

Historic Neighborhood News

FALL 2013

RENÉE KAHN, EDITOR

Naval Reserve Training Center Faces Uncertain Future

On August 20th, Wes Haynes, Executive Director of Stamford's Historic Neighborhood Preservation Program, Inc., conveyed to the Planning Board his opposition to the removal of the three industrial sheds located on city property on the west bank of the Stamford Canal. Their removal would be the result of an agreement currently under consideration to allow Building and Land Technology to replace the former boatyard on Bateman Way. Here is a portion of his statement:

THE THREE CONNECTED Butler buildings are the former U.S. Naval Reserve Training Center. Constructed in 1949, these utilitarian structures are well-preserved examples of Butler B type huts that were widely used to support military operations in World War II. The building type, assembled from pre-engineered steel parts, was first placed in production as an industrial/agricultural structure by the Butler Manufacturing Co. in 1940. With roof trusses capable of enclosing large volumes with 40-foot spans, the Butler hut was quickly

appropriated for military use, and along with the Quonset hut and Higgins boat became artifacts instantly synonymous with the war. Sited here immediately after the war on city-owned reclaimed dump land, the huts were equipped with a radar room, machine shop, training room and galley serving as the base for PC-1209, an anti-submarine Patrol Craft stationed in Stamford. This class of naval reserve stations was among the earliest domestic responses of the Cold War.

The base proved flexible to other uses, and the reservists shared the facility with the Navy League Cadets and the newly-formed parish of Our Lady Star of the Sea in the 1960s before decommissioning the station in 1975. The city waived the contractual requirement for the Navy to remove the buildings and repurposed them, permitting them to be used for the next decade as a marine-oriented community and research center under the auspices of the Oceanic Society, a maritime conservation group. The Oceanic Society played a key role in the environmental cleanup of the Long Island Sound, succeeding in having it classified by the federal government as an estuary and advocating for anti-pollution measures based on scientific research conducted here in



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Church and parsonage, c. 1875

Photo courtesy of Gwen June Ketchum

Roxbury Parsonage Moves Down the Road

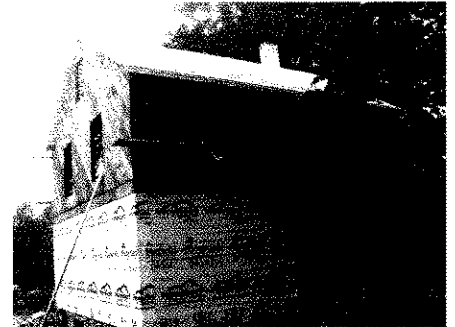
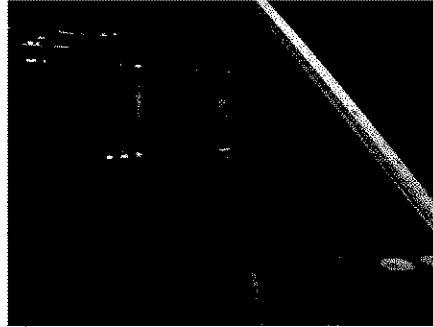
WHEN THE METHODIST Episcopal Church and Community Center at the corner of Roxbury and Den Roads burned down in 1997, the “orphaned” parsonage became unoccupied and gradually fell into disrepair. Plans to reuse the property as a nursery school or a hospice were fought by neighbors who wanted the site to be residential in keeping with its surroundings.

A few years ago, we were approached by Realtor June Rosenthal, owner of the picturesque Greek

Revival one-room schoolhouse on the corner of Long Ridge and Roxbury Roads that housed her real estate office. She wanted to expand her property but in a way that was compatible with the historic character of the area once known as Roxbury Corners. We suggested she might want to use Section 7.3, the Historic Density Bonus of Stamford’s Zoning Regulations, and move a historic building to the site. The empty c. 1875 parsonage just up the road

immediately came to mind. A modest dwelling – befitting a pious Methodist parson – it was what is known as a “vernacular” interpretation of the Italianate style popular in the 1870s, distinguished only by its chamfered porch columns and round-arched gable windows.

Pelham Country Homes, Inc., Ridgefield-based contractors, were hired to move the building the half-mile or so down Roxbury Road to its new site. We were skeptical and, as we had feared, we soon



Dismantling and rebuilding the old parsonage

learned that moving the building intact was not feasible – too damaging to trees along the way. Dismantling and re-erecting also seemed problematic, but the contractors assured us that they could do it and after the city's Zoning Board gave its approval, proceeded to take the parsonage apart, stick by stick, saving every piece of wood that was salvageable and trucking it down to its new site adjacent to Juner Properties. We found ourselves fascinated as we watched the timber frame being assembled. An old/new house appeared before our eyes. The contractors were true to their word, saving and reusing everything they could, including original wood windows. Now, with only final touches awaiting completion, we find ourselves both impressed and delighted. We would like to thank June Rosenthal along with her land use consultant, Rick Redniss of Redniss & Mead, and most of all, Joe Fossi, the contract

manager of Pelham Country Homes, Inc., and his team, for saving a historic piece of old Stamford. The relocated building passes the test of looking as if it had been there all the time. HNN

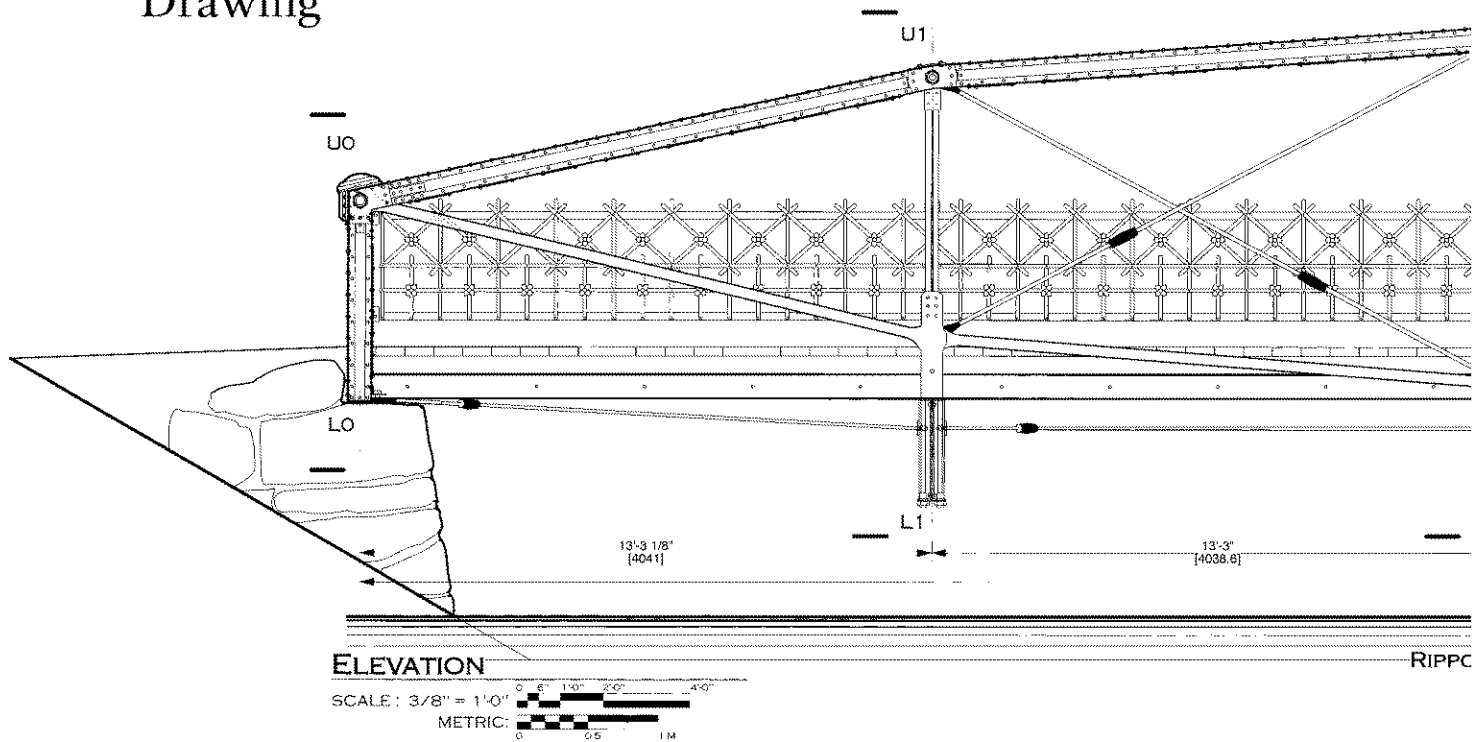


Rebuilt parsonage nears completion

J. Fossi photographer

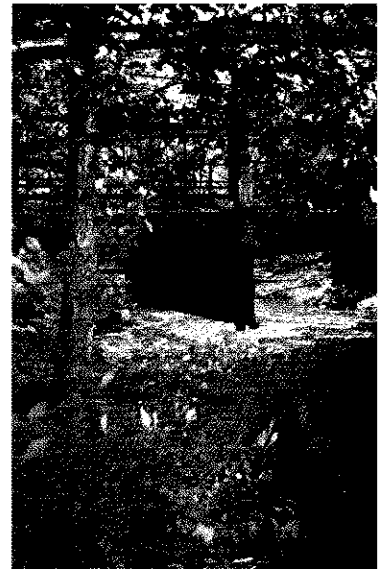
Architect
Morgen Fleisig
Wins Prize for
Turn-of-River Bridge
Drawing

TURN-OF-RIVER STAMFORD, CONN



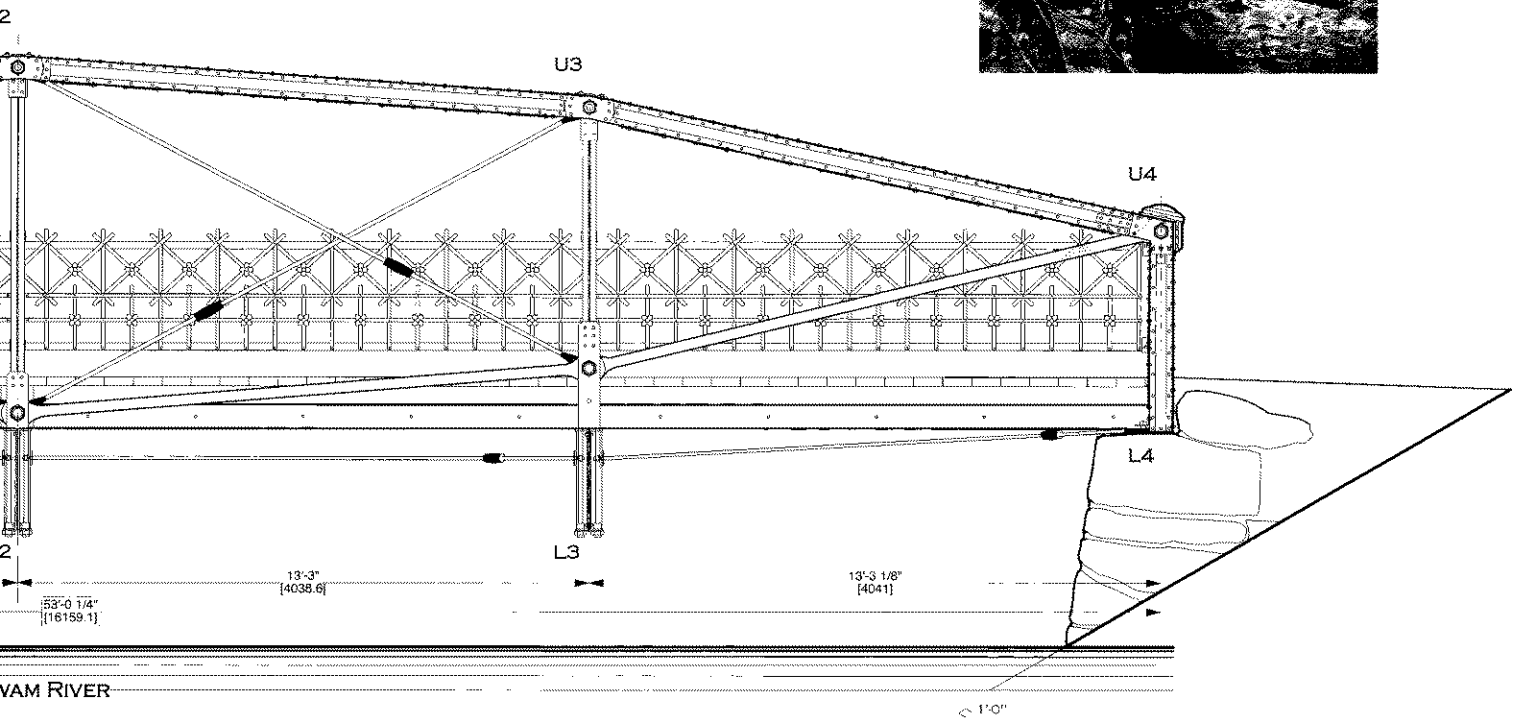
WE WERE RECENTLY NOTIFIED by Stamford's Engineering Department that Brooklyn architect Morgen Fleisig had been awarded the Leicester B. Holland Prize for his one-sheet measured drawing of the historic Turn-of-River Bridge in Stamford. The annual prize, awarded by the National Park Service, was the first given to an engineering structure; the previous winners have all been for architecture or landscape design. We spoke to Mr Fleisig, who explained that he had long been intrigued by these disappearing examples of American industrial ingenuity. Fleisig had documented bridges for the Historic American Engineering Record (HAER) while at Harvard, but had never before had the opportunity to record one of these lenticular (lens-shaped), parabolic

truss bridges constructed by the Berlin [CT] Iron Bridge Company. While over 100 of these ornate iron bridges had been constructed in Connecticut alone in the late 1800s, less than a dozen remain. Of the three (possibly four) built in Stamford, only two are left. The largest and grandest of them, the Pulaski Street Bridge, was demolished in 1990 despite considerable community opposition. An engineering marvel, the Pulaski Street Bridge consisted of two giant lens-shaped parabolas connected at both ends. All the bridges were constructed in the 1880s and '90s to handle increased traffic created by late-19th century population increase



TURN OF RIVER BRIDGE

CONNECTICUT • 1893



Photos courtesy of Morgen Fleisig

and industrial growth. Although more expensive to build than a traditional wooden bridge, they were cheaper than stone, were longer-lasting, and, with their mass-produced iron components, took less skill and time – often only a week or two – to erect (think Erector Set).

Few residents of Stamford are even aware this bridge exists as it carries no traffic and leads “nowhere.” Its connection to the remainder of Turn of River Road was severed by the construction of the Merritt Parkway in 1937. In 1893, at the time the bridge was built, the area was a thriving industrial and farming

center located along the bend of the Mill (Rippowam) River. You can see the bridge if, traveling up High Ridge Road, you turn right just north of Merritt Parkway Exit 35.

Mr. Fleisig selected this bridge for several reasons: first of all, it had not been documented previously by HAER (although we placed it on the National Register of Historic Places in 1986). Also, it was close to his home in Brooklyn and, although neglected, was in near original condition. He spent two full days at the site last June taking measurements and preparing detailed drawings – only one sheet was allowed per entry – and he won! HNN



Stamford Hospital's newly-constructed Crescent Building, c. 1970

Fate of Modernist “Icon” Uncertain

ABOUT SIX MONTHS AGO, we were delighted to hear from a government official that the current plans for the expansion of Stamford Hospital included retaining the modernist-style main building and refurbishing it into office space. However, when we spoke to a representative of the hospital recently, we were told that the decision was “on hold.” Apparently, concerns about sufficient parking to meet current regulations along with the need for expensive upgrades were giving hospital officials second thoughts. While it’s difficult for the public to think of modernist-style buildings as “historic,” they are the landmarks of tomorrow and need to be protected as such.

When this “new” section of Stamford Hospital, designed by E. Todd Wheeler of the White Plains office of prominent architectural firm Perkins & Will, was completed in 1968, it was hailed as a symbol of a new era, a modernist icon that was both functional and beautiful. Marie Updegraff, in her book *The Story of the Stamford Hospital 1896-1971*, stated: “The slim, crescent-shaped building with its continuous rows of sill-to-ceiling tinted glass windows was designed to give patients panoramic views of the surrounding area.”

Updegraff went on to describe it as a photogenic design that would break with the past, adding that “while graceful in appearance it is strong enough to support another six stories.”

When we informed architectural historian John Morris Dixon, long-time editor of *Progressive Architecture* magazine, of the current uncertainty, he expressed his concern. Mr. Dixon, who lives in Old Greenwich, serves on the board of the New York/Tri-State chapter of the international organization DOCOMOMO, dedicated to the preservation of modern architecture. He stated that he intends to bring the situation to the attention of DOCOMOMO members and commented in a recent e-mail to us that: “The hospital has indicated that this handsome and structurally sound building is adaptable for important uses. It would be a short-sighted waste to sacrifice it.” HNN

Need A Widget? Check With Us

RENÉE KAHN, *Historic Neighborhood News* Editor, had a colorful friend in Greenwich who loved to rescue ancient and abandoned buildings. For the past two decades, he and his team of dedicated carpenters were engaged in the Sisyphean task of restoring a c.1900 Victorian mansion in downtown Greenwich. Early on in the process, he bought the contents of a hardware store in upstate Connecticut that was going out of business – just in case he needed a “widget.” After his death over a year ago, his heirs offered the hardware to our organization, the Historic Neighborhood Preservation Program, Inc., and we, being a bunch of pack rats, eagerly accepted. For many months, boxes and boxes of hardware sat in the carriage house of board member Bill Bretschger, until his wife put her foot down and ordered everything out, sending them to a former Model T garage on Kahn’s property.

While none of the hardware could truly be considered antique, most of it is old and useful. For example, a carpenter we work with recently found a foot-long hook-and-eye combo he had been searching for.

If hardware is your thing, you are welcome to rummage through the collection. Who knows what you might find? A modest donation to the non-profit Historic Neighborhood Preservation Program, Inc., permits you to take it home with you. Call Renée at 203.322.6671.

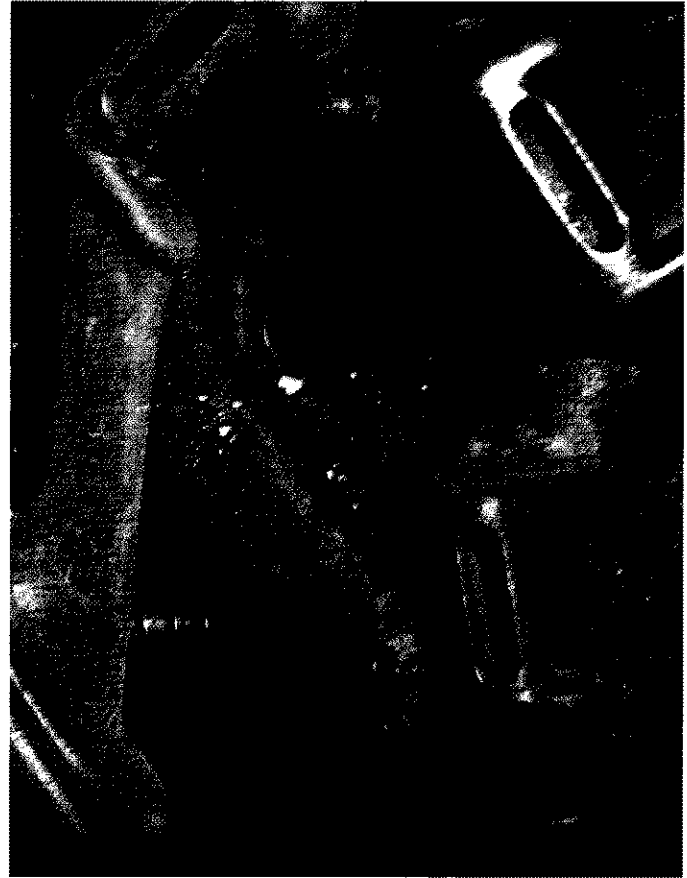


Photo: Renée Kahn

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Comments? Queries? Like to volunteer? Contact Wes at 203.325.4278 or execdirect@hnppinc.org

The HNPP is a non-profit, tax exempt 501(c)(3) organization dedicated since 1977 to the preservation of historic buildings. We would appreciate your help in achieving these goals.

Yes, I'd like to help...

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Naval Training Center

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Stamford. Since the Society's departure, the Cadets have remained in the buildings alongside City Operations and WPCA services which have subsumed much of the Cadets' space.

These modest buildings tell an important story about winning one war, preventing another, and the peacetime pursuit of environmental cleanup. We – Stamford – should be very proud of what these buildings represent and afford them the respect they deserve as monuments to these important events.

I remember how polluted the Sound was in the sixties and the ban on harvesting bivalves. I also remember the drill hall building too with its large bay opened wide on hot summer days overlooking the canal and circling gulls as a former Navy League Cadet and young parishioner of Star of the Sea where we attended Sunday Mass the year before the church was built. I don't mention my relationship with the building as being important to its significance other than to further make the point that cities are made of buildings, that this urban built environment holds numerous meanings and stories to the city's residents, that it is stories and connections to people that make cities interesting places to live, and that planning that respects this always makes cities better, more interesting places to live and visit. How many other communities in Fairfield County can offer a child or grandchild of the Greatest Generation a chance to connect with a real World War II artifact? And what about the Cadets' nearly 50-year close relationship to these buildings?

The Naval Reserve Training Center is a public building. On behalf of HNPP, I urge you not to take any action on this application that will harm or place this historic resource at risk. The proximity to the canal and WPCA facilities, as well as the industrial character of its immediate environment, are essential to understanding its history and significance. Preserved in this place it will be a highly visible landmark from the South End. HNPP offers to work with the city and new historic preservation advisory committee toward this end.

Thank you,

Wes Haynes
Executive Director, HNPP

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*Cynthia Reeder, former member of the Board of Directors of the Historic Neighborhood Preservation Program, Inc., pointed out relevant Section 27.8.B of the City Code of Ordinance:*

**It shall be the policy of the City of Stamford and its boards, commissions and departments to give priority to the preservation of the city's historic architecture and character. All boards, commissions and departments of the city, including but not limited to those dealing with planning, zoning, transportation, health and safety, shall consider historic and architectural significance and preservation when making decisions concerning whether and how properties and adjacent infrastructure should be rehabilitated, mothballed, maintained, or demolished, including decisions concerning to whom dispositions of property will be made. Properties owned by the City of Stamford shall not be excluded. Demolition shall be treated as an alternative of last resort and shall be utilized only when other reasonable alternatives do not exist.**