

CHAPTER I. HISTORIC RESOURCES

INTRODUCTION

The Town of Plainfield has a rich social and architectural history. Its residents have consistently supported the preservation of the Town's historic resources. The preservation of these resources is fundamental to the retention of a sense of place and identity for the Town. Surviving structures from days gone by contribute to the Town's character and individuality and lend a sense of continuity and community.

Plainfield is fortunate: the main streets of both Meriden and Plainfield villages are lined predominantly with buildings built in the 1800's and early 1900's. The lack of intrusive commercial development in the village centers has preserved their attractiveness and their character. Throughout the town there are over thirty 18th Century buildings, and another 109 buildings built between 1800 and 1850, the majority in excellent condition. The fact that most of these older buildings are in excellent condition is evidence that they have been cared for over the years and that there is a tradition of respect for older structures in the Town.

The Cornish Colony, which flourished between 1885-1930, brought many famous artists to the Plainfield/Cornish area. These artists and their families, who made Plainfield their summer or year-round home, contributed not just to the Plainfield economy, but also fostered local interest in drama, arts and crafts, and cultural activities. The faculty and students of Kimball Union Academy, founded in 1813, have also contributed to the intellectual and artistic life of the community.

In addition to historic structures, areas with proximity to water logically hold great potential for prehistoric and historic archaeological areas. The eastern banks of Sumner's Falls, the low-lying meadows of the Sprague property and the land across the Connecticut River from the mouth of the Ottauquechee River are known to be rich archaeologically. These areas, and possibly others in meadows on the lower terraces of the Connecticut River, should be protected for their archaeological potential.

TOOLS FOR PRESERVATION

To date, the continued protection of Plainfield's historic resources has been accomplished largely through individual action and community-wide respect for the Town's historic assets. However, there are a number of tools available for a Town's historic preservation efforts. Most important is a local group dedicated to local history such as the Plainfield Historical Society. A longer list of tools may be found in the 1987 Plainfield Master Plan.

Historic Resource Survey

There are several advantages to undertaking an historic resource survey. In addition to providing a permanent written and photographic record of a town's architecture, a good inventory is the most basic of preservation tools and can be used to establish historic districts or to prepare nominations for listing of historic structures on the National Register of Historic Places. Although no complete historic resource survey of Plainfield has been done, there are documents that could contribute to one. The first is an architectural survey of many of Plainfield's pre 1850 buildings, which was done by Philip Zea in 1974. The second was a series of historic rambles through Meriden, East Plainfield and Plainfield Village, organized by Mr. Zea. It includes a map, sketch and brief description of each structure. In 1984, an intern with the UV Regional Planning Commission completed a windshield survey of most of the Town, the first step in the survey process. In 2000 Jane Stephenson wrote walking brochures describing the architectural and social history of over 90 homes in Plainfield and Meriden villages, and the brochures were updated in 2009. Finally the town history, "Choice White Pines and Good Land," published in 1991 chronicles the development of the people and built environment of the Town. All of these documents provide a useful starting point for a comprehensive survey of the Town.

National Register of Historic Places

Listing on the National Register of Historic Places is another way to acknowledge cultural resources that are worthy of preservation. Five local sites are currently listed on the National Register of Historic Places: the Meriden Covered Bridge (1890), the Mother's and Daughter's Clubhouse (1902), the Plainfield Town Hall (1798, moved to present site in 1840), the Meriden Town Hall (1896) and the Blow-Me-Down Grange #234 (1839). A number of other Plainfield sites are potentially eligible for inclusion in the National Register. National Register listing can be an important tool for identifying and planning the future of significant resources. Listing can act as a catalyst to change public perception and improve an area's image, but cannot in itself prevent major detrimental alterations or even demolition. It remains an important first step toward historic awareness, respect and protection.

COMMUNITY ATTITUDES REFLECTED IN PRESERVATION WORK

Responding to the 1993 and 2005 Community Surveys, respondents to the surveys showed a high level of support for the preservation of historic buildings and landmarks, specifically the covered bridge, town halls, granges and churches. Both the Meriden and Plainfield town halls were extensively

renovated in 1995, and the Town offices and Police Department were relocated to the Meriden Town Hall.

The historic Blow Me Down Grange #234 building was restored between 1998-2000 with volunteer and financial support from the community.

The Plainfield Historical Society, founded in 1978, and occupying the former Mother's and Daughter's Clubhouse, has a growing collection of artifacts, photographs and records related to Plainfield's history. The Historical Society meets monthly throughout the year, presenting speakers and stimulating discussion about a variety of topics related to local history. (remove this line--old news "In 1992, the Historical Society took responsibility for raising money for the restoration and preservation of the Maxfield Parrish stage set, which was completed in 1993.")

2003 RECOMMENDATIONS

The Historical Society should update the oral histories and continue to inform and educate townspeople about the history of Plainfield.

Update A: Oral histories that were done with tape recordings and slides in 1976 were shown again to the public in 2009. Efforts are underway to have these put on CD to preserve them and make them accessible to the general public. There is interest in continuing to do more oral histories, but no plan in place to do so.

Update B: In 2007, a website for the Plainfield Historical Society was created, and this provides another means for residents to learn about town history.

Update C: The PHS sponsored a fall cemetery tour in 2006, 2007 and 2008 featuring some of the towns more interesting and colorful former residents, and the periods in which they lived.

Update D: The walking brochures of Meriden and Plainfield villages were updated in 2009.

Signs designating significant historic buildings and sites should be erected. The Historic Sites Committee of the Plainfield Historic Society has developed a priority list of sites to be marked, and should work with the Town on accessing appropriate Town trust funds for signage.

Update A: Four signs marking significant historic sites in town were erected in 2003, using private donations.

Update B: The PHS has also been promoting and selling historic house signs, which have been placed on over a dozen homes.

Update C: In 2007, large "welcome" signs were placed at the town borders.

The Zoning Board of Adjustment and Planning Board should develop ordinances designed to protect historic buildings, and should investigate creation of historic districts in Plainfield and Meriden Villages.

Update: In 2006 the Planning Board had extensive discussions about the creation of a Heritage District in Plainfield Village, in response to concerns from village residents about a specific commercial development. A draft HD ordinance was written, and a public meeting held in December 2006 to begin a

discussion about what mix of residential and commercial development residents of the village felt would be desirable, and whether the creation of a Heritage District would address their concerns.

The Planning Board decided to defer moving forward with a Heritage District Ordinance at that time, but encouraged village residents to work on drafting their own ordinance and see if it would be supported by the town.

A comprehensive inventory and evaluation of Plainfield's historic resources and visual resources should be undertaken.

Update: This has not been done.

To develop land use regulations that ensure that new development in areas with historic buildings, archeological sites and scenic views is appropriate and sympathetic to existing neighborhood character.

Update: The voluntary Architectural Design Guidelines are intended to strongly encourage any new residential and commercial development to be sympathetic to the existing architecture.

Recommendations 2010:

A historic resource inventory should be conducted, that would include photographs of all 18th and 19th century buildings.

Given the threats to historic buildings in Meriden village, and continuing concerns about Plainfield village, the idea of Heritage Districts should be re-evaluated.

Sites for additional historic markers should be identified by the PHS, and sales of house signs should be encouraged.