

Newburyport and a New Kind of Urban Renewal

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A NEW kind of urban renewal project is taking place in the heart of historic Market Square in Newburyport.

Market Square is one of the last seaport business districts remaining from the golden days of New England shipping. The city's prosperity was built on a practical combination of shipbuilding, fishing, European and West Indies trading, distilling and domestic trade. Market Square has been a market area since the Indians met early explorers from England, France and Holland on the banks of the Merrimack River to trade furs and fish.

Newburyport's downtown area was the scene of what is referred to as "The Great Fire of 1811." The fire started in an old stable in Mechanics Row (now Inn Street). It soon extended to Market Square and State Street, and then began to spread in fan-like fashion, enveloping all of the buildings in the central portion of the city and sweeping across wharves, leveling warehouses, sail lofts and other waterfront structures.

The General Court in June of the same year took steps to "secure the town of Newburyport from damage by fire" and passed an act providing that all structures erected between Market and Federal Streets and the northeasterly side of High Street, and the Merrimack River should be built of brick or stone, and prohibited the erection of wooden buildings

more than 25 feet high in any other part of the town.

During the term of the legislature's special act, many brick buildings were built on State and Pleasant Streets and in other parts of the center of the city, which are still standing. These include the uniform buildings within the renewal area where it is noticeable that no structures are constructed of wood. All have fire walls rising vertically from the basements and extending through the roofs.

During the early 1960s a typical renewal project was envisioned as the Central Business Project which proposed the wholesale clearance of Market Square and the adjacent waterfront of the Merrimack River.

In 1964, the Historical Society of Old Newbury formed a committee headed by Dr. Robert W. Wilkins, head of the B.U. School of Medicine and a resident of High Street with its distinctive Federal architecture. As a result of his enthusiasm Dr. Wilkins accepted an appointment to the Redevelopment Authority in 1966. The Historical Society was one of many groups and numerous individuals that was unhappy with the plan that proposed the demolition of this old seaport. It was their thinking that Newburyport, because of its rich architectural and maritime heritage, should lean towards rehabilitation and preservation rather than demolition, especially of the uniform early nineteenth century three-story brick Federal



FIG. 1A. AND FIG. 1B. TWO VIEWS OF MARKET SQUARE, NEWBURYPORT. THE UPPER ONE SHOWS IT AS IT APPEARED IN MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY. AS IT APPEARS TODAY IS SHOWN IN THE LOWER VIEW

buildings running along State Street from Threadneedle Alley down to Market Square.

After much discussion the Redevelopment Authority commissioned a feasibility study of the buildings along State Street. The architectural firm of Perry, Dean, Hepburn and Stewart was engaged and a study was undertaken. The study indicated that rehabilitation was feasible and desirable.

In May, 1969, the Redevelopment Authority took formal action to preserve Market Square and initiated the replanning of the project to rehabilitate the historic buildings. The proposed rehabilitation includes a row of unique and interesting small "shop-type" buildings on one side of lower Inn Street, buildings surrounding Market Square and a Greek Revival United States Customs House.

The new plan also calls for an elevated pedestrian walkway at the second-story level along the rear of the State Street and Inn Street buildings. The elevated pedestrian walkway will increase the economic viability of the buildings for restoration by making the second floors readily accessible for commercial uses. The area between the restored Inn Street and State Street buildings which is now vacant will be converted into a pedestrian-oriented plaza with a possible outdoor restaurant.

Although a major portion of the project area is composed of historic buildings another important facet of the area is a large tract of cleared land along the Merrimack River. Plans for this area call for a restaurant, motel, marina and related commercial uses with a new road running along the waterfront.

The only building within the project area that will not be "Touched" by urban renewal is the fire station in the cen-

ter of Market Square. This, too, is a most unusual building. Built in 1823, its initial use was as a market house with stalls in front where merchants from far and near brought their wares for sale. Through the years the market house has been occupied by many different uses including the Newburyport Chair Company, St. Mark's Lodge, Democratic Rallies, and city meetings. The clock on the market house was originally on the westerly side of the "Square" and was probably removed and placed on this building in 1852. In 1864 the butcher stalls on the lower floor were taken down and the space converted to accommodate the city's new steam fire engine. From that time on the building has served as the local fire station.

In March, 1970, a public hearing was held on the new plan. City and state approvals were obtained and an application was submitted to the Department of Housing and Urban Development for funding. Included in the application for funding was a request for \$540,000 to actually allow the Redevelopment Authority to restore the facades of several historic buildings including those along State Street. These buildings will be sold to private developers for interior rehabilitation and commercial use.

In November, 1970, the writer, Paul J. McGinley, a renewal planner and historic preservationist, was hired by the Redevelopment Authority as its new Executive Director. Efforts were immediately taken to get the project funded in light of the shortage of urban renewal funds.

On February 3, 1971 the Redevelopment Authority received word their application for funding had been approved in the amount of \$1,053,000. However, the funds for historic preservation had not been approved.

To assist in getting the funds for historic preservation restored to the renewal budget, it was suggested that Market Square be designated as a historic district and placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Through the efforts of the Redevelopment Authority staff;

On March 5, 1971 the Department of Housing and Urban Development approved the additional funds for the Redevelopment Authority to undertake the essential rehabilitation of the historic buildings. Newburyport's urban renewal project is one of the first in the country to

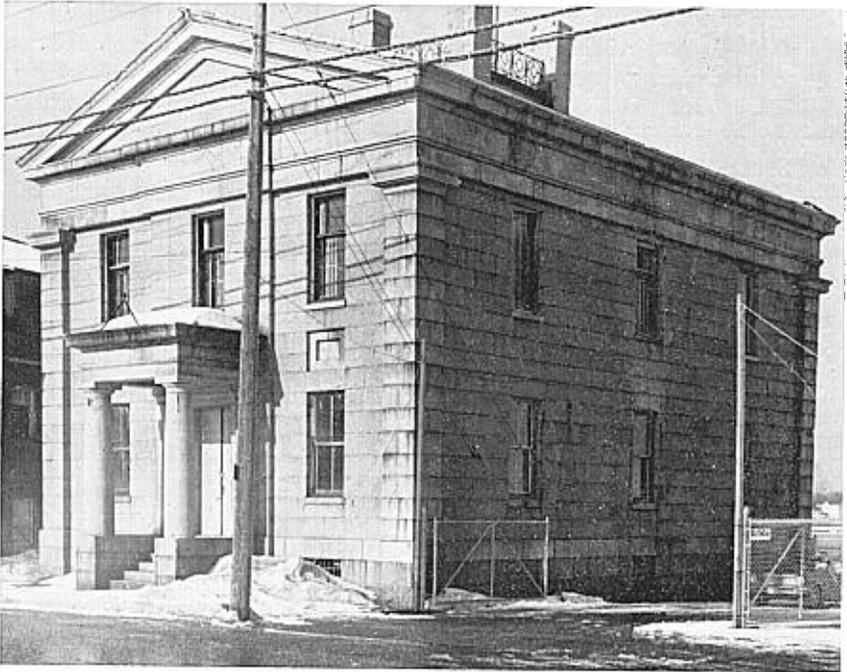


FIG. 2. THE CUSTOMS HOUSE. BUILT IN 1834-1835 AND DESIGNED BY ROBERT MILLS WHO WAS THE ARCHITECT FOR THE TREASURY BUILDING, THE PATENT OFFICE BUILDING, THE WASHINGTON MONUMENT, AND OTHER OUTSTANDING BUILDINGS IN WASHINGTON, D. C.

Congressman Michael J. Harrington; the National Trust for Historic Preservation; Secretary of State John F. X. Davoren and Dr. Richard Hale of the Massachusetts Historical Commission the "Market Square Historic District" was documented and listed on the National Register in a period of less than 15 days.

initiate restoration of historic buildings within a historic district with urban renewal funds.

Also recently placed on the National Register is Newburyport's United States Customs House, another historic building within the renewal area. The Customs House, built in 1834-1835 was designed by Robert Mills, America's first native-

born architect to achieve national renown. Mr. Mills shortly thereafter designed many of Washington's most outstanding buildings including the Treasury Building, the Patent Office Building, the Old Post Office and the Washington Monument. The renewal plan proposes the restoration of the Customs House for use as a maritime museum operated by the Newburyport Maritime Society. Detailed plans are now being prepared for this venture and the city's Historical Commission is applying for a HUD Historic Preservation Grant to assist with the cost of restoring this important link with Newburyport's maritime heritage.

The Redevelopment Authority is now

moving ahead to implement its ambitious plans. Historic buildings are available for purchase and restoration for various commercial uses and compatible new development. Anyone interested in participating in the restoration or development program as an owner or tenant should contact the Redevelopment Authority in Newburyport.

The citizens of Newburyport are now excited that the route to rehabilitation is getting underway to provide Newburyport with a unique downtown business district; one with "the flavor and nostalgia of the past, but with the conveniences of today."

Newburyport is now enjoying a new kind of urban renewal.