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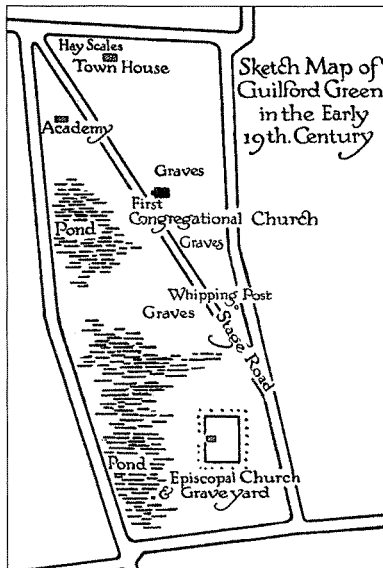
The Guilford Green

Nona Bloomer

New England town greens are a classic American image and the quintessential expression of a regional vernacular landscape tradition. From their earliest beginnings they have provided a central place for public gatherings, ceremonial rituals and practical functions. While the specific uses of greens have evolved over the years as the needs and values of their communities have changed, the role of greens as places of gathering, individual repose and central importance for towns has endured.

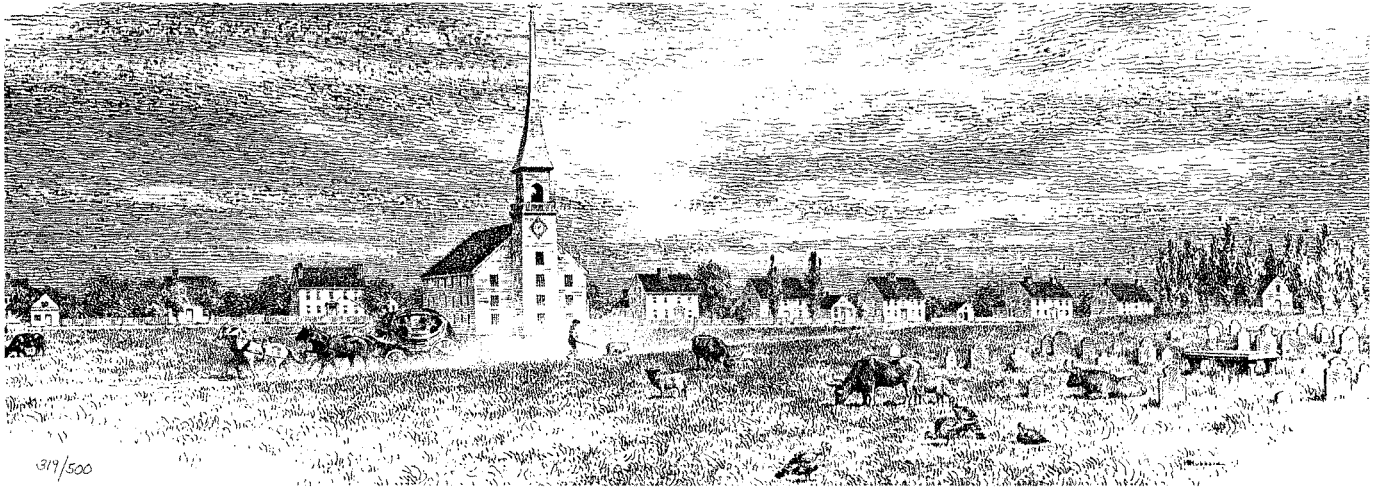
Many greens, however, have been encroached upon or fragmented beyond recognition. As development continues to threaten their existence, it becomes increasingly important not only to work for their protection but also to examine their historic and cultural roles and the unique contributions they make to the quality of life in a town.

The evolution of the green in Guilford, Connecticut, exemplifies the marvelous flexibility of this open space. In its early days it was used as a communal ground for grazing cattle, burying the dead and drilling the militia; it contained a saw pit, a whipping post, a gravel pit, hay scales, churches, schools and the town hall. Today it is a parklike setting that accommodates high school graduations, seasonal celebrations and town parades. For more than three and a half centuries, the Guilford Green has adapted to changing spiritual and societal patterns while retaining its role as a center for the town.



Above: Drawing by Charles Hubbard.
 Courtesy Guilford Free Library.
 Opposite page: Aerial view of
 Guilford Green, 1981.
 By Joel Helander.





Sketch of Guilford Green in the nineteenth century.

Drawing by Charles Hubbard. Courtesy Guilford Free Library.

An "All-Purpose Utility," 1639-1814

Guilford was settled in 1639 by a small company of landed gentry and yeoman farmers from the rural counties of Sussex, Kent and Surrey, England. After purchasing land from the Native Americans, they settled on a fertile plain lying between two rivers that run to the Connecticut shore of the Long Island Sound.

Following the general practice of Puritan communities providing common grazing lands, Guilford planners set aside a communal ground of sixteen acres, around which they distributed their home lots. Although the nine-square plan of nearby New Haven, where the settlers spent their first few months in the New World, may have inspired their orderly plan, Guilford's central space differed from New Haven's in size, shape and appellation. It was smaller, more rectangular and, from the beginning, called "The Greene."¹ New Haven's central square, by contrast, carried the name "Market Place," reflecting the mercantile cast of its urban London founders.

The green, surrounded by privately owned land, functioned, in the words of architectural historian Elizabeth Mills Brown, as an "all-purpose public utility"² — serving as a drill field, cemetery and grazing ground. The green was unoccupied by buildings for the first four years of its existence, until Guilford Colony combined with New Haven Colony for mutual protection against the Dutch, French and Native Americans. Because New Haven's theocratic government

restricted voting privileges to church members, a church had to be established quickly. In colonial New England communities it was standard practice to locate the church on the green, and in Guilford a Congregational "Meeting House" (a term expressing the use of the building for town meetings as well as for religious purposes) was constructed on the northwest end of the green in 1643.

Concern for the green was recorded as early as 1646, when cutting down trees in front of the meeting house was forbidden.³ But the green was not yet sacred, and it eventually lost some of its turf. In 1670, when the town needed a blacksmith, the town leaders sliced off land from the south side to offer as a home lot. Unfortunately he did not stay, and in 1676 they took a second slice from the east side for another blacksmith. These excisions cost the green four of its original 16 acres. Its shape was still rectangular, but the town inherited clumsy jogs in the streets that now adjoin the southwest and northeast corners.

In this early period there were no streets around the green; the entire space was regarded as a public passageway. An official survey taken in 1729 measured the area of the green to be twelve acres (today, the grassy part within the street curb is only eight acres). The survey signaled the pressure for development and the importance of the green as a thoroughfare and multi-use space, and it protected the green from further subdivision:

to accommodate the Several Lanes that Center in Sd Green to pass from one Lane to the other as well to the meeting House burying place School House: and being the usual & necessary place of Parade for the Train bands [militia] we find the whole of sd Green is necessary for highway, for the use aforesd and will not admit of any Lands to be there Laid out to any person as fifth Division or otherways without prejudicing of highway, and thereupon we have set out & Stated the Whole of Sd Green for highways.⁴

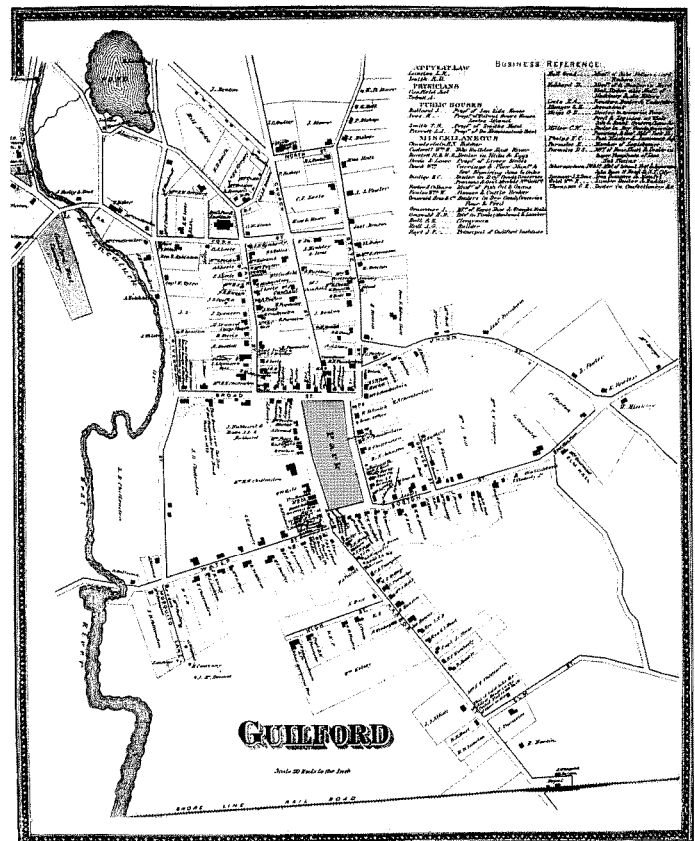
By the beginning of the eighteenth century Guilford and New Haven colonies were under the jurisdiction of Connecticut Colony, and church membership was no longer a requirement for voting at town meetings. As life became increasingly secularized, two more institutions appeared on the green, one reflecting the prevailing spirit of religious tolerance and the other a practical need for a non-denominational meeting place “for the purpose of transacting the public business of the town.”⁵ In 1750 a small Episcopal church was built on the southeastern end, and in 1775 a two-story clapboard “town house,” the ancestor of today’s town hall, was constructed on the northern end. This building also served a commercial purpose, as the lower floor was regularly leased as a store.

Although Guilford prospered comfortably in the eighteenth century, the green remained somewhat disheveled. It was “an unkempt area of public land,” far from level, with pond holes and a gravel pit. “There were no trees, no walks, no fence and disorder prevailed. Here, for nearly two centuries, the townspeople had pastured their domestic animals.”⁶ They had been burying their dead also, as noted by Timothy Dwight who travelled by in 1800:

*This square, like that in New Haven, is deformed by a burying ground, and to add to the deformity is unenclosed. The graves are therefore trampled upon and the monuments injured both by men and cattle. ... Nor is it unreasonable to suppose that the proximity of these sepulchral fields to human habitations is injurious to health. Some of them have, I believe, been found to be offensive and will probably be allowed to have been noxious.*⁷

The green was as cluttered above ground as it was crowded beneath, with four buildings inside it — two churches, a schoolhouse (called the Academy) and the Town House. Assorted farm animals were running loose, and paths crisscrossed in all directions.

By the time Dwight was writing the green was also open to more than local traffic. The southern section of the stagecoach mail route between New York and Boston passed through the green on a diagonal. A remembrance of the passage of the Boston Post Road remains in the name of Boston Street, which runs along the south side of the green.



Guilford town center, 1868. From *Beers Atlas of New Haven County, Connecticut*. Courtesy Guilford Free Library.

Beautifying the Green, 1815-1873

The turning point in the life of Guilford's green came with the organization of the town borough in 1815. Inspired perhaps by New Haven's example of relocating its own central burying ground, or responding to Dwight's criticism, or sensing that the green should begin to serve different public needs, borough officials assumed the difficult task of beautifying the green. The warden and burgesses planted trees "for shade or ornament" in the "shadeless streets," restricted swine and geese from the "Publick Walks" and officially christened the green a "Publick Square."⁸ This new designation suggests a social motive behind the transformation of the green, one that envisioned a reinterpretation of the use of the green as a public place.

Two new cemeteries were opened in 1817 and the green was no longer used for burials. By 1824 the gravestones were removed and the mounds denoting the graves were levelled. Horses could no longer be fastened to trees, and only cows that were registered with the borough clerk and wore straps bearing the owner's name were allowed about. But the vision of the borough officials extended beyond planting trees, relocating cemeteries and controlling animals; it called for making a thorough and clean sweep of the green.

The Congregational church, dissatisfied with the condition of its building and nudged by borough officials, decided to

relocate from inside the green to the edge. In 1829 it purchased a property across the street to the north and sold the house upon it. The house was carried away and construction then began on the imposing new edifice for Guilford's earliest ecclesiastical institution; the commanding presence of the church still dominates the green's central axis.

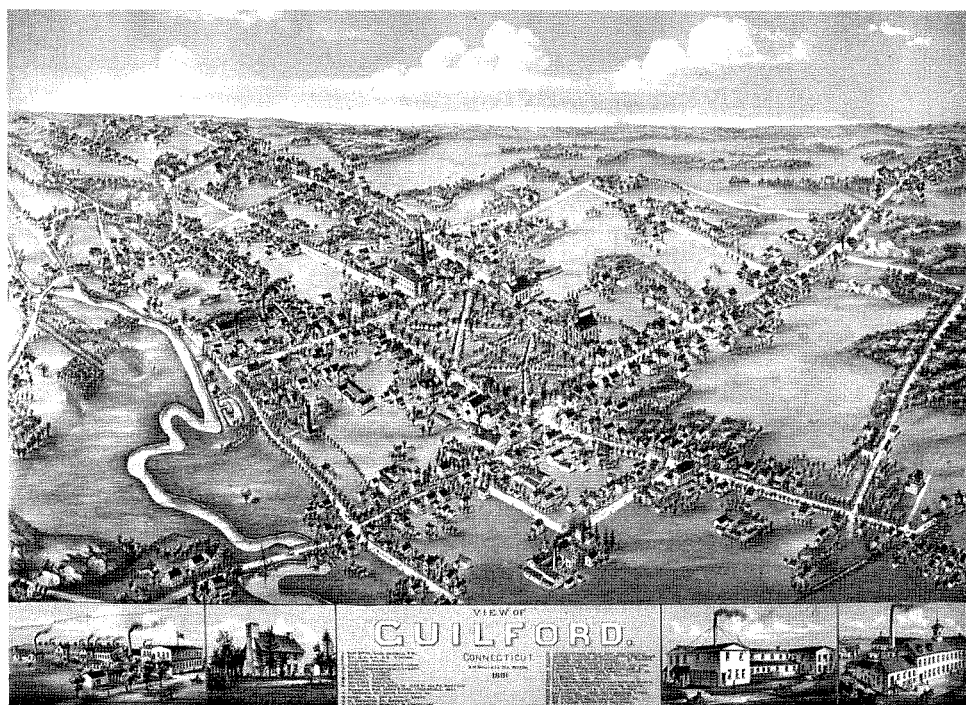
In 1830, after the Congregational church's old building on the green was razed, the Academy and the Town House were moved to properties on Church Street. This effort to purchase new properties, raze and move old buildings and construct new ones speaks highly of Yankee stamina and local financial support.

Only the Episcopal church remained standing on the green. The white rail fence that was constructed around the green left an opening to allow carriages access to that church until 1838, when a stone gothic building was completed on the east side of the green. The old church on the green was then dismantled and sold, and the railing could be closed.

Even then the green was not completely empty. An old-timer reminiscing on the appearance of the green in 1844 recalled: *The green of this period was used as a cow pasture, very convenient for the dwellers in the vicinity, and they strenuously opposed this privilege being taken from them and deemed it perverted taste to convert a useful cow pasture into an ornamental park, which is now the pride and glory of this old, historic town.*⁹

The cows were finally evicted in the 1860s.

Bird's-eye view of
Guilford, 1881. O.H. Bailey
& Co. Courtesy Guilford
Free Library.





United Workers for Public Improvement at the Guilford Fair, 1897. Courtesy Guilford Free Library.

In 1868 the green was dignified with a new appellation, “park,” in the *Beers Atlas of New-Haven County*. The Guilford Agricultural Society also named it Guilford Park on the cover of its premium lists from the 1870s on. The word “park,” which is today part of the common vocabulary of public space, was relatively new at the time. For example, it first appeared as a topic in an American encyclopedia in 1863 when Frederick Law Olmsted (who had been schooled by North Guilford parsons and had his first farm in Guilford at Sachem’s Head, by the seashore) contributed an essay to *Appleton’s New American Cyclopaedia*. Mid-nineteenth-century parks were conceived as a relief from the evils of urban life, as pastoral landscapes and as “great pleasure grounds mean to be pieces of the country, with fresh air, meadows, lakes and sunshine right in the city.”¹⁰

The transformation of the green to what we consider a park today was very gradual. Without the benefit of being cropped by cows, the green in the latter part of the nineteenth century must have looked more like a country meadow than a manicured urban park. Crops of hay were raised on the green and sold to the highest bidder until 1894, when thrift finally gave way to aesthetics and the town purchased a horse-drawn lawn mower.

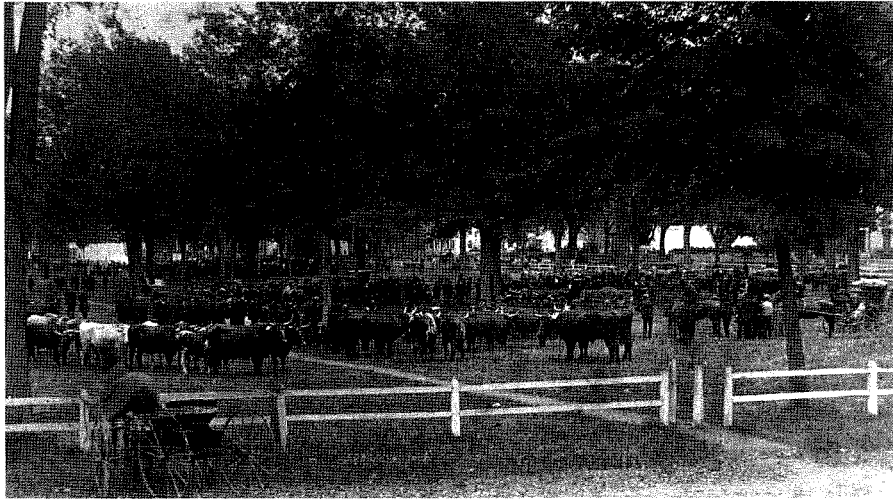
The new name did not stick, perhaps because the green never directly fulfilled the social role or physical form envisioned for parks. However, it remains in the name of Park Street, which runs along the east side of the green.

The Village Improvement Society Makes its Mark, 1874-1931

The transformation of Guilford’s green speaks not only of the introduction of ideas about park space into the nineteenth-century town but also of the formation of village improvement societies, which sought to improve the residential character of towns. The concept began in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, in 1853, spread throughout New England and become a national movement. Writer George Waring formulated the goals of these groups:

*to improve and ornament the streets and public grounds of the village by planting and cultivating trees, establishing and maintaining walks ... lighting the streets, encouraging the formation of a library and reading room, and generally doing whatever may tend to the improvement of the village as a place of residence.*¹¹

In 1874 Guilford women organized themselves into their own exclusively feminine society, “The United Workers for Public Improvement.” They intended “to raise funds to repair the walks, light the streets, improve the condition of the green” and extend the work of beautifying and improving the village.¹² They had one hundred lampposts erected in the streets about the green and paid a man to keep them lighted. They encouraged the planting of trees and supervised the beautification of the green. They gathered each spring to rake the green, a rite heralded by the celebrative ringing of church bells and the shooting of the cannon.



Above: Cattle show on the green during the Guilford Fair in the 1890s. Courtesy Guilford Free Library.

Right: For a time, the green was called a park, an appellation that did not last.

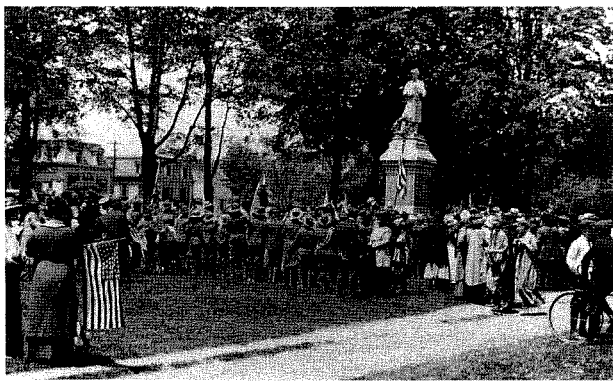
Vale Business College THE OLDEST AND BEST
 PREMIUM LIST
 OF THE
Guilford Agricultural Society,
 FOR THEIR
 THIRTY-SIXTH ANNUAL
CATTLE SHOW & FAIR,
 TO BE HELD
Wednesday, Sept. 30, 1896.
 GUILFORD PARK AND TOWN HALL,
 GUILFORD, CONN.
 If Stormy, Next Pleasant Day.
 If You Want
 Farm, Garden or Flower Seeds
 Roots, Bulbs and Nursery Stock,
 Go to
FRANK S. PLATT
 374 State St.

 Flowers, Plants and Decorations,
 Jardiniers, Flower Stands,
 Plant Food and Florists' Supplies.
FRANK S. PLATT
 New Haven, Ct.
SHORE LINE LITHO. PRINT, GUILFORD, CONN.

The local papers enjoyed reporting on this festive event: "Every day one may see some new thing under the sun if he keeps his eyes about him. On Saturday we saw something new, eighty ladies with eighty rakes freshening up Guilford Green." The women, dressed in big bonnets and ruffled headdresses, carried rakes patriotically decorated with red, white and blue streamers, while "the Guilford band played to cheer the workers on their way."¹³

Concerts, parades and sporting events were held on the green during this period. It was used for football and baseball games, lawn tennis, winter skating and evening promenading. Fire drills were demonstrated and election parades celebrated with the "booming of battery cannons." A bandstand was placed near the center, the dilapidated fence was removed and handsome granite curbing was installed along the edges of the green.

The green also assumed a memorial role. In 1877 the granite foundation for a Civil War monument was placed in the center of the green just above the old cemetery. Between 1903 and 1928 cement walks, contributed by townspeople in memory of loved ones, replaced the green's muddy paths. One reporter, however, disapproved: "Surely the common Green should be kept in character. Running loud white side-walks across it is like taking the ancient sunbonnet from a fine old country grandmother and substituting a forty-cent flapper beret."¹⁴



Civil War monument on the green. Courtesy Guilford Free Library.



Today the green is used for diverse activities, such as political gatherings, memorials and monuments, fairs ...
Credits: Left, *Shore Line Times*; center, Mark Bloomer; right, Barbara Kleutsch.

With the advent of the First World War a new Liberty Flagpole and an honor roll appeared on the green. Trees were planted in memory of Guilford's war dead, and in 1931 a boulevard for a permanent memorial was set into concrete. Since then five more monuments, four of them war memorials, have been placed on the green.

The United Workers for Public Improvement disbanded in 1931. Without the care of the women the green fell, once again, into a disheveled condition. Rossiter Snyder, Warden of the Borough, pleaded for contributions to revitalize and fertilize its greenery, acquire suitable benches and fund a "credible band" to play in the bandstand. He also recognized that the green performed an important symbolic role, in addition to its recreational and commemorative one. It was a "monument to the town" and a historic presence of national significance:

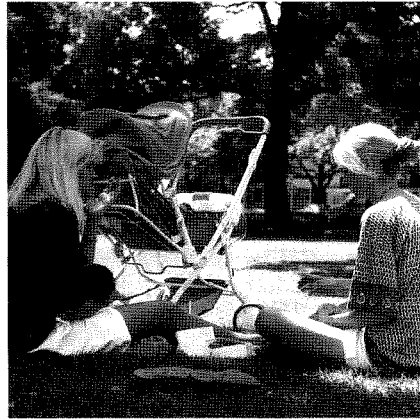
*The saving and beautifying of the Green means more to this town than any other public improvement at present. By the Green the town is known and remembered. It is starving to death and we want to revive it. The borough allotment for it will go only a limited distance. The Green is an inheritance of three hundred years and it must go on for that many more. It is a source of interest and pride beyond the limits of the town. Its value reaches the entire state, and the New England states, and, for that matter, the United States, for it is true that these old New England towns are the background, the foundation, the sources from which most of this nation grew. And we cannot let the foundation of our house crumble.*¹⁵

The Guilford Green Today

Originally at the core of the settlement, Guilford's green is now geographically dislocated as a central place, not only regarding habitation, but also business. The straightening and relocation of the Boston Post Road in 1927 took the town's main commercial activity to a strip north of the village, leaving the area around the green for smaller businesses. The houses facing the green have been adapted for business uses and rental apartments, but residential streets lined with trees and fences fronting antique houses lead immediately off the streets around the green.

After the borough consolidated with the town, in 1941, responsibility for supervising the green passed to the Board of Selectmen. The selectmen have repeatedly affirmed its use as a public place for public assembly on condition that whoever is using the green take care of it.

The green today plays a ceremonial and celebrative role in the town, serving as a location for events from Memorial Day celebrations to Christmas tree festivities. It sustains a vivid public life for town residents, who attend graduations, concerts, festivals, strawberry socials, ecumenical gatherings and peace vigils there. The care and appearance of the green is a widely accepted community responsibility supported by several local organizations, although not always with complete agreement about what should go on the green or how the space should be used.



... the town's annual "strawberry social," quiet moments of relaxation and high school graduation ceremonies.
Credits: Left and right, *Shore Line Times*; center, Mark Bloomer.

Before the hurricane of 1938 the green had so many trees it was always dark. There is disagreement today, however, about the kind and number of trees to be planted on the green, and some people are unhappy about the trees that already block the vista of the Congregational Church.

The last bandstand on the green was removed in 1945 and has not been replaced. Apparently the bandstands had provided opportunities for mischief and vandalism. When a proposal for a new bandstand was decisively rejected in a special town meeting in 1965, opponents contended that "a bandstand would be an anachronism on old Guilford Green, that a portable shell would offer greater flexibility, and that the bandstands previously on the green never contributed to the cultural atmosphere of Guilford."¹⁶ This issue is alive today with the recent formation of the Bandstand Committee of the Guilford Foundation, which is asking for contributions to build a portable shell.

The Guilford Agricultural Fair, which was first held on the green in 1859, outgrew this traditional location and in 1969, after years of argument, had to move to larger fairgrounds a mile away. Its opening parade, however, with floats, fife and drum corps, school marching bands and a procession of war veterans and town officials continues to make its way around the green before heading toward the new grounds. A large handcrafts exhibit is held annually on the green, inciting discussions about the use of the green for an event that draws more than 15,000 people from miles around — causing much wear and tear on the green's turf and paralyzing surrounding traffic. The colonial scale of the green may be able to accommodate the people, but not the cars and trucks that bring them.

Guilford's fire department has the dubious distinction of having provided the proverbial last straw regarding monuments on the green. The local paper reported that, after much controversy, a firefighter's monument would be placed on the green temporarily. It still happens to be there, but beyond the issue of its not being a war memorial is the question of whether another monument of any kind should have been placed on the green. When the first selectman commented with exasperation, "I didn't realize the Green was going to be such a controversy," he received the telling reply, "It's an emotional hot bed."¹⁷

Although the Guilford Town Center, embracing the green, was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1976, it took decades to give this place a local historic district designation protected by state statutes. A proposal for a historic district study was rejected by town meeting in 1962. Finally, in 1987, after much hard work and public education, the district was approved by a majority vote of property owners. The newspaper's recognition that the "concept of the state's historic district has its roots in Guilford" is a tribute to those who wrote the enabling legislation and worked to protect the green and its historic surrounds.¹⁸

As Guilford has grown from a few hundred settlers to a town numbering more than 21,000 inhabitants, the green has evolved from a utilitarian square to a dignified presence of enduring social importance. The significant role the green plays for the townspeople is underlined by the comment of David Dudley, president of the Guilford Savings Bank, which faces its southeastern corner: "It symbolizes the way people relate to the town."¹⁹

To appreciate today's reverent and sometimes impassioned responses to the simple, silent and now urban space of Guilford's beautiful green, one must evoke the ancestral cultural sensibilities of the town itself. The green as the heart of the community does indeed represent a collective remembrance of its historic place at the center of the original colony, even as it functions as an open space that serves the citizens of today and their ongoing activities.

Notes

1. For a discussion of the resemblance of this plan to the bastide design of French medieval towns built for defense, see Anthony N. B. Garvan, *Architecture and Town Planning in Colonial Connecticut* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1951) and Robert Blair St. George, "Bawns and Beliefs: Architecture, Commerce and Conversion in Early New England," *Winterthur Portfolio* 25:4 (Winter 1990) 241-287.

2. See Elizabeth Mills Brown, "Architectural Development," in *Survey of the Historic Architecture of Guilford, Connecticut* (Guilford, CT: Guilford Preservation Alliance, 1982), 23-68; and *Guilford, Connecticut: Its Green and Its Historic Buildings* (Guilford, CT: Guilford Bicentennial Committee, 1975) for the place of the green within the architectural framework of Guilford.

3. Bernard C. Steiner, *History of Guilford and Madison, Connecticut* (Baltimore, 1897; reissued by the Guilford Free Library, 1975), 259.

4. Guilford land records, 1729, 4:120.

5. Steiner, 221.

6. *Shore Line Times*, 29 November 1928.

7. Timothy Dwight, *Travels in New England and New York*, edited by B. M. Solomon (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1969), 2:360.

8. Guilford Borough Records, 1815-1847, 31-73. See also Joel E. Helander, *Guilford Long Ago* (Guilford, CT: 1970).

9. *Shore Line Times*, 16 June 1910.

10. Galen Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982), 4-5, 24.

11. John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *American Space: The Centennial Years, 1865-1876* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972), 102.

12. *Shore Line Times*, 4 June 1931.

13. Mary Gay Robinson letter dated 30 April 1877 to the *New Haven Journal and Courier*, in the Mary Hoadley Griswold Scrapbook, p. 12, Guilford Free Library.

14. *Shore Line Times*, 2 December 1928.

15. *Shore Line Times*, 7 May 1931.

16. *Shore Line Times*, 15 April 1965.

17. *Shore Line Times*, 21 March 1985.

18. *Shore Line Times*, 9 August 1989.

19. Tim Clark and Stephen O. Muskie, "This New England: Guilford, Connecticut," *Yankee Magazine* (May 1989), 136.



The Guilford Green,
1993. Photo courtesy
Mark Bloomer.