Preservation Opportunities

The Most Important Threatened Historic Places in Connecticut

Alice Ball house, New Canaan
(International Style teardowns, The Most Important Threatened Historic Places, 1999)

Significance: Designed for a single woman in 1953 by Philip Johnson, the Ball house is a small, simple structure that gains architectural interest from the use of crossed axes to make a small space seem larger. It has no historic designation.

Threat: The owner, Christine Ross, is an architect who wants to build a huge new house on the property (reportedly 14,000 square feet or more) and use the Johnson building as a pool or guest house. But the town wetlands commission turned down her application. Ross claims that her only alternative is to demolish the Ball house and build the new one on its site. The house is listed for sale (at two times the price she paid for it just two years ago), but Ross has also threatened to apply for a demolition permit.

Broader issues: Modernist houses remain particularly vulnerable to teardowns, partly because they may employ experimental materials that haven’t held up well or contain smaller spaces than today’s homebuyers are trained to expect. In this case, an innocent house is being held hostage to its owner’s overblown and unnecessary plans.

Editor’s note: This year, the Connecticut Trust has tried to increase its involvement with the sites listed and to find or propose concrete, realistic solutions to the problems they represent. Rather than merely bewailing sorry situations, we hope that these listings will illustrate good practices for preservationists across the state. Because of this change in approach, we have re-listed some sites from the past, where they seem to have reached a critical point or where they illustrate an especially interesting point.

continued on page 6
From the Executive Director

This summer we have benefited from having Melissa Antonelli, a student from the Roger Williams University preservation program, as an intern. One of the most knowledgeable interns we’ve had, Melissa has researched delay of demolition ordinances, helped make measured drawings of endangered barns in Wethersfield, and tirelessly dug for information for our annual listing of The Most Important Threatened Historic Places. We will miss her!

The Connecticut Trust has received a grant from the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s Northeast Office of $2500 to help support a feasibility and fundraising plan that will enable the John E. Rogers African American Cultural Center create a cultural and community center at Northwest District School (1885-1895) in Hartford. The John E. Rogers African American Cultural Center was established in 1991 for the specific purpose of engendering pride and empowering the black community of Connecticut with the knowledge of its unique history and culture. Trustee Glenn Geathers can be credited with bringing the Rogers Center and the Connecticut Trust together for what we expect to be a very productive partnership.

In mid-August, the Greater Hartford Convention and Visitors Bureau, the Trust and the Hartford Preservation Alliance welcomed from the National Trust Kathy Adams, Director of the Center for Preservation Leadership and Lori Feinman, Associate Director of Meetings and Conferences to Hartford for their two day visit to evaluate the offerings of the city for the site of the 2011 National Preservation Conference. Numerous community leaders including Mayor Eddie Perez, and residents of historic neighborhoods in Hartford, as well as preservation leaders from around the state helped with the visit, making an excellent case not just for the conference but for the growing vitality of Hartford. We will learn in early October if Hartford is chosen.

I hope many of you have been following Deputy Director Christopher Wigren’s “Forum on Form,” a series on architectural styles in the Sunday Hartford Courant. They are instructive while being excellent reading. Chris is scheduled to speak on “Modernism in Connecticut” at the AIA New England annual conference in New Canaan on October 6. His talk is part of a three-day program centered on Modernist design and celebrating the opening of the Glass House.

—Helen Higgins
Scultures in Local Historic Districts: What’s a Structure?

The Connecticut Supreme Court ruled in June that historic district commissions have the power to regulate large sculptures that sit on the ground in local historic districts.

The issue was raised by a case in Southport, where Andrew and Christine Hall installed a large concrete-and-steel sculpture on the front lawn of their home, the Oliver H. Perry house, in 2003. The sculpture, by German artist Anselm Kiefer, is titled “Etroits sont les vaisseaux” (“Narrow are the vessels”) and consists of 17 wavy sections of concrete with protruding rebar.

The state enabling law for local historic districts says that property owners must obtain a certificate of appropriateness before constructing or altering any building or structure visible from a public right-of-way. The law defines a structure as “any combination of materials, other than a building, which is affixed to the land, and shall include, but not be limited to, signs, fences and walls…”

The Halls initially applied for a certificate of appropriateness, but withdrew the application before it could be ruled on, claiming that the sculpture did not constitute a structure since it was not permanently attached to the ground. The town of Fairfield argued that the sculpture, because of its size and weight, did constitute a structure. The town sued to force the Halls to apply for a certificate of appropriateness or else to remove the sculpture. The court ruled in the town’s favor, and the Halls appealed the decision to the Connecticut Supreme Court, which upheld the lower court’s decision.

Writing for the Supreme Court, Justice Peter T. Zarella notes that the enabling law does not define the meaning of “affixed to the land” except by listing examples such as “signs, fences and walls.” Based on dictionary definitions, Zarella concludes that gravity could also be considered a potential means of attachment. He notes that other states, including California, New Jersey, Oregon, Utah, and New York, follow this definition and he cites Connecticut precedents recognizing fences that are not embedded in the ground. Zarella concludes, “…if fences resting on the earth and held in place by their manner of construction and weight are regarded as attached to the land, then an eighty foot long, multi-ton sculpture that is secured in position by its enormous size and weight also must be considered attached to the realty.”

The ruling gave the Halls until August 11 to apply for a certificate of appropriateness. As CPN goes to press it appears that they have not done so, but are instead making arrangements to remove the sculpture.

The decision leaves unanswered the question of just how big and how heavy an object has to be to be considered “affixed” to the ground by gravity. Zarella draws a distinction between the Halls’ sculpture on one hand and hammocks, flower planters or statuette on the other, but exactly where between those two extremes does the dividing line lie? The answer will have to wait for another lawsuit, or for clarification by the legislature.

For more information: the full text of the Supreme Court’s decision can be found at http://www.jud.ct.gov/external/supapp/Cases/AROCr/CR282/282cr77.pdf

The Oliver H. Perry house in Southport, where a large sculpture was judged to be subject to historic district regulations. The sculpture was installed on the front lawn, largely screened from the street by plantings.
Ledyard. The developer of the town’s first conservation subdivision is seeking to overturn aspects of the approval. As CPN reported in July, Ledyard’s planning and zoning commission had approved plans for the subdivision, including a number of conditions to protect archaeological sites associated with Rogerene Quakers. These conditions were based on recommendations drawn from the developer’s own archaeological and hydrological experts.

The approval was a long and difficult process, but the commission thought it had reached a compromise that accommodated the interests of the developer, town residents, Indian tribes, and the State Historic Preservation Office. However, after the vote the applicant, Arnold Peck, of Orange, filed an appeal seeking to have the restrictions lifted.

According to Town Planner Brian Palaia, Peck claims that the conditions imposed by the town have exceeded the town’s authority under its planning and subdivision regulations and would devalue his property. He specifically objects to the requirements that he eliminate two building lots, breach a dam on the property, and implement a cultural management plan recommended by his consultants, the Public Archaeology Survey Team.

The appeal will go to a state court, but no date has been set for a hearing. In the meantime, the developer is pursuing plans for both a conventional subdivision and a conservation subdivision without the elements that he has objected to.

Ellington. After nearly four years of efforts, an agreement between a developer and the town will ensure the preservation of the Eleazer Pinney house.

The house was built between 1775 and 1778 by Pinney, a successful farmer who also held several town offices and represented Ellington in the legislature.

According to architectural historian John O. Curtis, the house’s brick construction, generous plan, and sophisticated classical detailing demonstrate that Pinney was a man of taste and means.

Deer Valley, Ltd., a development company founded by Eric S. Santini, acquired the property in 2004 with plans to build high-end townhouses. Santini soon announced plans to demolish the Pinney house, claiming that it was structurally unsound.
In response, the town of Ellington formed a committee to look into ways of preserving the house. A Historic Preservation Technical Assistance Grant (HPTAG) from the Connecticut Trust helped fund a National Register nomination, which now awaits final approval by the National Park Service. Deer Valley, as owner of the property, initially opposed National Register listing, but Dale Roberson, chair of the ad hoc committee, hopes that the objection will be dropped. National Register listing will make the house eligible for financial assistance.

This past spring, Santini agreed to lease the house to the town for one dollar per year. The town plans to restore the house and rent it to community groups for events. The 99-year lease was signed on August 17, and the town is entertaining applications from engineers to conduct a thorough structural analysis.

The town has also received a state grant of $500,000 toward the cost of restoration. “There are many people who took part in this process,” says Roberson. “But it was the funding and the Santini family’s cooperation that brought it all together. Persistence paid off.”

**Norwich.** A proposal that would have established floating commercial zones throughout the city has been dropped, but a developer’s plans still threaten an historic neighborhood.

The developer, Carpionato-LaBossiere Properties LLC, wants to build a Walgreen’s drugstore on Washington Street, one of Norwich’s main thoroughfares. The site lies in an area just outside the Chelsea Parade National Register district that nonetheless contains a number of historic buildings. The company currently has an option to purchase 299 Washington Street, a ranch house on the site of Benedict Arnold’s birthplace (which was demolished in 1853). It would also like to buy numbers 301 and 303, an Italianate house built in 1870 and a shingled bungalow dating to 1925, according to the city assessor’s records.

Rather than simply rezone these properties, Carpionato-LaBossiere proposed a floating zone that would allow commercial development on any parcel measuring between three and five acres, as long as the parcel is on a state road and within 300 feet of a commercial use existing at the time of passage. Norwich has several state roads that pass through predominantly historic residential areas where small-scale commercial uses like neighborhood stores could provide numerous opportunities for rezoning under the floating zone.

The City government accepted Carpionato-LaBossiere’s proposal, seeing it as a way to build Norwich’s grand list by attracting more businesses. Like most Connecticut cities, Norwich is strapped for cash, and most of the new development that the city has managed to attract recently has been for housing, which generally uses more in city services than it contributes in taxes. Commercial development, officials thought, would take some of the tax burden off homeowners.

However, the proposal drew broad community opposition. Opponents called it a broad-blanket rezoning that didn’t consider the needs of and consequences for individual sites. They said that new development under the proposed ordinance could decrease the value of nearby residential properties, actually reducing rather than increasing the grand list.

Eventually, Mayor Ben Lathrop withdrew the floating zone proposal. However, Carpionato-LaBossiere still hopes to rezone just the Washington Street houses. Introducing new commercial activity in the corridor will increase traffic volume to an already congested stretch of state road. Norwich officials should carefully consider all the consequences of rezoning these properties.

**New Haven.** A temporary art installation is calling attention to New Haven’s transportation and industrial history.

When Slovenian artist Matej Vogrincič first visited New Haven at the invitation of Site Projects New Haven, he was struck by the former rail yards and factory buildings. "I was excited by the rawness of the site," he says. "It’s like a blank canvas—a place where anything could happen."

Vogrincič has created an installation of public art in a vacant parking lot near the New Haven train station. The project, called “Brickyard,” features a series of large-scale sculptures made from recycled materials, including old bricks, metal piping, and discarded electrical conduits. The sculptures are intended to evoke the industrial history of the area, while also serving as a visual reminder of the city’s past as a hub of transportation and manufacturing.

The installation is part of a larger initiative by Site Projects New Haven to promote public art and cultural development in the city. "We want to create opportunities for artists to explore new forms of public engagement," says project director J. Michael Sundberg. "This is just the beginning of what we hope will be a long-term effort to inject new life into this historic neighborhood."
What's needed: A realistic plan for Ross' new house or a new owner who appreciates the Ball house for what it is. In connection with the opening of Philip Johnson's Glass House in New Canaan, the National Trust for Historic Preservation is positioning itself as an advocate for preserving New Canaan's internationally-known inventory of modern houses (see CPN, May/June 2007). The Glass House staff, along with Circuit Rider Greg Farmer, the New Canaan Historical Society, and the National Trust's Northeast Office has urged Ross to scale back her construction plans, appealing to her skill as an architect, her respect for Johnson's work, and the potential bad press that would result if she demolished the Ball house.

Freeman houses, Bridgeport
(The Most Important Threatened Historic Places, 1992)

Significance: Built in the 1840s for Mary and Eliza Freeman, these two houses represent the last historic remnants of “Little Liberia,” a once-thriving antebellum community of free blacks. The houses were listed on the National Register in 1999 and belong to Action for Bridgeport Community Development, Inc., a nonprofit organization that, according to its website, seeks to identify and eliminate the causes of poverty.

Threat: Past attempts to redevelop the severely deteriorated houses failed, and they are rapidly nearing the point of no return. The houses stand between two low-end commercial buildings and opposite an ocean of parking lots and vacant lots that extends for several blocks. This is not an attractive location for anything, be it museum, housing, or any other use.

What's needed: First, a clearly articulated vision for the houses, and second, broad-based support from Bridgeport, the rest of Connecticut and even outside the state. Fortunately, the city has selected a developer for the vacant land across the street, whose plans call for townhouses on that parcel and new commercial development beyond. With this development, the houses, located between downtown and Seaside Park, stand a better chance of finding a viable use.

First Lutheran Church of the Reformation, New Britain

Significance: Built in 1903 to designs by New Britain architect William Cadwell, this monumental Gothic Revival church is a landmark on New Britain’s Franklin Square, where its soaring twin towers help define one of the city’s most important civic spaces and call attention to the congregation’s ministry. The building has no official designation, but it appears to be a good candidate for the National Register, either on its own or as part of a larger district around the square.
Threat: The congregation is facing the consequences of deferred maintenance. An architect estimates that bringing the building back to ideal condition would cost $1 million. In addition, the towers are separating from the main body of the structure, also due to lack of maintenance. To repair them, they would have to be dismantled and completely rebuilt, at a cost of an additional $1 million. Church members see three options: demolish the entire building and start over; remove part of the towers and repair the rest; or restore the entire building.

Broader issues: Many struggling urban congregations face the difficult choice between buildings and mission. The Partners for Sacred Places, a nationwide preservation organization for historic houses of worship, argues that this is a false dichotomy and advises congregations to reach beyond their own or denominational resources to other persons and groups whom they serve. The group also points out that religious buildings themselves can be a form of ministry, a visible public witness to the congregation's faith and a source of comfort or inspiration to passersby (see CPN January/February 2007).

What's needed: Reconsideration of the importance of First Lutheran’s building and of ways to finance repairs. National or State Register listing could help the building qualify for restoration grants. Circuit Rider Brad Schide has met with the pastor and put church leaders in touch with Partners for Sacred Places.

“The Great Fill,” Farmington Canal, Cheshire

Significance: Built by New Haven investors in an attempt to wrest access to the interior—and advantages for trade—away from Hartford and other Connecticut River ports, the Farmington Canal was never a financial success, but it was Connecticut’s most impressive contribution to the nation’s canal-building era. One of the canal’s most impressive sights is the Great Fill, an elevated section, 1,000 feet long and 40 feet high, that carried the canal over a river. Essentially a huge culvert, the Fill was technically difficult and expensive to build, a major engineering feat of the age. The entire canal is listed on the National Register.

Eventually a railroad replaced the canal, but it diverted to a different path away from the Great Fill. The railroad line has gradually been converted to a trail for foot and bicycle traffic, but the Great Fill survived until recent years in nearly unaltered condition, hidden away on private property.

Threat: After years of benign neglect, a storm damaged the Great Fill this past April, exacerbating erosion by ATV traffic. After the storm, the State cut through part of the Fill so that future flooding could bypass the narrow culvert through which the river flows.

In addition, the site’s owner, W/S Development, plans a mixed residential/commercial development on the 100-plus acre tract. Jeff Curley of W/S Development stresses his company’s interest in maintaining the cultural and historic value of the Great Fill: plans include repairing the stone culvert, installing an information kiosk, and constructing a walking path. But the company’s plans actually call for preserving only a short section of the Fill, and for lowering the height of that remaining section, which will drastically change its historic character and detract from the magnitude of the engineering feat that it represents.

What's needed: W/S Development could use assistance in assessing the character-defining elements of the Great Fill and determining how best to protect them in the context of their development. So far, the company appears open to suggestions, but there still is a way to go. The Trust is trying to help the developer understand what elements of the Great Fill and the canal are important to preserving the site’s historic integrity while carrying out a project that will make it accessible to the public.

Capewell Horse Nail Factory, Hartford

The Most Important Threatened Historic Places, 2001

Significance: Founded by inventor George Capewell, who devised an improved technique for making horseshoe nails, this is one of Hartford’s most important factories, a reminder that Connecticut
Most Important Threatened Places, cont’d from page 7

industries not only produced goods, but also developed innovative machinery and manufacturing techniques. The Capewell factory is individually listed on National Register as an example of this dual significance.

Threat: Developer John Reveruzzi has been trying for years to renovate the factory as moderate-cost, market-rate condos, but progress has stalled for lack of funding, and the factory continues to crumble. Laura Knott-Twine, executive director of the Hartford Preservation Alliance says, “If work on restoring the building is put off for 2 more years the building may then be beyond saving.”

Broader issues: Among the difficulties is Hartford’s weak condo market, which has hurt a number of condo projects or caused them to switch to rentals. However, Hartford mayor Eddie Perez is committed to promoting home ownership and reluctant to support creating rental housing, even though rental properties could qualify for an additional federal historic rehabilitation tax credit. One option might be to do the project as rental housing, and then convert to condos after five years, as the federal tax credit allows. The factory’s location between downtown and the Colt armory should make it a prime revitalization candidate, allowing it to benefit from ongoing revitalization projects at both.

What’s needed: Funding to meet the gap. The Hartford Preservation Alliance (HPA) has been working with the owners, funders and people from various city departments towards a plan, and Knott-Twine is hopeful that a solution is close.

Osgood bowling alley, Norwich

Significance: This unusual private bowling alley was built around 1850 for Charles Osgood, a wealthy druggist and developer. The alley was converted long ago to a residence, but its distinctive outline makes the original function readily identifiable. Bowling alleys from the 19th century are very rare: Osgood’s is one of only four known to exist in Connecticut. It is located in the Jail Hill National Register district.

Threat: The owners, Raysman Cheung and Joyce Chan, of Bayside, New York, want to demolish the bowling alley for new condos, even though a prior owner had obtained site plan approval for similar development incorporating the alley. Cheung and Chan have a demolition permit, which Norwich’s municipal historian, Dale Plummer, says was incorrectly issued without imposing the appropriate delay for being in a National Register district.

Broader issues: No matter how well they are written, demolition delay ordinances are only as good as their enforcement.
using the buildings, Susan Chandler of the State Historic Preservation Office assumes that prudent alternatives exist.

**Somersville Manufacturing Company factory, Somersville**

**Significance:** Constructed between 1835 and 1928, this textile mill incorporates a wide range of industrial building forms and construction techniques. The factory is the centerpiece of the Somersville National Register district.

**Threat:** In early 1990s a developer began renovating the mill for condominiums but then abandoned the project. After years of standing vacant, the roof leaks and most of the windows are broken.

Since the factory straddles the Scantic River, flood insurance is a major problem and was a key factor in the previous developer’s failure. The Federal Emergency Management Agency, which issues federal flood insurance, says that the bottom two stories must remain vacant or be used only for commercial space or parking, which significantly reduces the building’s developable area. The danger of flooding also makes it difficult to obtain financing and could scare away potential tenants or buyers. Many historic industrial buildings are located in flood plains, but few are as deeply affected as the Somersville factory.

**What’s needed:** A new developer. The town of Somers has been looking for one, and there have been some expressions of interest, but so far no one has made an offer.

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**Former St. John’s by the Sea Episcopal Church, West Haven**

**Significance:** The church complex includes the church itself, approximately 60 years old; the parish hall, a converted Foursquare house; and the rectory, an Arts-and-Crafts bungalow with handsome interior woodwork. Only the rectory is architecturally distinguished, but all three belong to a modest shorefront community extending from Savin Rock to the Milford line and beyond. Many of the houses have been converted to year-round use but the character of the neighborhood as a whole has been maintained. The West Shore Fire District Headquarters, located near the church, was listed on the State Register in July, and the entire neighborhood appears to qualify for district listing.

**Threat:** St. John’s merged with another congregation last year, making these buildings redundant, and the diocese has put them up for sale. There are three potential buyers in line. The first is a developer who wants to clear the site for condominiums but has put off the closing to apply for a zoning variance and hire an architect. The other bidders are both religious groups that want to use the buildings for their current purposes. The diocese says that the town and the neighbors don’t want another religious organization on the site, but members of the West Haven Historical Society argue that a condominium project would exert development pressures on other properties.

**What’s needed:** Independent structural analysis and assistance in developing a plan that incorporates the historic building. The state Historic Preservation Council plans to hold a hearing on the building at its September meeting, and could refer the matter to the Attorney General’s office for action under the Connecticut Environmental Protection Act, which allows lawsuits to prevent the unreasonable demolition of historic structures. Since there was prior approval for development...
Where We Lived

Three new sites recently listed on the National Register of Historic Places illustrate where Connecticut citizens lived in the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries.

From the 18th century is the Parmelee house, in Killingworth. Built around 1770, the house was located on marginal farmland, which accounts for frequent changes of ownership, as those who could, moved away. From the front the house appears to be a typical dwelling of the time, two stories tall and built around a center chimney. But it is not so typical after all. It is built into the hillside, and the main living spaces are on the second story. This arrangement is reflected in the small square gable windows that light the spaces in the eaves—a feature usually found only in one-story houses. The front rooms on the lower level, while habitable, are clearly secondary, and are said to have served as a tavern.

Inside, the framing is unusually heavy, and put together in ways that suggest that the house may once have been a barn and later converted to a dwelling. Jan Cunningham, author of the National Register nomination, comments, “The conversion of an outbuilding to a house may once have been common practice, especially in the poorer areas of Connecticut, but there are few documented examples.” She recommends further study to better understand the history of this unusual house.

In Bloomfield, the Captain Oliver Filley house tells a different tale. Filley was a gentleman farmer and civic leader who became a successful tinware manufacturer with a national distribution market. Beginning with a small tin shop, he rapidly expanded his business, setting up production and distribution centers outside Connecticut, as well as showrooms in Philadelphia, Saint Louis, and Troy, New York.

Filley built this house in 1834 for his son, Jay, who ran the family farm; however, the older Filley retained ownership of the property until his death in 1846. The stone construction—rubble walls with colorful traprock veneer and brownstone quoins and lintels—was Jay’s request, but was also a local preference. At least six other houses were built in the Bloomfield area in the 1830s, all sharing similar construction and Greek Revival design.

On the farm, Jay Filley and later owners followed prevailing agricultural trends, experimenting with silkworms in the 1830s, more successfully growing tobacco in the 1840s and later, then supplying dairy products and produce to Hartford. Ownership by the Catholic Missionaries of La Salette helped keep the farm going when neighboring properties were being developed. Today the site, with its surviving outbuildings and open fields, continues to evoke the historic landscape in the midst of expanding suburbia. Now owned by the town of Bloomfield, the Filley house is scheduled to be restored by the Wintonbury Historical Society.

The keeping room of the Parmelee house in Killingworth: the ceiling joists are unusually heavy, suggesting that the house may once have been a barn.

The Oliver Filley house, in Bloomfield, retains its historic agricultural landscape.
Hartford’s West Boulevard Historic District represents an early phase of the suburban development that the Filley farm escaped. The district was part of the estate of Horace W. Fox, president of the Capitol City Lumber Company, which seems to have begun making preliminary development plans in the 1890s, although its first house did not appear until 1911, and most were built in the booming years of the 1920s.

Fox’s development centers on West Boulevard, which is distinguished by a median and lines of sugar maples—one of five such broad, landscaped streets laid out in Hartford in the opening years of the 20th century. This layout reflects nationwide interest in urban planning at the time, exemplified by the master plan that the City of Hartford commissioned from the prominent architect John M. Carrère in 1912. Carrère could have been describing West Boulevard when he wrote, “…there is no reason why our streets should not be streets and thoroughfares and breathing spaces and pleasure grounds all in one.”

Lying between the industrial neighborhood of Parkville and the wealthier professional-class West End, West Boulevard continued on page 12.

Two-family houses catered to the upwardly mobile residents of Hartford's West Boulevard historic district.
Attracted upwardly-mobile middle class residents, many of them businessmen who came from blue-collar backgrounds. Deed restrictions forbade apartment houses and set a minimum cost for houses, ensuring that the development maintained a certain level of “quality.”

Because most were built by a single development company, the district’s houses possess a high degree of uniformity. Single-family houses are modest in size and almost uniformly Colonial Revival in style, while most of the two-family houses share similar narrow massing and two-story porches.

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and drive residents from their homes.

**What’s needed:** A development plan that reuses the existing buildings or maintains the size and scale of the neighborhood. A National or State Register district listing, if appropriate, could provide recognition and incentives to encourage preserving the buildings.

### Comstock, Ferre & Company barns, Wethersfield

**Significance:** Comstock, Ferre claims to be the oldest continuously operating seed company in the nation. In addition to its main building, fronting on Wethersfield’s Main Street, the property includes a large barn, the oldest section of which was probably built sometime between the 1840s and the 1880s. The property is located in the Wethersfield National Register district and the Wethersfield local historic district.

**Threat:** Developer Thomas Coccomo wants to demolish the barn for a new residential-commercial development. As currently planned, the elevations and massing of the new building would be very similar to those of the barn. Wethersfield’s historic district commission (HDC) approved the project in June 12, and the planning and zoning commission has indicated that it will defer to the HDC. Some neighbors have appealed to Superior Court; a hearing is scheduled for September 11.

**Broader issues:** Opponents of the project feel that the HDC bent over backward to accommodate Coccomo while hassling homeowners who appear before it over miniscule details. If this contention is supported, there is a danger that the public could lose confidence in HDC’s reliability and fairness.

**What’s needed:** Careful consideration of the feasibility of reusing the main barn as part of the project. Coccomo has expressed willingness to do this, so Todd Levine and Melissa Antonelli of the Trust made measured drawings of the barn, and Trustee William Crosskey is preparing schematic designs to show how it could be reused in the new development.

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Member, Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation
410 Asylum Avenue, Hartford (1999). New York-based Common Ground plans to break ground this fall on its renovation of the 81-year-old Capitol Building at 410 Asylum Avenue as a mixed-income residence and commercial space and one of the first certified “Green” residential buildings in Connecticut.

The Capitol Building, to be renamed The Hollander Foundation Center, will provide 70 rental apartments, 80 percent of which will be targeted for moderate-income households. Services offered to residents and community members will include job training and employment services. The ground floor is slated for commercial and retail use.

In addition, the building will incorporate sustainable design elements that enhance energy efficiency, including a green roof that promotes water conservation and reuse and a high-efficiency heating system.

410 Asylum Street was donated to Common Ground in 2003 by Milton and Betty Ruth Hollander after they unsuccessfully attempted to demolish the National Register-listed building. Common Ground is funding the project through federal and state historic tax credits, as well as low-income housing tax credits and financial assistance from the Connecticut Housing Finance Authority, the City of Hartford and the Connecticut Department of Economic and Community Development.
new outer layers of the paint film were stronger than the inner layers of old formula oil paint. As it ages it shrinks a little more than old oil paints underneath. This creates stress in the film that leads to cracking, curing and peeling. Then lead pigment was eliminated from the new paint, allowing mildew and algae to grow on the surface. Increased auto traffic exhaust with sticky hydrocarbon dust began to soil buildings more than in the past. Result: dirty looking buildings, leading to more frequent and complete repainting instead of the traditional practice of painting only where the paint was weathered away.

**IMPORTANT POINT #1:** Recoating began taking place about every 15 years, and EXCESSIVE paint buildup resulted, which is a new condition that never existed before. This new thicker paint film system is not flexible so it cracks. Moisture penetrates the cracks, soaking the wood beneath. As the moisture tries to escape it can not get through the paint and it pushes the paint right off the wood. Increased shrinkage of the outer layers of the paint film force the film to curl away from the wood and the film breaks down where it is weakest, right next to the wood. Result: paint peeling down to bare wood.

**Modern Times**

The more coats added to this thick paint system, the faster it peels. Through the 1960s and 70s “latex” paint was introduced. Whether traditional oil-based paint, or new “latex” paint was used it lasted 10 to 15 years between adding another coat and a shabby appearance due to peeling. In the ‘80s it lasted 5 to 10 years. In the ‘90s it looks shabby in just 4 to 6 years.

Now you know where you’re at with your peeling paint, and now I’ll tell you why you are there. **IMPORTANT POINT #2:** The fundamental cause of the problem: paint materials changed, but the maintenance method did not. Full recoating of the entire building continued, more and more frequently. This was great for the paint industry; selling and applying more and more product. Clearly, it was not the best treatment for older buildings. Exterior stains have been used in the past with some success, but even stains create paint buildup, especially the so-called “solid stains,” which may act more like paint than stain.

We have developed two approaches for the solution to this problem. Frequently both are used on different parts of the same building.

**Spot Paint Maintenance Program**

This treatment “goes with the flow” in that the paint is allowed to peel off, mostly at its own rate. Full coating is not done since this would further shorten the cycle of coating and peeling. Appearance will be “variable,” but is not usually consider “shabby”. Every three to five years the paint surfaces are cleaned, loose paint is knocked off and the bare wood in these spots is primed and painted. There is no attempt to feather the thick edge of heavy paint buildup since it will do little to extend the life of the work. Relatively weak “oil-based” primers and paints are used. Matching the color and sheen of the surrounding paint is important. This is a relatively low cost treatment, but it must be repeated for as long as there is heavy paint buildup that is peeling off. Lead-containing waste material does not usually require costly special handling and disposal since relatively small amounts are generated, although you will still want to handle and dispose of them responsibly. The continuing cost of this treatment over the long term might be higher than complete removal. Typical costs are $5.00 to $11.00 per square foot, with only 20% to 30% of the exterior needing treatment.

**Complete Paint Removal and Recoating**

All paint is removed down to bare wood. The surface is prepared and oiled if needed, primed, and painted with two top coats. “Oil-based primer is used and top coats are acrylic “latex” or higher performance acrylic elastomeric. This is a very high cost treatment, but is only done once. Since it removes the basic cause of the problem (excessive paint buildup) the cost of continuing maintenance is much lower than the spot paint maintenance approach. Typical costs are $16.00 to $26.00 per square foot. This includes access, removal, consolidating oil, primer, two top coats paint, but does not include the cost of disposal of special or hazardous lead paint waste. In recent years the rising costs of safely removing and disposing of lead paint has made complete removal a choice of last resort. Usually chemical methods are used since grinding the paint off with sanders creates large volumes of lead dust, and heat removal methods are a fire risk. We often limit complete paint removal to areas with difficult access such as towers where long-term performance is needed and on areas where appearance is important such as at front doorways.

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Peeling Paint Looks Shabby

I have been told a paint job on my house built in 1900 will only last about 5 years. Yikes! Is this true? Some experts and non-experts are telling me to use a solid body stain over the existing paint. There is a lot of flaking paint. The idea is that the remaining paint will flake regardless of whether I paint or stain, but by using stain, I will eventually reduce the amount of scraping required. If I do stain, what about that pesky edge where the paint flaked? Will wood putty smooth that edge under stain? Will the stain look OK over wood putty? What about using a grinder to remove the paint and then stain? It seems like that is about the same amount of work as scraping, but then I won’t have to scrape again. —Marty W. in Maine

Recently many of my clients have been “up in arms” because their last paint job looked shabby after only four to six years. Working together we have figured out why this is happened and what to do about it. First a few basics about paint:

How Paint Works

“Oil-based” paints are made of three kinds of materials: solvent, a thin liquid that evaporates with exposure to the air, like paint thinner; binder, a thick syrupy liquid that solidifies with exposure to the air; and pigments, colored minerals ground to a fine powder that can block the sun’s rays. The solvent, binder and pigment are mixed to form liquid paint. When a coating of paint is spread out on the surface the solvent evaporates and the binder glues the pigment particles together and bonds them to the surface. Depending on the materials and formulations used, a coating can have different functions and characteristics:

• Primer soaks deeply into the surface forming a tight bond. Intercoat builds thickness and adds strength.
• Top Coat protects from the weather.

These coatings work together forming a coating system. The result is a thin film that protects the wood surface from sun and moisture. The film is somewhat flexible, so it will move along with swelling and shrinking of the wood which occurs due to inevitable changes in moisture content of the wood. The film also decorates the surface, changing its appearance.

Traditional “Oil Paint”

For the past three centuries, “oil paint” was usually made with linseed oil binder and lead oxide pigment. This paint usually deteriorated by weathering away at the surface of the film and sometimes by cracking due to shrinkage of the binder in the film as it ages. Maintenance of this coating system was simple: when the film was mostly weathered away the loose pigment was brushed off the surface and a new coating applied. This paint penetrates very well, so the porous surface was consolidated and cracks in the old paint film were effectively filled, sealed and “healed.” This had to be done every 20 to 40 years. Sometimes only weathered parts of the building, such as towers, lower walls and porches, were repainted. The result was little buildup of paint coatings on the surface. Traditional oil paints kept a building looking clean because any dirt weathered away with the surface and the lead pigment prevented growth of mildew and algae.

Post War Construction Boom

After the 1940s the paint industry changed the binders and pigments in their paint. They continued to call this “oil-based” paint even though it acted very differently from traditional oil paints. The new, “improved” paints had alkyd binders which were more flexible and very resistant to weathering. It was the perfect paint for the bare wood surfaces on all the new houses being built, but not so good for older buildings. Here’s why: The new paint was more resistant to weathering. As new coatings were added the paint film began to build up, forming a thicker coating system. The new paint did not penetrate cracks well, leaving these faults buried in the paint film system. The