The Most Important Threatened Historic Places: 2006

Using suggestions submitted by members, leads from an informal poll of preservationists across the state, and the observations of our Connecticut Circuit Riders, the Connecticut Trust has compiled a list of the most important threatened historic places in the state.

This year, we have two statewide listings that were directly inspired by the Trust’s activities. Our survey of historic barns has confirmed the general impression we had that historic agricultural buildings face demolition at a higher rate than almost any other category of building. And a rash of advertisements in the Trust’s Historic Properties Exchange for houses located in state parks led us to think about the fate of historic buildings on land acquired for recreation or open space protection.

In one way or another, several of this year’s listings have to do with public policy. They include publicly owned resources, such as municipal buildings or buildings on open space land or in parks. The threats facing these structures often arise from limited budgets. These shortages become most acute when a building’s historic character, or even its existence, is secondary to the owner’s primary mission. In other cases, town plans and zoning regulations encourage teardowns for new development or make it more difficult to adapt historic buildings to new uses. And government activities can actively threaten historic places, as when revitalization plans unthinkingly call for widespread demolition in historic districts, rather than looking at them as assets on which to build. There are plenty of tools out there to encourage and assist preservation in the public realm, but it’s up to us as citizens to be active in demanding that these tools be used.

—Christopher Wigren
The summer has brought several personnel changes here at the Connecticut Trust. We welcome Gregory Farmer as our new Connecticut Circuit Rider, joining veteran Brad Schide. Greg officially began work on September 5, but he spent much of the summer getting the feel of this signature field service program by visiting an historic farm in Mansfield, vetting our Most Important Threatened Places list through field visits, and absorbing the office cultures of both the Connecticut Trust and the Northeast Office of the National Trust, our partner in this program.

Greg has been running his own historic preservation consulting firm, Agricola Corporation, in western Massachusetts, where he provides consulting services to architects, engineers, developers and property owners. He has served as consultant to historic museums on stewardship of their buildings and collections and was senior planner at the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission. In the 1980s Greg was director of the Connecticut Valley Historical Museum. He has a BA from SUNY Brockport in American Studies.

Anne Stillman, who coordinated our very vital Historic Properties Exchange for 12 years. Anne, who has served as a consultant to the National Trust, brought her consider-able preservation experience and excellent writing skills to make HPX not only a valuable service but also a lively and instructive read. She can certainly take credit for saving historic places in Connecticut and now give her full attention to the challenges of being director of the Jay Heritage Center in Rye, New York, as it embarks on a capital campaign. Beginning with this issue, Todd Levine, the Trust’s Preservation Services Officer, takes over responsibility for HPX, which is also published on www.cttrust.org.

Last year the Trust launched its Real Estate School, having received certification from the state’s Real Estate Commission to offer the seminar “Selling Historic Houses” to real estate agents and the general public for three continuing education units (CEUs). This fall, the seminar continued on page 15.

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.

Gregory Farmer, the new Connecticut Circuit Rider

Upcoming Meetings of the Connecticut Historic Preservation Council

October 4, 2006, at 9:30 a.m.
November 1, 2006, at 9:30 a.m.
State Historic Preservation Board
October 12, 2006, at 9:30 a.m.
All meetings take place at the South Congregational Church
277 Main Street, Hartford
For more information call (860) 566-3005

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Connecticut Commission on Culture & Tourism
Old Lyme. After a decade of planning and more than a year of work, the newly-restored Florence Griswold Museum reopened in June. Open to the public since 1947, the Museum is named for Florence Griswold (1850-1937), who transformed her family home into a boarding house that became the center of a colony of American Impressionist painters.

The restoration included stabilization of the house’s exterior and upgrades to its climate controls, electrical, lighting, and fire protection systems. The climate control systems employ “green” geothermal technology that draws energy for cooling and heating from a series of deep wells on the riverfront property. This system regulates temperature and relative humidity consistent with the preservation of the museum’s collections housed within.

Inside, the work focused on recreating the boarding house interiors. Drawing upon sources that ranged from the memories of those who once stayed in the house to the scientific analysis of the building itself, researchers were able to recreate period paint colors and identify appropriate furnishings, including many pieces original to the house. Particularly valuable was visual evidence found in photographs and paintings by the artists who stayed there. Digital technology enabled the museum to draw out details not visible before, in order to guide the refurnishing.

This restoration points out the various approaches available in interpreting historic buildings, either as museums or for other purposes. In some cases, exemplified by the Old State House in Hartford, restoration can reflect changes in a building’s use and appearance over time (see CPN, May/June 1996). Like the Old State House, the Griswold Museum formerly used different rooms to interpret different moments in the house’s history, but the new restoration concentrates instead on a single period, that of the art colony—a decision based on a careful evaluation of the history and importance of this particular site.

Manchester. Three buildings in the Cheney Brothers National Historic Landmark district no longer face demolition for school expansion (see CPN, May/June 2006). In June, the Manchester Historical Society and town’s Historic District Commission requested under the Environmental Protection Act that the State Historic Preservation Council seek the Attorney General’s assistance in blocking the demolition. The buildings, all located on School Street, are the former Hose Company Number 4 Firehouse, the boiler plant, and the former Howell Cheney Technical High School.

The Council approved the petition, but the Attorney General’s office decided not to pursue legal action, insisting instead that the town work the matter out with the preservationists. At that point, the town dropped its demolition plans and it is now seeking to acquire other properties in the neighborhood for off-street parking, which was the intended use. The decision represents a preservation victory, but now uses must be found for the “saved” buildings. The Connecticut Circuit Riders are working with the Historical Society on grant funding for a feasibility study to determine how these buildings can continue to serve the community.
Beginning fall 2004, my anthropology classes from Joel Barlow High School in Redding and I had an opportunity to excavate the back yard of a Newtown house that was built in 1784 by a recently freed slave named Cato Freedom. Cato had been the slave of Moses Platt, and after Platt’s death he passed to Platt’s wife, Hannah, who freed him about 1783. Within a year he bought two thirds of an acre of land and built a small house which still stands. Subsequently, three generations of Cato’s family lived in the house until the last granddaughter died unmarried in 1887. The current owners, Mike and Pam Davis, have owned the house for eight years and have been fascinated by its history, so there was no resistance at all when I proposed to dig up the back yard to see how the material culture of an 18th-century African-American household differed from that of a European one of the same time and town.

The excavation of a terrace that had once been a small garden located 40 feet beyond the back door, yielded the remains of a low foundation, possibly the base of a cooper shop operated by Cato’s son, Ozias. From the molten window glass and large amounts of charcoal it is obvious that the building had burned, probably in the late 19th century, judging by the debris lying just above the structure. The discovery of several scraps of band iron a few inches long and three-quarters of an inch wide reinforces the speculation that the outbuilding was a cooper shop, because the scraps are identical to the type of iron that was used to make barrel hoops. The excavation of the probable cooperage is not yet completed and we will continue to explore the extent of the walls and the building’s floor.

Some of the most interesting aspects of the site were not the artifacts recovered, but rather the nature of the house itself and the things that were found within it. Although the house was post and beam construction, it was atypical of European or native New England construction. The main part of the house measured 24 x 24 feet, using the African 12-foot standard plan that James Deetz found at Parting Ways, an Afro-American site in Massachusetts. In addition to being square, the house was also oriented with the front door located on the south wall, rather than facing the road to the west. The entrance was also in the gable end rather than under the eaves, as it usually is in Connecticut story-and-a-half construction.

In the basement an X-shaped mark with a greatly distended upper left stroke was found carved into the very hard stone of the chimney stack at about eye level.
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Unfortunately, the floor just beneath this mark has been covered with a concrete slab precluding any excavation there to look for a buried cache of shiny objects which are often associated with these marks in Afro-American basements, and which functioned to protect the house from bad spirits.

A single man’s shoe was found within the kitchen crawl space that was part of an addition built very shortly after the main house. Adrienne Saint Pierre, curator at the Fairfield Historical Society, has identified this man’s left shoe as a “concealment shoe”. Folklore related to “concealment shoes” originates in the British Isles, and this practice was transplanted to the colonies. They are often found when renovations are underway but their function has been frequently missed because they look like common shoes that may have been lost during the early history of a house. These shoes are occasionally flattened and purposely mutilated, leading folklorists to believe that they were placed in concealment to fend off bad spirits.

Because of the shoe’s heavily worn condition and its late 18th or very early 19th century date, it must have belonged to Cato and is, therefore, the first object of slave material culture to be discovered in Newtown or the surrounding area. Even more exciting was the discovery of an X mark on the shoe’s upper leather, identical to the mark on the chimney stack, linking it unquestionably to the house. These signs and the shoe also demonstrate a clear conjoining of English and Afro-American spiritual practices reflected in material culture and decorative forms. It is hoped that with further investigation of the house and grounds additional evidence of Cato’s spiritual life and mindset will be uncovered.

This shoe, found in the Freedom Davis house in Newtown, demonstrates a blending of English and African-American spiritual practices.
Seth Wetmore house, Middletown (2003).

On August 4 Probate Judge Joseph Marino approved the house’s sale to a developer who plans to convert it to a bed-and-breakfast inn for visiting faculty to Wesleyan University. Michael Minja of Manchester offered $309,000 for the property and pledged to preserve and restore the house. The house is administered by a conservator on behalf of its owner, Helen Green, who lives in a nursing home and cannot care for the property.

According to papers filed with the court, Minja intends to pursue preservation grants from the state, to sell a preservation easement to the state, and to consult with state and local preservation organizations on the restoration.

Built in about 1746 by a prominent merchant and judge and individually listed in the National Register, the Wetmore house is one of Connecticut’s finest examples of Connecticut Valley baroque design, featuring a grand pedimented doorway, an impressive stair, and paneled rooms. Remnants of terraced gardens are visible on the grounds, and the hillside site offers panoramic views of Middletown and the Connecticut River.

The Connecticut Trust called attention to the house in 2003 as a result of neglected maintenance and intrusive road-widening. Since then, the owner’s conservators have made some repairs, and the Trust for Public Land, working with the Connecticut Trust and Middletown preservationists, has attempted to put together a deal to acquire the house and then re-sell it with preservation easements, but without success. As we go to press, the court has received a second offer for the property, for $315,000. A hearing is scheduled for September 7.


The North Branford Town council voted in July to request that the South Central Connecticut Regional Water Authority (RWA) not demolish the former Angelo Forte gas station located at 714 Foxon Road. The gas station, a small wooden building with a half-octagon end, was built in the 1930s by Forte, who lived in the adjoining house.

RWA agreed to the request and is now working to transfer ownership of the building to the Town and to amend the demolition permit to cover only the house. The Town will move the small structure down Route 80, and plans to apply for grant funding to hire an environmental consultant to supervise lead-paint removal, the move down the highway and placement at the new site.

The building will be moved to the Reynolds Beers house, owned by the Tototoket Historical Society. The Society is seeking an old-fashioned gas pump to recreate the gas station’s original appearance and has nominated the building to the State Register of historic places.

Unfortunately, the move will rob the gas station of its historic roadside site, as well as its association with its builder’s house, both of which make its original function more easily understandable. But it is heartening to know that, out of 16 houses and a barn threatened with demolition by RWA, one small outbuilding is now assured of preservation.
Fort Trumbull: End of the Story?
New London. In 2000 the 64 houses and 26 businesses in this riverfront neighborhood were listed by the Connecticut Trust as one of the “Most Important Threatened Historic Places in Connecticut.” Since that time the Fort neighborhood has made national news as seven property owners, led by The Institute for Justice, and supported by New London Landmarks and the Coalition to Save the Fort Trumbull Neighborhood, went all the way to the Supreme Court to save their homes.

The Court ruled against them, and nearly all the buildings remaining in Fort Trumbull will be demolished shortly, obliterating this small neighborhood of late 19th and early 20th century vernacular homes. Suzette Kelo’s now familiar pink house may be moved if a new site can be found and a few of the plantings in the Cristofaros’ historic family garden will be transplanted. Then the heavy equipment of demolition will wipe out all features of the neighborhood in preparation for redevelopment.

Was this a fight worth pursuing? Yes. Did the Fort Trumbull owners win? No. Will the City of New London win? That remains to be seen.

The larger battle is not lost. The abuse of eminent domain was the major concern of New London Landmarks and supporters for the last seven years. Now all issues of eminent domain are high on priority lists in state, city and small neighborhoods nationwide. Private property rights versus public interest and appropriate compensation in event of eminent domain takings are now recognized as subjects for arbitration. Developers no longer have the last word when redevelopment involves eminent domain takings.

Current plans for Fort Trumbull include a Coast Guard museum, a luxury hotel, 66 rental apartments and 14 rental townhouses, as well as a 24 suite, extended stay hotel and a River Walk. Only one office building remains on the original riverfront site. Demolition plans have always exempted the existing Coast Guard Station and Fort Trumbull State Park.

Complete financial information on Fort Trumbull redevelopment is not currently available, even under the Freedom of Information Act. Accurate financial accounting of this project is virtually impossible, let alone consideration of the intangible human costs.

Meanwhile, from a preservation perspective, the history of this working-class neighborhood, with ties to its Italian roots, is gone. The homes, the granite outcroppings, the families and the naval technology that made Fort Trumbull historically significant have all been wiped out. At the end of this drawn out and emotional battle, one has to wonder if this project, as currently planned, will bring the economic development promised by New London Development Corporation. At the turn of the 22nd century, will New London residents be proud of the new Fort Trumbull neighborhood? Will its economic development have helped to save other historic neighborhoods in the city? It remains to be seen.

—Sandra Kersten Chalk, Executive Director, New London Landmarks
dust, noise or smells that farming can create. Even where farmers continue to work the land, changes in crops may require different buildings, putting some older barns at risk. See the sidebar for a brief analysis of threats to barns in one Connecticut town.

What’s needed: Fuller documentation and recognition in surveys and historic register forms; recognition is the first step toward protection. In many cases, the best way to preserve barns is to preserve their original use. Planning that makes room for agriculture can help preserve barns, as can programs to encourage farming, such as the state’s program to purchase the development rights of agricultural land. For barns themselves, Connecticut should look at state programs, as in New York or Vermont, which provide tax credits or grants or loans for agricultural buildings. For cases where barns must find new uses, flexibility and imagination are needed. New Canaan has zoning regulations that make it easier to keep historic barns, which could be a model for other towns (see CPN April/May and September/October 2004).

Statewide: Buildings on open space land

Significance: When land is acquired for park use or open space protection by the state, by local land trusts, by towns, or by utilities, there is a good chance that there will be historic buildings on it. Because open space land is by definition in rural areas, the threatened buildings are overwhelmingly farmhouses and related structures.

Threat: While groups that preserve open space and provide for recreation contribute much to society, building preservation is not usually part of their mission. Almost all operate with severely limited budgets, and buildings that don’t contribute to their core missions are an unaffordable luxury. Offering the buildings to be moved can seem to be a reasonable solution, but in actuality it rarely works. In 2004 the South Central Connecticut Regional Water Authority (RWA) offered 17 historic buildings for moving (see CPN, November/December 2004), and in the past year the state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) has offered four houses located in state parks to be moved. Of these, one has been successfully moved, and the department is close to an agreement for a second, but the remaining two could still face demolition. In addition to DEP, towns, land trusts, and utilities face similar dilemmas.

What’s needed: Historic resources should be noted when land is acquired for open space purposes, and their preservation planned for. If the landowning body has no use for the buildings, resale with appropriate protective covenants is an option, one that the town of Hebron is considering for the Samuel Peters house, which it acquired when it bought 120 acres for town use (see CPN, July/August 2005). RWA sought and gained legislative approval to sell its historic buildings, but has refused to exercise that option. State law does not allow DEP to sell properties, or to lease them to private entities, only to towns; perhaps greater flexibility could help the department preserve historic buildings. Some states, for instance, have leasing programs such as the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation’s Historic Curatorship program, which offers long-term leases on parkland buildings in exchange for restoration and maintenance. Another possible solution is partnerships with municipalities or other nonprofit organizations; after receiving no proposals to move the Ostrom Enders house in Waterford, DEP is currently talking to the town of about ways it might use the house.

Endangered Barns: The View from One Town

Between 1976 and 1978, Old Sturbridge Village conducted a survey of barns in central Massachusetts, northwest Rhode Island, and northeast Connecticut. The study appears to have focused on larger dairy barns, but included some smaller barns, and some identified as “modern.” The Sturbridge study covered 176 barns in Woodstock, more than any other town included. The Woodstock Historic Properties Commission has recently undertaken a windshield survey to see how those barns have fared. So far, the Commission has determined that about 30% of the barns from the Sturbridge survey had been lost (the work is not yet completed). In addition, they have found barns that Sturbridge missed, particularly those on smaller roads or set back from a road.

Commission chair Jean McClellan, a former CTHP Trustee, writes, “It appears to me that weather and fire have been equal partners in the demise of Woodstock barns. While all areas of town have been affected, the greatest losses seem to be in the areas of poorest soil and least affluent population. Barns on small holdings that have fallen into disuse have been especially vulnerable, unless rescued by creative re-use or enthusiastic new owners. Barns on active farms with good soils generally have strong roofs and structures, though they may not be painted. Farmers have sometimes built new barns and sacrificed the old; but many of the older barns are lovingly maintained and in active use.”
Bridgeport: Possible Thomas Wheeler homestead site

Significance: Thomas Wheeler, the first settler in Bridgeport’s Black Rock section, built a house in 1644 that also served as a trading post and fort. According to Bridgeport historian Charles Brilvitch, the remains of 3-foot-thick stone walls recently discovered at 10 Brewster Street are consistent with 17th century fort construction and could be remnants of Wheeler’s homestead.

Threat: Developers Brewster Street LLC want to build a 76-unit condominium building on the site. They say the stonework isn’t the remains of a fort, but rather the foundations of a 19th-century factory.

What’s needed: Archaeological sites are less visible to the untrained eye than standing buildings, yet they can offer valuable information about the past. The developers have temporarily withdrawn their plans, so there is time for further research. While industrial remains are potentially important, a 17th-century site would be much rarer. In either case, the larger issue is the importance of knowing what you have before you destroy it. According to State Archaeologist Nicholas Bellantoni, “You need to find out before it’s too late.” If the site turns out to be important, then perhaps the developers could allow time for thorough excavation.

Madison: Shelley house

Significance: Individually listed on the National Register, the Shelley house is exceptionally well-preserved, featuring such early elements as feather-edged wall sheathing and exposed framing members with well-crafted chamfers and stops. Most impressive is the clear evidence that the house was actually built in several stages, beginning in the late 17th or early 18th century as a one-room, two-story structure with an end wall of stone, then gaining a second two-story section and finally a rear lean-to.

Threat: The owner is about to put the house on the market. While it was lived in until about a year ago, the systems and services need updating, and general restoration will be needed as well. Location on busy Route 1 with commercial development nearby might deter some prospects.

What’s needed: A buyer with appreciation for historic architecture and patience to undertake restoration.

Norwich: Plaut-Cadden Building

Significance: Built around 1910, the Plaut-Cadden building is a handsome Beaux-Arts commercial building in tan brick with richly carved ornamentation and a contributing resource in the Downtown Norwich National Register district.

Threat: Neglect. After a fitful attempt to renovate the ground floor, the owner abandoned the project and the building sits empty.

What’s needed: This is the largest downtown building that hasn’t either been renovated or currently has plans for renovation. In a city whose economy is on the upturn and on a site only a few doors from the newly-restored Wauregan Hotel (see CPN, July/August 2006), it’s likely that, sooner or later, something will...
Threatened Places, cont’d from page 9

happen with the Plaut-Cadden building, but action needs to begin before the neglect goes too far.

North Haven:
Pierpont-Bigelow-Kipp house
Significance: Probably built in the mid-18th century, this was the home of Joseph Pierpont, a prosperous merchant and mill owner. Later it became the birthplace and boyhood home of Hobart Bigelow, who became a prominent industrialist and civic leader in New Haven. Under its aluminum siding, the house appears to be a well-preserved example of a common North Haven type of the 18th century, a one-story house with gracefully flaring eaves and a center chimney. The 15-acre property also includes farm buildings dating from the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Threat: The town has approved plans for a new residential subdivision, which call for demolishing the house and outbuildings. The North Haven Historical Society and historic consultant Kate Ohno are preparing a National Register nomination for the property, which will delay demolition under the Connecticut Environmental Protection Act (EPA). But the owner will eventually be able to block Register listing, and the EPA will no longer apply.

Larger issues: Like many Connecticut towns, North Haven faces strong development pressures; if an expected commuter rail line between New Haven and Springfield is built, these pressures will only increase.

What’s needed: For this site: a plan to incorporate the house, and possibly some of the outbuildings, into the new subdivision. In the long term, North Haven, like many Connecticut towns, could enact measures to make preservation more attractive, such as a delay of demolition ordinance and zoning incentives for reusing historic buildings.

Norwalk:
Grumman-St. John house
Significance: Recent research suggests that this house may have been built in the mid-18th century, even though its visible elements are Federal and Second Empire in style. The house is a contributing resource in Norwalk Green National Register district and despite conversion to apartments retains a significant amount of historic fabric.

Threat: The neighboring Norwalk Inn wants to demolish the house for expansion. In 2001, the inn received a variance allowing it to build an addition on the site of the house, but an adjoining property owner appealed the variance, and it was overturned by the state Superior Court. Now the inn and the neighbor have agreed to settle, and the variance could be reinstated if the court approves it.

What’s needed: The Norwalk Preservation Trust is actively opposing demolition. In 2001 they received a Connecticut Circuit Rider mini-grant for a plan showing how the inn could use the house, and the group is currently applying to be an intervenor in the court case under the Connecticut Environmental Protection Act.

Stamford:
Yale & Towne Lock Factory
Significance: Once the world’s largest hardware manufacturer, Yale & Towne dominated Stamford’s economy for close to 70 years. The company’s 20-acre complex in the city’s South End contains 500,000 square
feet of former industrial buildings, now mostly housing artists’ studios and antique dealers. The site is the centerpiece of the South End National Register district.

**Threat:** Consultants for the previous owner, Heyman Properties, recommended preserving almost the entire site, but the property has since been sold to Antares Real Estate of Greenwich, who need to develop it more intensively in order to recoup their investment. Antares’ plan calls for converting the main factory building, a large five-story brick structure, into luxury lofts. Most of the one-story manufacturing sheds with their sawtooth and monitor roofs would be demolished for a New Urbanist development with mixed commercial and residential uses on a small grid of streets. The property would have to be rezoned, but local preservationists think this will happen, despite opposition from downtown merchants.

**Comments:** Massive multi-story factory buildings are imposing remnants of historic manufacturing activity, but subsidiary buildings more vividly reflect the processes required for specific products. Without these smaller structures, the sense of the site as a complete industrial complex will be lost.

**What’s needed:** Plans to incorporate more of the existing historic buildings into the project. Preservation tools such as the federal rehabilitation tax credit and the new state residential conversion tax credit (see CPN, July/August 2006) might help make this economically viable.

**Torrington: Water Street**

**Significance:** Part of downtown Torrington, Water Street developed in the 19th and early 20th centuries with a mix of commercial and industrial buildings. The street was designated a National Register district in 2002.

**Threat:** After several quiet years, the city is moving ahead with a redevelopment plan created in 2001 (see CPN Sept/Oct 2001), which calls for transforming Water Street into a shopping district with a large anchor store and numerous smaller businesses.

**Comments:** The development is planned to look like a traditional downtown, with lines of shops facing the streets, but the single-developer model more closely resembles a mall.

**What’s needed:** An independent evaluation of each of the historic buildings and a commitment to incorporating as many as possible into the new development. The Torrington Historical Society commissioned an alternate redevelopment plan, partly funded by a Connecticut Trust technical assistance grant, which shows how revitalization can be accomplished by preserving the district’s historic buildings. Because state money is involved, the State Historic Preservation Office has a regulatory role in the project.

Some would be located in existing historic structures, but the plan calls for “completely or mostly” demolishing 17 of the district’s 34 contributing buildings (that is, some facades would remain as fronts for new buildings).

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*continued on page 12*
the process; Susan Chandler, the office’s Historical Architect, says, “I’m very hopeful that the demolition can be minimized.”

**Watertown: Watertown Town Hall**

Significance: One of the community buildings that surround Watertown’s green, the town hall is what a local historic district study called a “vibrant but naïve” Colonial Revival building, whose “apparent clash of forms … creates a brash dynamism rarely found in public buildings in this area…” The area is also a National Register district.

Threat: Neglected for many years, the town hall suffers from water damage, roof failure, and questions about the stability of its rear wall. The town has been trying for a long time to find a site for a new town hall, and has been reluctant to invest in this building. The town council has authorized a citizen group, the Town Hall Preservation Committee, to raise money for repairs, but the group’s efforts have been put on hold pending a detailed structural analysis.

What’s needed: Public-private partnerships can be valuable methods for funding restoration of public buildings. In this case, central location, impressive architecture and historic associations argue for continued municipal use. Nearby Thomaston provides an example of a town that has made a long-term commitment to its historic town hall.

**Willimantic: Three buildings on Main Street**

Significance: Nathan Hale Hotel (1926), a Georgian Revival structure; Thomas Hooker Hotel (1887), currently owned by Connecticut Housing Finance Authority and operated as supportive and low-income housing; and the YMCA (actually two deteriorating 19th-century buildings joined behind a later pierced-block façade). All three are contributing buildings in the Main Street National Register district, which comprises Willimantic’s commercial district. Also included is the vacant site of the Chapman...
Block, recently demolished after years of neglect.

Threat: In January the Town of Windham issued a request for qualifications for redevelopment. Two potential developers responded. One, POKO Partners of Port Chester, New York, called for restoring one of the YMCA’s historic façades, reconstructing the Chapman Block, and renovating the two hotels as mixed-income housing and retail. The town chose the other developer, called Frog Prince, who wrote that “every initiative will be taken to reuse and restore all buildings that have been deemed historically significant,” but then submitted a plan that calls for razing all three buildings for a new hotel, offices and conference center on one side of the street and 20 condominium units on the other. Sharon Vernon of the town’s Community Development office says the town still wants to preserve and reuse the buildings.

What’s needed: A professional evaluation of the historic and structural integrity of the buildings. The town should stick to its guns and require Frog Prince to retain and reuse as many of the historic buildings as possible.

And one to watch…

The City of New Haven has received bonding approval to buy the Bigelow Boiler Company factory for redevelopment. The factory, home to a manufacturer of steam boilers that had a world-wide business (it was founded by Hobart Bigelow—see North Haven, page 10), is the centerpiece of the River Street National Register district. But the money won’t be delivered until October, and the factory’s owner, Jeffrey Etherington, is balking at the time involved. As CPN goes to press, Etherington has pulled a demolition permit and is threatening to raze the factory buildings.
The Preservation League of New York State named Historic Wooden Windows to its annual “Seven to Save” list, announced in February.

“Each year thousands of historic wood windows are removed and sent to landfills across New York,” said Jay DiLorenzo, the League’s president, in a press release. “At the Preservation League we have been particularly concerned about this issue because original wood windows are such an important part of the appearance and character of a historic home. We want New Yorkers to have all the facts before they opt for replacement.”

Those facts include the relative ease of repairing wooden windows. Lorraine Weiss, the League’s Program Manager for Technical and Grant Programs, notes that, “Sometimes repair is simply a matter of learning to re-tie the ropes holding the counterweights. A few yards of rope are far more affordable than a new window.”

As for new windows, “There’s a reason they’re called replacement windows,” says preservation specialist John Leeke (see his column on page 16). “When they break, the only thing you can do is buy an entire new window because there are no craftsmen who can repair them.”

Another justification often given for replacing historic windows is the need for greater energy efficiency. However, the seals on double-glazed replacement windows are generally guaranteed for only twenty years, while storm windows and weather stripping can also block air leakage.

Like many preservation groups, the Preservation League, New York’s statewide nonprofit preservation organization, publishes an annual list of important historic sites that face significant threats. Listing wooden windows was a departure for the League, since it highlights a widespread preservation issue, rather than a particular site or district. The League plans to add a special section about the maintenance and repair of wooden windows to its website, and is working with other preservation organizations to offer window repair workshops for homeowners.

For more information:
Preservation League of New York State: www.preservenys.org


The textures and shadow lines of wooden windows are an essential characteristic of many historic buildings.
all the way to a power scrubber with hot water and a tri-sodium phosphate detergent. If bare wood is exposed excessive water may swell and warp the wood. Use as little water as possible and have handy a wet-dry vacuum and ventilation fans. You may find at any step along the way that the floor looks good and requires no further treatment. With the floor clean you can assess its condition. Is the existing finish worn down to bare wood? Are there extensive cracks and peeling? Is the current color the natural color of the wood? You can determine if it has been stained by cutting through the finish and into the wood with a sharp knife or chisel. If the color of the wood is much lighter below the surface it is probably stained. What is the condition of the wood? Are there splits, slivers or excessive cracks between the boards? Is the surface worn near doors and along walkways?

It is unlikely a polyurethane varnish will expand to 6 CEUs and be offered in Middletown, Danbury and lower Fairfield County. Rachel Carley, an architectural historian and preservation consultant from Litchfield, will teach the sessions, using her own book, The Dictionary of American Domestic Architecture, as a supplemental text. Rachel is an old friend of the Trust’s, having written the text for www.towngreens.com and served as our architectural historian consultant on our two trips to Cuba. —Helen Higgins

Feder Funds

Are there any Federal funds available for private restoration projects? —Nathan Wilkenson, Dover, NH

Generally, Federal grants are not available for privately owned properties. However, you can get a tax credit for rehabilitating an historic building, or a non-historic building built before 1936. Federal tax law offers a 20% tax credit for rehabilitations of historic buildings, and a 10% tax credit for rehabs of non-historic buildings built before 1936. The credit is a dollar-for-dollar reduction of taxes owed. The 20% rehab investment equals 20% of the amount spent to rehab a certified historic structure. The 10% rehab investment tax credit equals 10% of the amount spent to rehab a non-historic building built before 1936. What buildings qualify? For the 20% credit, the building must be listed in the National Register of Historic places, eligible for the Register, or be located in a registered historic district. The work done on the building must meet strict guidelines that preserve its architectural character and historical significance. For the 10% credit, the building must be built before 1936. For both credits the building must be income-producing. The tax credit program for historic buildings is administered by each state’s historic preservation office. For more info on preservation tax credits call your state historic preservation office. The office in your state may have a different name than that, but every state has one. Call your state government general information number and they will help you find the correct office.

John Leeke is a preservation consultant who helps homeowners, contractors and architects understand and maintain their historic buildings. You can contact him at 26 Higgins St., Portland, Maine, 04103, 207 773-2306; or by E-mail: johnleeke@HistoricHomeWorks.com; or log onto his website at: www.HistoricHomeWorks.com.

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This is the first installment of a regular question and answer column on the maintenance and preservation of historic (and just plain old) buildings by John Leeke, American Preservationeer. As an historic building specialist, Leeke has been helping owners, tradespeople, contractors and architects understand and maintain their historic buildings for 20 years. He has been restoring historic buildings in New England for over 30 years and still spends a good part of his time “with hammer in hand”. He has written on restoration and preservation topics for Old-House Journal, Fine Homebuilding, The Journal of Light Construction and other national publications. He now writes and publishes the Practical Restoration Reports.

**Weathered Shingles**

We have an historic Shingle Style house that was reshingled a few years ago. The exterior finish is now mostly gray rather than the rich wood color it once had. Is there a way to restore the shingles to their original appearance? —Kathy Kline, Bass Lake, CA

When unprotected wood is exposed to the weather it gradually changes from the “bright” tan (for typical softwoods) to a silvery gray. This happens because the ultraviolet rays of the sun break down the tan colored lignin content of the wood at the surface leaving the gray cellulose fibers. This is the “natural” appearance of weathered wood. If you want that “fresh” look you will be bucking this natural process and setting yourself up for routine maintenance.

To renew the original look of the wood you can spray it with the selected effect on the rest of the house. Add a water-repellent treatment, such as Thompson’s Water Seal or Curprinol Clear, to the fresh wood surfaces which will help prolong the fresh look. Eventually it will turn gray and you can clean and treat again. You may have to repeat this every 2 to 5 years.

**Floor Finishing**

I have uncovered wood floors (maple) in my 1920s bungalow home that have been covered with carpeting for many years (I would guess more than 20). Is there a method that I can put a new finish on these floors without sanding them down? There are not a lot of scratches or stains in the floors and I don’t want to retain the current color of the wood. Can I put a new polyurethane finish over the old varnish finish? —Jerry Langley, Atlanta, GA

First clean the newly exposed wood flooring. Begin with a damp mopping and warm water and progress by steps to more aggressive cleaning methods and materials. An intermediate step would be hand scrubbing with a mild detergent like dish washing detergent, Murphy’s Oil-Soap, Simple Green or Minwax’s new wood floor cleaners.

The texture and color of weathered wood shingles are an important element of the Shingle Style. This is Tranquility Farm in Middlebury, demolished in 1985.