leave.

The placement on the endangered list inspired the first question asked at the NHT Annual Meeting during which Bill Champagne pointed out that 20 Downtown buildings have been lost in the last 10 years.

Norwich Heritage Trust's Board welcomes suggestions for helping preserve the architecturally significant buildings in downtown at a time when the economic climate is not favorable.

NHT Board Members Elected at Annual Meeting

New Norwich Heritage Trust Board member Paul Rak was elected to fill a vacant position on the Board of Directors at the Annual Meeting on May 28. At that time, Debbie Novack, Michael Lahan, and Rick and Linda Crootof were elected to fill their expired seats on the Board.

Board of Directors

Donald Buell, President
 Michael Lahan, Vice President
 Linda Crootof, Secretary
 Rick Crootof, Treasurer
 William Champagne
 Patrice Champagne
 Roy Jeffrey
 Jean Szafran
 Debbie Novack
 Tim Lafayette
 Judy Ramblen
 Sandy Quarto
 Mary Loose
 Terry Enos
 Janet MacDonald
 Paul Rak

NHT has a balance of \$767.99 in the checking account and \$4352.43 in the Certificate of Deposit

Safety Codes and Old Buildings - Sometimes We Can Preserve Historic Character And Still Make Buildings Safe for Modern Use

One difficulty often encountered in rehabilitating old buildings is that they frequently do not meet the requirements of modern building and safety codes. Alterations made to bring the buildings up to code can remove historic fabric and destroy a building's historic character. But sometimes a way can be found to preserve historic character and still make buildings safe for modern use.

Article 22 of the Connecticut Basic Building Code allows for exemptions from or alternatives to usual code requirements when necessary to preserve important features or characteristics of historic buildings. Such exemptions or alternatives must not affect the safe design, construction or use of the structure. "Historic buildings" are defined as ones listed on the State Register of Historic Places. (Any building on National Register is automatically also on State Register, as is any building listed as a contributing resource in a National Register District.)

Fire safety codes are generally more stringent because they are so directly related to preserving human lives, and there is no formal provision like Article 22 for exemptions from or modifications of the fire safety code, but allowances can sometimes be made for historic buildings. For instance, fire-resistant paints may sometimes be used instead of replacing original materials that would ordinarily not be allowed.

One case is the Benjamin Weed house in Darien, a Cape built about 1785, which the Connecticut Trust bought in 1987 and rehabilitated. The house's stair was too steep and too narrow, and its upstairs windows were too small. Building officials accepted the installation of a sophisticated smoke detection system as a way of compensating

for these deficiencies, so that the original stair and windows could be retained.

To qualify for an exemption from or a modification of building code requirements, property owners must submit a Preservation and Rehabilitation Certificate to your local building official. The certificate is issued by the State Historic Preservation Office, the Connecticut Historical Commission, 59 South Prospect Street, Hartford 06106, (203) 566-3005. There are also provisions for appeals of decisions by local officials. Fire code modifications must be negotiated with the local and state Fire Marshals. The ease of obtaining relief depends partly on particular local officials' degree of sympathy to history. Remember that their primary concern is the safety of the building's users.

--by Christopher Wigren

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City Hall Renovation Plans Changed Following Failure Of Bond Issue

The City Hall Renovation Committee, which has been meeting for several years, has been meeting again to change the renovation plans following the failure of the bond issue. NHT members Judy Hamblen and Mary loose, members also of the Renovation Committee, report now that renovation on the City Council chambers is taking place this summer. City Council has already moved to temporary quarters.

The more extensive plans for the rest of the building will be carried out at a later date.