Restoration and preservation are not necessarily the same thing, as a recent dispute in Litchfield has highlighted. This case has put Litchfield right in the middle of a preservation debate that has been raging for more than 100 years, one that involves all Connecticut local historic districts.

The dispute began when the owner of the Ozias Seymour house, located in Litchfield’s historic district, removed a door and a porch from the house’s side wing and replaced them with a window that matches the other windows on the house. The wing, which always had a door, was added to the house in about 1830, and the porch added in the 1850s. The historic district commission tried to require the owner to reverse the change; she sued to overturn the ruling and won on a procedural issue.

In the 19th century, Europeans began restoring architectural monuments to their past glory. One of the most prominent restorers was the French architect Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-duc, whose works include Notre Dame cathedral in Paris and who penned a famous definition of restoration: To restore an edifice means neither to maintain it, nor to repair it, nor to rebuild it; it means to reestablish it in a condition of completeness, which may in fact never have actually existed at any given time. As this suggests, Viollet’s restorations often included a good deal of what we might consider guesswork; his aim was to undo alterations made after the original construction and sometimes to fulfill the medieval builders’ unfulfilled intentions. Buildings restored by Viollet-le-duc often look drastically different from their pre-restoration selves, but they are works of great beauty and coherence that have inspired other restorers around the world.

In Litchfield, the owner of the Seymour house seems to belong to Viollet-le-duc’s school of restoration. According to William Devlin, an historian who testified on the owner’s behalf, the main reason for removing the door and porch was that having two doorways on the front wall of the house was confusing to visitors and that replacing the side door with a window would give the façade greater coherence. Moreover, the door had been altered, was out of character with the house as a whole and was not of itself an important piece of architecture. “Should a minor Victorian addition be a major make-or-break element of an important Federal house?” Devlin asked.

In contrast with Viollet-le-duc’s approach to restoration was that of the English critic John Ruskin. Reacting to the sometimes drastic efforts of Viollet and his followers, Ruskin wrote that [Restoration] means the most total destruction which a building can suffer: a destruction out of which no remnants can be gathered; a destruction accompanied with false description of the

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A n important component of the Connecticut Trust’s strategic plan is to improve how we reach our constituencies. Two recent activities are a direct outcome of that goal for 2006:

The Trust has signed up with a web messaging service, Constant Contact, which allows us to send important announcements electronically, in a format that is both attractive and consistent with the Trust’s image. We are using this system to keep legislators informed of Trust activities and grants in their districts and to disseminate information to members on our awards program, our map of Historic Sites in the Settlement of African Americans in Connecticut during Black History month, our real estate courses, HouseTalk, and other events. For the time being, we have opted not to join the e-newsletter world, believing that our print magazine, Connecticut Preservation News, now in its 27th year, is too important a communication vehicle to abandon. I hope that all our members will view this electronic method of communicating our work and events as helpful and informative and want to make sure we have up-to-date e-mail addresses.

The Trust has been selected to participate in a Google Grants program that will give us free advertising on Google for three months. Whenever someone types any of a selected list of key words into Google’s search engine, a three-line ad for the Connecticut Trust will appear on the first page of the search results. The ad will include a link to our website, www.cttrust.org. After researching the most common search words used in historic preservation and history searches—for example, “this old house” is the top one—we have selected twenty that we hope will help us reach a targeted audience. We look forward to seeing a three-month burst of activity at www.cttrust.org that we hope will translate into further use of our services.

With funding from the Connecticut Humanities Council, three architectural historians and four researchers wrapped up a six-month field survey of Connecticut barns, collecting either windshield or comprehensive documentation on 400 barns around the state. Finding the barns depended on good local contacts. When there were no local contacts, the researchers just drove around with a map on the passenger’s seat, stopping whenever they saw a barn to note its location and snap some photos. In some cases, known old and/or scenic roads, like Route 169 in the east and Route 4 in the northwest, provided starting points for exploration. We hope to receive one final grant from the Humanities Council in May to develop exhibits and a database from this research for our new website, www.connecticutbarns.org. The site is already up; please visit it now, but come back later, too, when it will have much more information.

Helen Higgins

The Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation is a nonprofit statewide membership organization established by a special act of the State Legislature in 1975. Working with local preservation groups and individuals as well as with statewide organizations, it encourages, advocates and facilitates historic preservation throughout Connecticut.
People who live in Greenwich hate to hear this, but for those of us who don’t the town’s name usually conjures up rarefied images of imposing estates, chic shopping streets, or glass-and-concrete corporate headquarters. These alone would constitute an architectural heritage well worth writing about, but Rachel Carley has uncovered much more. Greenwich’s long building history (settled in 1640, the town is one of Connecticut’s oldest) also includes Colonial farmhouses that blend English and Dutch influences, factories and working-class housing, bungalow colonies, and such little-known specialized structures as potato warehouses and oystermen’s watch houses.

The author of books and articles on architecture, Carley led the Connecticut Trust’s two study tours to Cuba in 2002 and contributed to the Trust’s town greens project. She wrote Building Greenwich for the Historical Society of the Town of Greenwich, and much of the raw material comes from the Society’s “Signs of the Times” program, which since 1987 has documented the town’s historic buildings. An appendix lists buildings covered by Signs of the Times, as well as those listed in the National and State registers of historic places or located in local historic districts.

A wealth of illustrations, including both present-day and historic photographs, architectural drawings and historic maps, makes Building Greenwich a joy to read. The only thing missing is a present-day map of the town. Readers unfamiliar with the Greenwich’s geography will find it difficult to follow much of the discussion of the town’s development.

That’s important, because Building Greenwich is no mere recitation of individual buildings and their fine craftsmanship and design. The book’s true subject is much broader: a history that focuses on the town’s physical development as a way of understanding its social and economic development.

The story begins with Greenwich’s earliest days as a settlement on the border between New England and New Netherlands. It continues with the water-powered mills and maritime occupations of the 19th century, and later with the growth of manufacturing. These activities sparked the rise of a number of villages, each with its own identity: the factory communities of western Greenwich, the commercial center in the borough of Greenwich, the immigrant neighborhood of the Fourth Ward, the sleepy fishing and milling center of Cos Cob. New forms of transportation enabled the growth first of resorts and then wave after wave of suburban housing developments at every income level from modest bungalows and capes to gated enclaves.

In fact, “architecture” per se frequently takes a back seat to social, economic and technological movements. It comes to the fore, however, in a series of sidebars that discuss individual buildings, as well as in meaty photo captions. (An exception is the chapter on post-World War II architecture, where the language suddenly becomes more vivid, betraying Carley’s particular interest in the subject.)

In her final chapter, Carley makes a strong plea for preserving Greenwich’s built heritage, which is increasingly threatened by homogenized mass design practices and by sprawl development that together are erasing the individual character of the town’s communities, neighborhoods and countryside. But there are encouraging signs, particularly “the proprietary attitude demonstrated by residents toward their educational and cultural institutions” as the town’s greatest asset in the effort to preserve a sense of place. That attitude has expressed itself in a number of recent public buildings that, despite differences in style and materials, share “the familiar symbolism of the town green or plaza because these familiar formats help to reestablish a community focus and sense of belonging. In towns that are steadily losing their identity and character to the neutralizing hand of development, it is precisely that sense of belonging that people want the most because it is what they miss the most.”

Books like Building Greenwich help us to move beyond stereotypes and understand just what makes a sense of place. They are the first step toward preserving what is important and toward building communities that will be better places in the future. We need more books like this.

—Christopher Wigren
A remarkable exhibition at New London’s Lyman Allyn Art Museum (open till April 10, 2006) helps us see urban space as a work in progress and a work of art. Commerce and Culture: Architecture and Society on New London’s State Street, the product of a senior seminar at Connecticut College, was the dream child of art history professor Abigail Van Slyck. It provides a visual feast that paints an astonishing portrait of a world we have lost.

This is truly a must-see for Connecticut preservationists whose interests do not often find overt expression in museum settings, despite the fact that historic preservation was born out of the act of creating house museums and despite the fact that our most public art—and I would also say much of our most compelling art public or private—is the built environment. Those who lament the decline of the metropolitan experience once supplied by our central cities cannot fail to find inspiration here. Whether you prefer Danbury, Hartford, New Haven, Waterbury or Willimantic, we can all recognize the cycles of growth and decline revealed in this story of New London’s primary thoroughfare. It’s a model museums associated with every Connecticut city would do well to emulate.

The exhibition presents an abundance of riveting photographic images and involves pictures enlarged to mural scale to create a kind of virtual reality we can almost step into. The only thing missing is the honking of horns, the sound and smells of sea, and the clatter of street side conversations by the throngs once drawn to this alluring place.

State Street, the historic commercial center that connects New London County Court House (1784) with Union Station (1888) and the sea, is shown from every angle. Photographs, postcards, maps, paint-
ings, prints, advertising ephemera, architectural drawings, and tourist souvenirs evoke a sense of place so compelling, it left me wondering how we function without the social effect created by such mixed-use, multi-faceted public environments. Our malls, theaters and airports cannot even pretend to stimulate such conversation. State Street wasn’t just a shopping and office corridor, it was a veritable banquet that clearly stimulated and nurtured a sense of belonging.

Photographs provide vignettes of a bustling urban setting layered with architectural aspiration. Henry Hobson Richardson’s Union Station, with its oak paneled waiting room, anchors the prominent intersection of State Street and Main. The Nichols and Harris Drug Store (ca. 1896) offered a classic nineteenth century retail environment where customers, relegated to a single aisle flanked by display counters, asked clerks to fetch goods from the floor-to-ceiling shelves that lined the walls.

One of my favorite images shows the whaling exhibits at the Mariners Savings Bank (ca. 1885) a local business that commissioned murals, and lined the walls and filled display cases with artifacts to signal an integration of commerce and culture so compelling that no distinction need be made.

Alas, the arrival of the automobile brought on wrenching change as an environment designed for pedestrians and horses adjusted with difficulty to accommodate a growing car culture that increasingly passed it by.

Like New Haven and Hartford, New London was devastated by urban renewal and now grapples with the challenge of downtown revitalization. One of the first substantial triumphs of the historic preservation movement in the 1960s was rolling back an urban planning consultant’s recommendation that Union Station be demolished “to restore the seascape value to the heart of downtown New London.” The planners took another whack at it in the ill-conceived Captain’s Walk project of the 1970s, which razed the areas historically associated with working-class housing to build office structures and parking garages conspicuously devoid of character.

The exhibition helps visualize new possibilities for a public space that still has enormous aesthetic and emotional power. It provides an opportunity for city planners and urban boosters to fill their imaginations with impressions of what Connecticut’s cities were like before they were gutted by urban renewal and sprawl. A close study of art and history is an excellent way to imagine the possibilities of a revitalized urban environment. It’s all about bits and pieces coming together to create a thick stew of urban life. Since there appear to be few successful examples engineered from above and many instances of top-down planning making things worse, the most we can hope for are new incentives that reward good behavior, incremental change and modest aspirations. In helping us see that, the Lyman Allyn Art Museum has staged a rather immodest triumph.

William Hosley of Enfield is an historical consultant and a Trustee of the Connecticut Trust. An earlier version of this article appeared in the Hartford Courant.

A very special house is available to a very special buyer.

Built by the Woodward family in 1884, a member of the family has lived in the house ever since. The original detail is intact, including slate roof, fish-scale gable shingle, clapboard exterior, Eastlake-style lintels, and lovely turned porch railings and trim. Interior woodwork, floors and stairway are unchanged. With some updating, this house would make a wonderful home for someone who values its style, quality, and New Haven history.

For more information or to see the house, please call Katherine Bennett, Betsy Grauer Realty, (203) 787-0104 ext. 118
Work and Play

Sites recently listed in the National Register of Historic Places include one that relates to the transportation system that supported Connecticut’s industrial development and two others that represent leisure time pursuits made possible by the state’s increasing prosperity.

The New Haven Railroad Danbury Turntable is one of a rapidly shrinking number of railroad-related maintenance facilities in Connecticut. The turntable is essentially a swing bridge, consisting of a deck girder that revolves within a circular pit of reinforced concrete. The turntable served a number of tracks, allowing steam engines, which could not easily back up, to be shuttled between tracks and the engine house, where they were stored, serviced, or repaired. Built in 1916, the Danbury turntable has a girder that is 95 feet long and was able to handle all but the largest of the New Haven Railroad’s steam engines.

“Particularly in the age of steam, turntables were a vital part of railroad operations, allowing an engine house with multiple stalls to be served by a single track,” writes Bruce Clouette of PAST, Inc., in the turntable’s nomination. “Every railroad town of any size had at least one turntable and engine house, so there must have been several dozen in Connecticut at one time.” The Danbury turntable is the only intact surviving railroad turntable in Connecticut.

Essential to the movement of raw materials and finished products, the railroads played an indispensable role in Connecticut’s development as an industrial power. Clouette continues, “Although there are many historic railroad stations in Connecticut, these represent only a fraction of the state’s original rail infrastructure, which also included bridges, tunnels, interlocking towers, crossing-tender shanties, and a host of maintenance, storage, and repair facilities. Today, these other railroad buildings are becoming ever more scarce. Such attrition heightens the heritage importance of the rail-related structures and buildings that remain. Without them, it will become increasingly difficult to visualize the historical impact of the railroads, particularly in urban areas such as Danbury.”

Two consequences of industrial development were increased leisure time (at least for some) and the breakdown of traditional small-town forms of social interaction as more people moved to the cities. Both of these needs could be met by fraternal organizations such as the Willimantic Elks Club, completed in 1927. At that time, the Elks had about 600 members in Willimantic and sponsored social activities throughout the year, culminating in a summer fair that drew thousands of attendees from surrounding communities. In addition, the Elks, like many other fraternal organizations, offered sickness and death benefits at modest cost in an age before government benefits were available.
The clubhouse, designed by the Norwich architectural firm of Cudworth and Thompson, is a Tudor Revival building with half-timbered gables and broad porches. Well detailed, sitting on a knoll above the street and surrounded by spacious grounds, it resembles a mansion of the era. The interior is ornate and well-preserved, particularly the lodge room, whose rostrum, formal chairs, ballot boxes, organ pipes, ceremonial altar, members’ seating and symbolic elements are all original. Embellished with elks’ heads, stars, and the organization’s initials, the room is said to have been one of the most perfectly constructed Elks lodge rooms anywhere, its every dimension and features exactly as prescribed in the rules of the organization to fit into the lodge-meeting ritual and remind members of the group’s civic and moral ideals.

Prosperity and good transportation also made possible the growth of summer resort communities in Connecticut. One of them is the Oswegatchie Historic District in Watertown. The community dates to the 1870s, when the Manwaring family began taking in summer boarders on their farm at Sandy Point. In the early 20th century Selden Manwaring built an inn and cottages, reportedly naming them for an elite Adirondack resort. Following a common pattern, guests at the inn bought land nearby and built their own cottages. At Oswegatchie, many of the residents were relatively wealthy; a yacht club was formed in the 1920s, and a number of the homes included carriage houses, detached servants’ quarters, tennis courts, or croquet lawns.

The inn closed in 1932, but many of the summer houses remain. Generally built near the water, most were constructed in the first third of the 20th century in either Colonial Revival or Arts-and-Crafts mode. Almost all share an informal style, with generous porches, spacious grounds and water views to encourage relaxation. At least one house, “Petite Normandie,” the French-inspired cottage of sculptor George Gray Barnard and his actress wife, Sarah, is downright whimsical. Decorated with half-timbering, and flanked by a tiny, conical smokehouse, it is said to have formerly sported a thatched roof.

Built in 1861, this majestic Victorian sits on over one and half acres of land in Windsor’s historic district. It offers over 4,000 square feet of living space, including 11 rooms. Features include a newly refurbished slate Mansard roof characteristic of the French-inspired Second Empire style, 12-foot ceilings, and original coal fireplaces adorned with marble mantels. The grand, curved staircase leading to the second floor makes the foyer a dramatic and elegant appearance. This house has been carefully updated to protect its historic character, with rebuilt front and side porches, refinished chestnut floors throughout, and windows replaced to ensure efficiency without sacrificing historic detail.

For more information or to see this house, please call Leslie Bajorski of RE/MAX Precision Realty at (860) 223-4804.
Hartford. Connecticut television viewers were startled in December by news reports that the state Capitol was “crumbling.” The reports were accompanied by views of cracked stonework, flaking plaster, rusting columns, and leaking skylights that seemed to confirm the building’s dangerous state.

Within a few days, however, the story settled down. The Capitol was not actually in serious danger, but merely suffering from the ongoing problems that plague any old structure, particularly any as large and complex as it is. A major renovation of the building was completed in the late 1980s, but no major work has been done since then.

The problems included in the news report were identified in a conditions assessment by Schoenhardt Architecture + Interior Design, a Simsbury firm that has provides ongoing consulting services to the Capitol. Among the problems are:

- deteriorating stone trim;
- leaks from skylights and around the dome;
- cracked window frames;
- exterior steps that are buckling;
- flaking plaster ceilings under entrances;
- need for major cleaning;
- oak exterior doors that need refinishing;
- rust on interior beams and columns; and
- peeling decorative vinyl patterns on skylights.

A number of these problems are related to leaks that let water into the building. “The roof has always been a problem and will always be a problem,” said Eric Connery, facilities administrator for the Office of Legislative Management, which operates the Capitol. The roof’s complex design, with many hips and ridges and dormers, not to mention the dome, offers many opportunities for small cracks that become leaks.

Others issues are related, ironically, to preservation efforts. The peeling vinyl patterns on the skylights were used in the 1980s restoration as a less expensive alternative to painting designs on the glass. Unfortunately, they have not held up well. Still other issues are...
simply the result of aging and the wear
and tear of daily use. Connery’s office
is in the process of analyzing the report
and setting priorities for repair work.

Owners of any historic building should
know that regular inspection is crucial
to keep up with small maintenance and
repair problems before they become large
ones. Such studies are recommended for
any historic site, although the frequency
and degree of detail are determined by
the nature of the building itself. The
Connecticut Trust has given Historic
Preservation Technical Assistance Grants
to nonprofit organizations and towns to
perform such assessments. One of the
first HPTAG recipients was Saint John’s
Episcopal Church of Stamford, who
used their grant to develop a plan for
restoration and regular maintenance of
their church and parish buildings.

Bristol. The Bristol Historical Society
and other citizens are up against a deadline
to save the Gad Norton house, home of
the founder of Lake Compounce amuse-
ment park. The park, which claims to be
the oldest in the country, traces its his-
tory to 1846, when Norton opened his
lakeside property to picnickers. Norton
descendants operated the park until 1985.

In December, the Kennywood
Entertainment Company, the park’s pres-
ent owners, announced plans to demolish
the house for a new maintenance building.
Kennywood maintains that the house,
built sometime around 1800, is in poor
condition and not of any use for them.

Objections by Bristol resident George
Cowles triggered a 90-day delay of demo-
lition, which expires March 13, to give
preservationists a chance to work out a
deal. They thought that a museum of the
park’s history would be an attraction, but
Kennywood insists that restoring the house
would be economically infeasible. In early
February, the company offered to let the
historical society move the house off park
property if that can be done by April 1.
The company also offered to contribute
$15,000 toward the cost of the move.

As CPN goes to press, the historical
society is trying to raise additional sup-
port for keeping the house within the
park, but Kennywood continues to insist
that it be moved. The society is also work-
ing with the state Historic Preservation
and Museum Division to nominate the
house to the National Register of Historic
Places. The Connecticut Environmental
Protection Act allows lawsuits to prevent
the unreasonable demolition of structures
listed in or under consideration for the
National Register. Kennywood could
eventually block the nomination, remov-
ing any protections, but the process could
be a way of buying some more time.

New Canaan. Residents are
working to rescue the Irwin pool house,
one of the town’s landmark modern
buildings, and reuse it for exhibition
and meeting space. As New Canaan’s
modern houses are increasingly threat-
ened with alteration or demolition, this
would offer a rare opportunity for the
public to see one of the structures that
put the town on the architectural map.

Built for Jack and Jane Irwin in 1960,
the pool house was designed by Landis
Gores, one of the “Harvard Five” architects
who settled in New Canaan after World
War II and made the town an internation-
ally-known hotbed of modern architecture.
Gores was stricken with polio in 1954,
which severely limited his subsequent
career, and few of his buildings survive.

The design of the pool house reflects
Gores’ interest in the work of both Frank
Lloyd Wright and Ludwig Mies van der
Rohe. Like many of Wright’s Prairie
houses, it has a heavy hipped roof and is
anchored at the center by a massive fire-
place. Slender cross-shaped redwood posts
were inspired by the Barcelona Pavilion
and Villa Tugendhat, two of Mies’ ground-
breaking modern buildings of the 1920s.

The town acquired the Irwin estate for
a park in 2005, and is allowing a citizen
group, the Friends of the Gores Pavilion,
to raise money to restore the pavilion.

For more information, call the New
Canaan Historical Society at (203)
966-1776, or visit www.fotgp.com.
Second North District School, Hartford (2001). On November 14, Mayor Eddie Perez announced Hartford’s receipt of a federal grant of $1.7 million toward the rehabilitation of the vacant school, most recently used as central offices for the city’s Board of Education. The building is to become part of a new public safety complex serving the police and fire departments. The grant will help solidify the city’s plan to preserve the building and incorporate it into the complex.

The most recent design for the site, prepared by the Hartford architectural firm of Jeter, Cook & Jepson Architects, Inc. (now known as JCJ Architecture), places the fire department headquarters in the historic building and police department headquarters in a new complementary building nearby.

The federal funds will be used to set up a regional command center that will serve as a communications hub for major emergencies. The $40 million cost of the project is about $7 million more than the bond authorization approved by city voters. The city is expected to seek state and federal assistance to cover the balance.

The federal grant is “a great down payment and investment in safety for the city and region,” Mayor Perez said in a press release. “This is also a way to integrate the historic architecture of the old Board of Education building into the future, and a centrally-located home for our police and fire departments.”

—reprinted with permission from the Hartford Preservation Alliance newsletter

Regional Water Authority houses, New Haven County (2004). After several months of inaction, the Regional Water Authority of South Central Connecticut (RWA) has renewed its efforts to demolish fifteen historic houses plus one historic barn. In 2003 RWA announced that it wanted the buildings moved from Authority-owned watershed land—in spite of special legislative permission to sell the structures along with the land they sit on. Despite strenuous opposition from the Connecticut Trust and citizens from all seven affected towns, RWA proceeded to solicit proposals to move the buildings. David Silverstone, RWA’s CEO said that the Authority would be willing to consider proposals to keep the

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buildings on their sites for non-residential use, subject to local zoning approval.

A year later, RWA had received only a handful of proposals, no doubt due to the difficulty and expense of moving buildings, and to the Authority’s stringent financial and environmental conditions. By the beginning of 2006, all negotiations with potential takers had fallen through, and the sixteen historic buildings are once again in danger.

According to Dianne Tompkins, Senior Land Use Manager, RWA is no longer officially soliciting proposals to move the buildings, but will consider any proposals. Information on the buildings can be seen by appointment at the Authority’s offices in New Haven.

One house has already been demolished: the DiSanti house at 785 Foxon Road in North Branford. One of the smallest and least historically or architecturally important of the group, it had attracted no interest from potential takers.

Tompkins says that RWA is currently working on the Alling house in Orange, a Federal-style house probably built sometime between 1798 and the 1820s. The house is notable for its layering of high-quality decorative features from several periods, as well as for its association with local industrial history. Of the sixteen threatened buildings, this is one of five that the Connecticut Trust rated “Most Important.”

RWA has carved out a building lot on nearby non-watershed land and on February 16 asked its Representative Policy Board for permission to sell the lot and allow the buyer to move the Alling house to that lot. If there are no takers for the house, the Authority intends to sell the lot by itself and proceed with plans to demolish the house.

Once the Alling house is taken care of, the Authority plans to continue with the other properties. In each case, says Tompkins, there will be a hearing before the Regional Policy Board, although RWA may group some of the buildings rather than making a separate application for each one.

At the hearing on February 16, the Trust’s Executive Director, Helen Higgins, noted that the demolition of the Alling house would ensue if its removal could not be achieved. She argued that demolition of historic resources owned by RWA contradicts its Land Use Policy, which discusses the importance of preserving historic resources, specifically mentioning the Alling house, among others. The Policy Board did not vote that evening on the Authority’s request. A decision is expected at the next meeting, scheduled for March 16.

To contact the Regional Water Authority, telephone (203) 624-6671 or visit www.rwater.org.
thing destroyed. His point was that what people like Viollet called restoration was in fact alteration. Instead, Ruskin and his followers advocated simply preserving a building as it is, preventing further deterioration but not attempting to undo changes that had already happened. This approach became the guiding light of the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings, an English organization familiarly known as “the Anti-Scrape” for its hands-off approach to preservation.

The Borough of Litchfield has taken an Anti-Scrape position on the Seymour house. According to James Stedronsky, the Borough’s attorney, the successive changes made to the house paralleled the career of Ozias’ son, Origen Seymour. It was Origen who added the side wing about the time of his marriage. He used part of the wing for his law practice and to instruct law students from Tapping Reeve’s law school, and clients and students would have used the wing’s door to avoid disturbing the family. The later porch was part of a remodeling done just before Origen went into politics. In the ensuing years, he became the Speaker of the Connecticut House of Representatives, a candidate for governor, and eventually Chief Justice of the state’s Supreme Court of Errors. By removing the door and porch, Stedronsky argues, the owner has erased this history from public view.

Both approaches to preservation are still with us, and arguments can be made in favor of either one. In fact, outside of museums, most preservation projects owe something to both Viollet-le-duc and Ruskin. There are few pure examples of anti-scrape maintenance; most buildings tend to continue be altered to meet new uses, new code requirements, or new tastes, and there is a growing interest in the successive layers of time and use seen in most historic buildings. When the Old State House in Hartford was last restored, in 1996, different rooms were used to tell different stages in the building’s history, from Federal-era state house to Victorian city hall to Colonial Revival museum.

There are also fewer cases in which buildings are “taken back” to a single historic moment in the past, and the projects that do take that approach generally do so for a carefully articulated reason. In Virginia, the Montpelier Foundation is currently removing extensive 20th-century additions from Montpelier, the home of James Madison. In this case, the organization believes that Madison’s significance as author of the Constitution and president far outweighs the importance of the additions and the house’s later history.

What stand should local historic districts take? Should they allow the restoration, and even the improvement of historic buildings? Or should they hold out for strict preservation of all historic fabric? The state law that gives towns the authority to establish local historic districts is not particularly clear on the subject. While there is nothing that specifically instructs historic district commissions to prevent or minimize the removal of specific historic features, the statute does say that commissions should consider “historical and architectural value and significance” in making decisions, which seems to allow them to protect historic fabric.

William Devlin argues that Litchfield’s historic district commission, in a series of rulings over several years, has established a precedent that allows changes such as the removal of the Seymour house’s door. On the other hand, Wethersfield’s historic district guidelines specifically discourage the alteration or removal of characteristic architectural features, including architecturally significant additions. But they also include a broader statement that, “...the philosophical goal of historic preservation is not to freeze time, but to integrate the necessary and desirable changes that are signs of our neighborhoods’ continuing vitality.” According to Clare Meade, trustee of the Connecticut Trust and former chair of Wethersfield’s historic district commission, that commission’s goal is “to encourage an ongoing architectural conversation in which each building makes the best contribution it can to the streetscape as a whole.” “The enabling legislation is extremely broad,” continues Meade. “It’s up to each commission to create something that’s workable for its own district, and then be consistent to their own internal documents.”

—Christopher Wigren

As restored by Norman Isham in 1897, Guilford’s Whitfield house embodied the Viollet-le-duc approach of idealized restoration. Early guidebooks noted that the Great Hall that Isham created in the house had “the appearance which Whitfield could, had he wished, have given it.”
produce a thick growth ring. In years when the tree struggles, it will produce a narrow ring. The pattern of wide and narrow rings provides a sequence which, if large enough, allows a tree’s growth to be matched to a known pattern established from other trees for a specific period.

Out of this phenomenon grows a procedure that can, with some luck, yield a very specific date for the felling of the trees that make up the frame of a wooden building. The process starts with choosing timbers for sampling within a building’s frame. When an appropriate candidate is found—an ideal timber should be sound (no rot or insect damage), have evidence of the outermost growth ring or bark (so that it is clear that the final ring observed will correlate with the date of felling) and contain at least 50 annular rings (providing a larger enough sample to provide a usable pattern)—a small diameter core sample stretching from the outside of the timber to its center is taken with a specialized bit. The sample ends up looking rather like a dowel or round pencil. The more samples that can be taken, the more likely it is that a successful outcome will occur.

There is one other catch. For the research to be successful, the tree must be of a species and from a region where the pattern of growth rings has been established. This pattern, called a master curve or chronology, provides general trends over a long period of time to which specific samples can be compared. (The master curve is assembled by overlapping patterns from successively older samples. There are a number of chronologies that now stretch back many millennia for the American southwest and parts of western Europe.) While this matching was first done in the early 20th century by visually searching for patterns, the majority of the work is now done with computers running sophisticated statistical analysis programs. In simple terms, the programs compare the pattern of a sample to the existing curve, shifting one against the other until a match is achieved. When this happens, the master curve provides the date when a tree began growing and, most importantly for people interested in the construction dates of buildings, when it was felled. With a few exceptions, such as wood used in paneling or furniture, research has suggested that timbers were used quite soon after they felled.

The challenge in Connecticut is finding areas where existing master curves work or, alternatively, creating new master curves through further sampling. So far, fewer than a half dozen buildings are thought to have been sampled for dendrochronology. In addition to the Bates-Scofield barn, Bush-Holley House in Greenwich, Webb House in Wethersfield, a private house in Suffield, and a private barn in Simsbury are known to have been sampled. The Windsor Historical Society is hopeful that it will be able to use dendrochronology to help solve some of the puzzles surrounding the construction of its Strong House. Happily for the Darien Historical Society the preliminary results from Dr. William (Ed) Wright of the Tree Ring Laboratory at Columbia University’s Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory suggest that the samples taken from the barn match up with an existing master curve, and the Darien Historical Society will soon have a definitive date for their barn.

Judy Groppa, the Executive Director of the Society, offered a ringing endorsement of the process, “I would encourage everyone who has a historic structure to consider applying this technology.”

James Sexton, an architectural historian and preservation consultant from New Rochelle, is a member of the team for the Connecticut Trust’s barns survey.

Resources and Contacts for Dendrochronological Research

William A. Flynt
Historic Deerfield, Inc.
P.O. Box 321
Deerfield, MA 01342
413-775-7210
wflynt@historic-deerfield.org

Daniel Miles
Oxford Dendrochronology Laboratory
Mill Farm
Mapledurham
Oxfordshire
RG4 7TX
www.dendrochronology.com

Dr. Edward R. Cook
The Tree Ring Laboratory
Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory
Columbia University
New York, New York

English Heritage has produced a good introduction to dendrochronology. It can be found at:

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Counting the Rings: Bates-Scofield barn, Darien  

by James Sexton

It is a simple fact but one that is easy to forget: wooden buildings are made from trees. Normally, it’s not something we think about. What most people involved in preservation are interested in is how a building looks or functions once the trees are turned into usable lumber. But the Bates-Scofield barn in Darien, one of the many documented by the recently completed Connecticut Trust Barns Survey, provides a good reminder of why we should remember that buildings are filled with trees.

The barn is like many others in Connecticut. It’s a modestly sized, gable-roofed building with its entrance in one of the long walls. It’s had a variety of uses. Most recently it was a garage and storage building for a local electrical contractor. Then, as happens so frequently these days, the land became more valuable than the buildings that sat on it and the property was sold. The new owners, a bank, planned to demolish the barn to make way for a new branch bank. And here history began to repeat itself. The barn had for many years been associated with the Bates-Scofield house, now the home of the Darien Historical Society, before the house was moved to a new location in the early 1960s in order to save it from destruction. The barn was not threatened, and was left behind. Now, in order to save the barn, it needed to be moved and the Historical Society decided to reunite it with the house.

But the Historical Society chose to do more than just move the barn. They began to delve into its history. This is where the trees become important. Rather than just research the documentary evidence about the barn or closely examine the structure for clues to its history the society chose a tool that is relatively new to architectural history in Connecticut: dendrochronology or tree ring dating.

Dendrochronology relies on the fact that the weather in different years produces growth rings in trees of varying widths. In years when the weather is conducive to growth, a tree will...