'Connecticut's Most Auncient Towne': A Brief History of Homes in Wethersfield, 1634-1934

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‘Connecticut’s Most Auncient Towne’: A Brief History of Homes in Wethersfield, 1634-1934

submitted by

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Advisor: Kathleen A. Curran
Abstract

This paper aims to delineate the stylistic history of Wethersfield, Connecticut’s domestic architectural culture from the time of its founding in 1634 by Massachusetts adventurer John Oldham through the completion of the Hubbard Community in the mid-1930s by visionary developer and historic home restorer Albert G. Hubbard, originally of Simsbury, Connecticut.

Due to its status as the oldest town in Connecticut, Wethersfield has the advantage of having at least one example of each major style of home building from the mid-seventeenth century age of settlement to the birth of the streetcar suburb and a class of corporate commuters and automobile owners. A relatively unique position, though one that is not entirely uncommon in the Northeast, Wethersfield has devoted itself to preserving the finest examples of historic homes. This paper seeks to bring to light the history, context, and a concise summary of major restorative efforts, including challenges and setbacks, of and to these homes.

The Buttolph-Williams House (c. 1686), the Silas W. Robbins House (1873), the Joseph Webb House (1753), and the Hubbard Community (1912-1938) were chosen as benchmarks in the domestic architectural history of Wethersfield not only for their relative fame, but for their idiosyncrasies as well. These houses may not represent the average home of the day—few residents of the town, after all, could have afforded to build a house as grand as Robbins’s Second Empire mansion—but they symbolize points of great change, or phases of growth in the town’s history. The Buttolph-Williams House, considered a mansion for its time, represents a later phase of the tradition of Medieval English vernacular housing styles that were preserved until about 1750 as (in Wethersfield, mostly Puritan) settlers arrived to the New World and began to forge lives for themselves. The Webb House, a splendid Georgian gambrel house, is one of rather many of its kind on Main Street, though few are so well preserved. Its solidity, but also its elegance, show the development of the town from the fearful, modest settlement it had been in the seventeenth century to a small, busy place of some sophistication, and, as will be seen, a spot of particular interest for the American Revolutionary War. As mentioned above, the Robbins House especially represents nothing of the norm of Wethersfield, but instead serves as an example of the prowess of entrepreneurship, particularly in agriculture and the seed industry specifically, that ruled the town’s upper class. Finally, the Hubbard Community will be discussed. This area is interesting not only because it shows the intentional imitation of the rhythmic eclecticism of various housing styles standing side-by-side as a result of centuries of change, but also because it is the first automobile-enabled, strategically planned suburban community in Connecticut. Comprised of over two-hundred craftsman, Jacobean Revival, and English Manor style homes, the Hubbard Community was a twenty-five year project resulting in a close-knit, unified community of well-built homes of various designs, completed using local materials and construction teams to ensure quality and affordability.
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Introduction: Old Wethersfield

John Oldham and his Ten Adventurers arrived in Wethersfield—then called Pyquaug—in 1634. Oldham, a man of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, had visited Pyquaug before, and was impressed by its readiness for farming and advantageous location on the Great River, affording access to Long Island Sound. What was then a modest settlement, fearful of attacks by Native American tribes settled as far as modern-day Ledyard and Preston, survives today as the earliest permanent European-American settlement in Connecticut, as well as the largest historic district in the state1.

Measuring 2.3 square miles, Old Wethersfield is bounded to the North by Hartford (settled 1623/3623), to the South by the town of Rocky Hill (which belonged to Wethersfield until the nineteenth century), to the East by I-91 (built 1964), and to the West by railroad tracks stretching into Hartford and Cromwell, which were built in the 1850s and were in continuous use until 19414.

The area of land today recognized as Wethersfield was acquired by John Oldham from the Massachusetts Bay Colony, as well as from the chiefs of the Wongunk tribe, who occupied the land in the early seventeenth century, when Oldham arrived5 (fig. 1). In the years just before the introduction of European settlers to the area, the local native

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1 William Sesko (Wethersfield Resident and amateur historian), Conversation about the history of Wethersfield, 2013.
3 The above webpage mentions that Hartford was initially settled in 1623 as an outpost for Dutch traders, but was not colonized formally until 1636.
tribes had been decimated by a smallpox epidemic, which perhaps contributed to their willingness to welcome the Adventurers to Pyquaug. During its early years, Wethersfield served as a transport hub, but developed quickly into an important commercial station as well as an agricultural community. Initially, the area was enticing because of the large, flat meadows, which meant that farmlands would not have to be hewn from rough forest, which was a difficulty many settlers faced in the New England wilderness during the early stages of colonization. In the Great Meadows, as they were called, settlers planted corn, harvested crops like hemp and red onions, and grazed their livestock.

The local tribes had welcomed Oldham and his companions to Pyquaug, in part because of their recognition of Oldham’s peaceful intentions, but also because the presence of the European settlers might have protected them—or helped them to protect themselves—from attacks from other tribes. The smallpox epidemic that had come prior to the arrival of Oldham and his Adventurers had decimated the local Indian population, and, predictably, left their able-bodied numbers low, and their surviving individuals and lands vulnerable.

The fear that the local tribes felt was not an unreasonable one, and the openness of the Great Meadow—advantageous though it was for planting and grazing—left the settlers unprotected. In April of 1637, about sixty Pequot tribesmen ambushed men and women as they did their spring planting. They arrived by canoe from their settlement further down the River (near present-day Ledyard, or Uncasville), and slaughtered six or seven people, carrying away two young women, the daughters of prominent town

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7 Nora Howard, *Stories of Wethersfield*.
8 Willard, *Willard’s Wethersfield*.
9 Howard, *Stories of Wethersfield*. 
resident Captain Swayne\textsuperscript{10}. Following this attack, Wethersfield became a fortified town with menacing, garrison-like houses that were better prepared to withstand an assault. There was constant, vigilant watch for Indians, Pequot or otherwise, but no other major attacks came\textsuperscript{11}.

The earliest dwellings in Wethersfield at this time were little more than cellars roofed over with logs, thatched with branches and straw\textsuperscript{12}. There is no evidence that any log cabins of the type associated with early Scandinavian or Germanic settlements in Pennsylvania existed in Wethersfield, as the English settlers were not familiar with this manner of construction\textsuperscript{13}. The next wave of building brought small, framed homes, typically with one room and an end chimney, which were made of wood and clay. Thatched and insulated with wattle and daub technique between the studs, the exterior would be covered with wide weatherboards to protect against the harsh New England winters, and generally unpredictable weather. Wood chimneys were built into these homes, but a shift to brick was made fairly early on, with very few stone chimneys being built in Wethersfield at all during the early settlement period. Eventually, another room was added to the other side of the chimney, chronologically similar to when the shift to brick was made.

These houses were set back from the road, and were oriented to the East in order to capitalize on natural sunlight, regardless of orientation to the road. The road, called the ‘highway’, would be muddy or dusty at turns, depending on the season, and winding to

\textsuperscript{10} Howard, \textit{Stories of Wethersfield.}
\textsuperscript{11} Willard, \textit{Willard’s Wethersfield.}
\textsuperscript{12} Willard, \textit{Willard’s Wethersfield.}
\textsuperscript{13} Howard, \textit{Stories of Wethersfield.}
avoid immovable boulders, and old wells that people might have accidentally dug in the way\textsuperscript{14}.

The Meadows continued to be very active in the lives of the settlers, and in the life of Wethersfield itself. It became home to mills, including corn mills, saw mills, and hemp mills (hemp being the material that Oldham had first come to Pyquaug to trade), as well as warehouses and wharfs stemming off of the Great River. The River was the second highway, so to speak, and also an integral part of commerce and travel. Sailing ships from the Indies or England would come into the landing wharves, and families would gather at the Cove to retrieve cargo—such as seal skins, alum, indigo, red and yellow ochre, sheep’s wool, and combs—from incoming ships and to welcome seamen home from travel. Wethersfield’s social life was inseparably tied to its economy and growth—work in the Meadows, as well as this trade activity on the River, served as social gatherings as well as necessary elements of survival in the tumultuous and uncertain early years.

These fundamental lifelines remained largely unchanged as the colonial period gave way to Independence, and thus, the nineteenth century. Wethersfield, whose roots lay in planting, continued to thrive as an agricultural village, though it was certainly rural in character. The synthesis of agriculture and trade lead to the blossoming of a farming elite, namely residents like Silas Robbins, co-founder of the enormously successful Johnson, Robbins & Co. Seed Company, which continues to operate in Wethersfield

today as the Hart Seed Company. The boom in horticultural and agricultural interest in the second half of the nineteenth century certainly did not hinder Robbins’s financial success, and allowed him to construct what remains today to be one of the grandest examples of historic architecture in Old Wethersfield, his personal home at 185 Broad Street.

Hartford began to play an important role in the socioeconomic character of Wethersfield around this time, as it became an increasingly significant insurance city. Famously insuring the city of Chicago at the time of the Great Fire in 1872, Hartford flourished as a city of distinction and relative wealth, which in turn benefitted its neighbor to the South. A streetcar ran between Wethersfield and Hartford to facilitate a small number of commuters, as well as to enable the townspeople, or villagers as they were sometimes called, to visit the department stores and other commercial resources located in Hartford.

It was not until the dawn of the automobile age that Wethersfield truly bloomed into a highly populated, white-collar suburb of Hartford (fig. 2). In 1910, visionary architect and builder Albert G. Hubbard arrived in Wethersfield from his hometown of Simsbury, and purchased a number of plots in town. He built and sold three houses outside of the historic district (fig. 3), and in 1912, began the strategic development of Old Wethersfield from a farming village to a bona fide suburb. The combined convenience of Hubbard’s homes themselves, the availability of streetcar commuting into

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15 Martha Smart (Volunteer Research Librarian, Wethersfield Historical Society), Conversation, 2014.
17 Borrup, “Transit to Wethersfield”
18 Story of Wethersfield
Hartford, and the new abundance of wealth that led to the affordability of the automobile—namely, the Ford Model A, which could be seen in large numbers in Old Wethersfield—meant the exodus of wealthy businessmen out of Hartford into the new suburb. What this meant for Wethersfield was an exponential growth curve in a relatively short period of time—that is, a rapid increase in population and housing capacity from 1912-1938, owing almost entirely to Hubbard in Old Wethersfield, and a small handful of other, like-minded developers outside of the historic district.

This paper seeks to elucidate a clear line of continuous development from the generation of Oldham’s settlement in 1634 to the culmination of Hubbard’s work in the historic district between 1935 and 1939. These three-hundred years of history have given to the town an encyclopedic aesthetic and a variety of homes that stand testament to the lasting quality and dedicated effort of this country’s historic builders. Each period has given at least one home of historical and architectural significance to the legacy of Wethersfield—for the Early Colonial period, the Buttolph-Williams House; for the Revolutionary Colonial period, the Joseph Webb House, otherwise known as Hospitality Hall or the Washington-Webb House; for the nineteenth century, the Silas W. Robbins House; and for the twentieth century, the charming matrix of Craftsman Bungalow and Colonial or Jacobean Revival homes constructed by Albert G. Hubbard, known as the Hubbard Community. Secondarily, the extensive restoration and renovation efforts these homes have undergone over the decades will be examined as a method of discovering true historical accuracy, as well as underlining the consistent value of historic preservation that has long existed in Wethersfield.

1984 map of Wethersfield diagramming housing growth, courtesy of Wethersfield Historical Society, Inc.
The common theme, across generations, centuries, and genres, is that of growth, prosperity, and community. The brotherhood of the American settlers and colonists survived, and grew to an officially banded social club, with charity, entertainment, and friendship in mind. Surviving hardships from Pequots to the Great Depression, Wethersfield has a long tradition of solidarity and overcoming—a tradition represented by its strong and continuous domestic architectural history, a living document in the Connecticut River Valley.
Chapter One: The Age of Settlement

*The Buttolph-Williams House*

Lieutenant John Buttolph arrived to Wethersfield in 1676 from Boston, hoping to further his profits from trade on the Great River. He purchased two deeds from John and Noah Coleman, who had inherited the property from their father, Thomas Coleman, who was the third owner of the lot on which the present house stands\(^\text{20}\). Buttolph was a glove maker, trader, and tavern keeper, and kept a warehouse and shop on the southern two acres of the home lot. However, until relatively recently (1978, to be precise), it was believed that the house that survives today was not built by Lieutenant Buttolph, but by his son, David. The problematic aspect of this theory was that the house that was inventoried upon David Buttolph’s death was described contemporaneously as a mansion, with the assumption that the elder Buttolph had purchased the land in 1685 and built nothing. David Buttolph was a young man with little or no independent wealth, and therefore could not have afforded a house like the one in which he lived. The theory developed by Gail Cleere of the Wethersfield Historical Society in 1978 postulated that, in fact, the elder Buttolph built and furnished the home for his son’s use\(^\text{21}\).

Supporting Cleere’s theory is an account book belonging to Nathaniel Foote (of the Footes who came with Oldham and founded Wethersfield just over fifty years prior) which includes a bill in 1686 to John Buttolph, calling into question the 1692 date that had long been held for the building of the current home by David Buttolph upon his


father’s death. The work Foote did included measuring and finishing the house on the
vacant lot Lieutenant Buttolph purchased in 1685 using a recycled frame from another
home, placed over a pre-dug cellar that existed on the lot from the time of the Colemans’
ownership. David gained formally recognized ownership of the home in a 1693 contract
and, as previous historians pointed out, this deed omitted mention of a home structure,
though, according to Ms. Cleere, some deeds may not have mentioned a house, due to the
casual nature of record-keeping in the late seventeenth century\textsuperscript{22}.

The house that has been the object of such debate is known today as the Buttolph-
Williams House (fig. 4), named for its builder and the longest-running owner of the house
following the Buttolphs. While it has been established that the main house was built and
furnished by members of the Buttolph family between 1686 and 1692, a large part of
what stands today was built and expanded by the home’s third owner, Benjamin Belden.
The style of the house is typically associated with the seventeenth century in New
England, but it remained popular in the Connecticut Valley through 1725, and was not
fully abandoned until well after the Revolution\textsuperscript{23}.

The hall-and-parlor plan was common in large-form houses through the middle of
the eighteenth century, and in many cases, as at the Buttolph-Williams, the plan was
enlarged by an ell. The exterior features the typical extreme overhang, cedar-shingled
roof, board and batten doors, and diamond-paned casement windows that \textit{The Great
River Catalog} calls representative of the style and character of “the region’s first-century

\textsuperscript{22} Nancy Pappas, “Document Clouds”.
\textsuperscript{23} “The Buttolph-Williams House, Wethersfield, Connecticut, 1693-1714”, \textit{The Great
River Catalog} (Wadsworth Athenaeum: 1985), pp. 75-76.
housing. Behind the worn weatherboards, the interior reveals a lot about the original framing of the house. The entryway is extremely narrow, with less than four and a half feet between the entryway and the beginning of the triple-run staircase. In many of the rooms, the girts and floor joists are exposed, which, as *The Great River Catalog* details, was a common feature of a fine house of the time.

As was typical for the time, the framing of the house is bulky, and sturdy. The technique for framing houses in the seventeenth and early eighteenth century was, aesthetically speaking, reminiscent of steel-cage construction. That is to say, the frame of an Early Colonial house had the appearance of a skyscraper’s steel cage: a cube comprised of four smaller cubes (in the two-over-two hall-and-parlor plan) made of large wooden beams. This, of course, is the case in the Buttolph-Williams House. *The Great River Catalog* describes the framing in further detail:

> The north room is relatively large (15’ w. x 20’5” d.) and handsomely finished with molded sheathing (only fragments are original), whitewashed plaster, a deeply chamfered summer beam, chimney lintel, and exposed girts. The floor joists of this room were almost certainly exposed originally and were probably finished with beaded or chamfered edges.

> The roof of the house retains most of its original framing. It is framed by four large (8” x 4”) principal rafters interspersed with smaller (4” x 3”) common rafters and strengthened by purlins that are tenoned through the principal rafters and offset so that the joints do not intersect. Bracing is used to strengthen the joint between the purlins and the principal rafters.\(^{25}\)

Speaking more to the structure of the home is the 1947 restoration of the home by the Structures Committee. During the course of that restoration, the Committee replaced

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\(^{24}\) *The Great River Catalog*

\(^{25}\) *The Great River Catalog*, pp. 76.
the rotted sills, as well as removing skirting boards and lower courses of worn clapboard. In doing so, they discovered that the clapboards were not nailed to the studs or lining boards, but rather to nailing strips furring out the walls on the front and sides of the house. Beneath, there were thin white pine clapboards nailed directly to the studs of the house; these were originally painted red, but still were not the original coverings of the house. Originally, the home would have been covered with riven oak clapboards, which in 1947 only existed in the space where the ell joined the rear of the house.

Removing these old clapboards revealed the full four-inch overhang of the second story, which had been nearly flush when covered with modern clapboards, as well as the fragmentary remains of the original doorframe. The doorframe consisted of five-groove pilasters that once would have had capitals, which had since been lost. However, the shape of these capitals remained in the outlines on the moldings, so restorers could get a sense for how the entry would have looked.

The chimney presented another challenge for restoration, as it needed repair in order to allow the house to survive the next winter. Restorers found that the chimney rises from a stone base and then was built entirely of brick and clay from the ground floor up. This method of building was unusual in southern Connecticut for an early house, where typically the stack would have been built entirely of stone. In the upper Connecticut Valley, however, stone was hard to come by, and had to be carted from far away, which contributed to the predominance of brick chimneys.\footnote{Wethersfield Historical Society, Buttolph-Williams House Restoration Report, 1947.}

In removing the ell that had been added, presumably by Belden, who during his tenure as homeowner increased the value of the house to nearly four times as much as the
amount he had paid, the Buttolph-Williams house regained its status as arguably the purest example of seventeenth-century architecture in the area. As *The Antiquarian* states, the house is, “the last survivor of two rows of 17th-century houses that once lined [the] street...One by one, these houses have gone, perhaps turned into ells, to later houses, or even moved back to serve as barns before their final step into oblivion.”

The Buttolph-Williams House stands as a memorial to the earliest days of Wethersfield’s existence—days that were troubled by worries unfathomable to the modern resident. Like many other seventeenth-century dwellings, it maintains the forbidding, fortified appearance held by many early New England domiciles, and the influence of regional English architecture speaks loudly and clearly through the medieval details, such as diamond-paned windows. Yet the other needs of New England settlers—and of Wethersfield villagers in particular—were addressed at this home lot, and at most others as well. The house was equipped with, as mentioned before, a warehouse on the property, out of which Lieut. Buttolph ran a shop where he sold such items as ladies’ gloves (his specialty by trade), and other materials. Of course, almost every home had at least a small portion of its lot dedicated to cultivating small crops, and many families participated in the communal harvest in the Great Meadows, where the Pequot attack had taken place in the town’s infancy.

The House also represents a number of qualities that are hugely valuable to Early Colonial architecture on the whole. Its form, first and foremost, is a clean and well-preserved example of the preferred method of New England building between 1650 and

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28 Clark, *The Antiquarian*. 
1700—the rectangular plan with a massive central fireplace, a steep roof, and wood frame with exterior clapboards, as was the overwhelming majority in early New England. This form was a derivative of vernacular architecture in Late Medieval England, but was also reliant upon the climate of the area, as well, as Amir Ameri states in his paper on the topic, as the religious persuasion of the colonists in the region.

The preference for the central chimney is a logical one, considering the harshness of New England seasons, and is derived from the style of building more common in eastern England, where most of the settlers from Massachusetts and Connecticut originally lived. However, the dominant favoring of wood construction in New England—and in Wethersfield, rather pointedly—has not been attributed to any allegiance to a regional preference dating back to English ancestry, but rather to a lime shortage in the early years of New England settlement, although the practice of burning oyster shells to create lime was common in New London and New Haven, and a lime deposit was discovered and worked in relatively-nearby Providence, Rhode Island as early as 1662.

According to Ameri, this lack of brick speaks to another factor entirely, and one that is of equal importance in Wethersfield as it was in the Colonial New World at large. The lack of brick building in New England can be owed as much to a lack or shortage of lime as it can be attributed to social and economic conditions. Economically, brick would have presented an enormous expense that would have severely limited the number of people who could afford to build them. But, as seen in Wethersfield, the times of

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30 Ameri, “Housing Ideologies”. 
economic hardship dissipated as the colonies settled into routine and established sufficient trade and agricultural patterns. In New England, brick building did not increase with improved economic conditions—this is where the social aspect, or the aspect of Puritanism, comes into play.

Wethersfield, like many other New England settlements, was founded and populated by devout Puritans, and the religious practices of that group remained important throughout the early years of the town’s history—for example, Lieut. Buttolph is recorded as being a man well respected enough among his fellow townspeople to have been elected to the position of ‘selectman’, which was a town councilman associated closely with the church. While Puritan society did not have any outward issues with possessing wealth or enjoying it, nor was there any uniform practice of owning only modest and inexpensive items, there was pointedly less focus—to the point of frowning upon—blatant, visible displays of wealth. Traditionally, masonry was associated with the English gentry, and symbolized wealth and success; chimneys, too, were symbols of prosperity and social success. Puritans typically made an effort to alleviate extremes at either end of the socioeconomic spectrum, and went so far as to pass laws forbidding the wearing of extravagant clothing and jewels. Luxury, in addition to creating notable, visible wealth discrepancy, was thought to be spiritually harmful to a person, as the Puritans were convinced of a mutual exclusivity between the pursuit of worldly goods and proper devotion to God\textsuperscript{31}. Brick building was lumped into this idea of shunning boastful expressions of wealth, while wood construction was exalted:

If, as Edmund Pendleton put it in the late 1760s, to build a building ‘of wood’ meant to ‘be humble’ in the architectural

\footnote{31 Ameri, “Housing Ideologies”.}
vocabulary of these colonists, and brick meant a dignified ‘improvement’, then the Puritans’ selection of wood as the building material of choice was well in keeping with their views and practices and their disdain for the display of wealth and status for its own sake. Brick and peripheral chimneys, given their significance, would indeed have been inappropriate because of their formal and material association with all that the builders had rejected and left behind.\footnote{Ameri, “Housing Ideologies”, pp. 13.}

Although it seems forbidding, and somewhat modest, to today’s eyes, the Buttolph-Williams House was, in reality, every bit the mansion it was described to be upon David Buttolph’s death. Despite being a home of wood frame construction, featuring one of those massive, utilitarian chimneys so common in early Colonial homes, the house that stands today on the corner of Church and Marsh Streets rather embodies the ideals of the upper strata of Puritan society in the first era of communities in New England. That is not to say, however, that the Buttolph-Williams House represents the norm in New England houses, and much less does it reflect the average home in Wethersfield, which might have appeared more like the Buttolph-Williams’s later (c. 1730) neighbor across the street, the Ezra Webb House (fig. 5). As John Willard discusses in his Willard’s Wethersfield (pub. 1975), many of Wethersfield’s earliest homes were small, modest structures, and as the centuries have passed, those houses have, unfortunately, disappeared from the Wethersfield landscape\footnote{Willard, Willard’s Wethersfield.}. It cannot be forgotten that Wethersfield’s roots are humble, and, as history trumped forward, it was—and has been—that heritage of hardworking, modest lifestyles that carried through, foregoing much of the grandeur that is found in many other historic homes around the state. Having undergone a number of renovations, additions, and changes as it changed
hands over the centuries, the Buttolph-Williams House stands today in a state as close as could be imagined to its original form, though, of course, some dispute remains as to the actual designation of rooms (examples: figs. 6 & 7)—though it is well-known that room specialization did not come into play until the middle of the eighteenth century, which accounts for the seemingly odd practice of placing furniture tightly against the walls for flexibility of use.

Nonetheless, as stated by the Wadsworth Athenaeum’s publication, the Buttolph-Williams House is, without a doubt, the clearest and best-preserved example of this phase of building in Connecticut, and serves today to transport the visitor back to the days of Blackbird Pond, the Ten Adventurers, and excitement on the Great River; the infancy of Wethersfield remains immortalized in each of its summers and girts, in its massive chimney and its narrow entryway, ready to greet each new century as it comes.
Wethersfield continued to flourish after the departure of the Buttolphs around the turn of the eighteenth century, and as Revolution loomed on the horizon, life in Wethersfield had changed little in character since its earlier days. The town remained somewhat sleepy, yet industrious, bustling about in agriculture and some trade, as the colonies hurried toward what would be unimaginable change for so many. Wethersfield, predictably, remained on the outskirts of fame, and of activity, until the Revolution quite literally came knocking at its door.

The Joseph Webb House, which stands today at 211 Main Street, was originally built by Joseph Webb, Sr. in 1753 (fig. 8, center). Webb, who was a member of a well-to-do family that had long lived in town, was widely complimented on his construction of what one Historical Society pamphlet described as ‘one of the handsomest dwellings of the town’\(^{34}\). Webb died in 1761 unexpectedly, leaving his well-admired house to his wife and his son, Joseph Webb, Jr.—although the widow Webb only resided in the house until her remarriage to diplomat Silas Deane, who built a house next door. Deane was an early patriot, and it is because of him that recognition and Revolution both came to Wethersfield in the last twenty-five years of the eighteenth century.

In June of 1775, General George Washington passed through Connecticut on his way to take command of the new American army stationed at Cambridge, Massachusetts. On his journey, Washington carried a letter from Silas Deane, who was at the time on

\(^{34}\) Wethersfield Historical Society, “The Old Webb House, Wethersfield, Connecticut”, no date available.
business in Philadelphia, inviting him to stay with his wife in Wethersfield should he need a place to spend the night. Washington likely accepted Deane’s offer, and it is thought that, on this first trip, he lodged at the Deane House, but was entertained for some time at the Webb House next door. It is known, though, that Washington met Joseph Webb, Jr., and his younger brother, Samuel Blatchley Webb, who lived in the house at the time. Samuel Webb soon went on to become a close member of Washington’s staff, and served in the Continental Army through the Revolution.

The Webb House gained its nickname of “Hospitality Hall” several years later, in 1781, when General Washington returned to Wethersfield on appointment to meet the Comte de Rochambeau. Rochambeau was the leader of the French forces in America, stationed at Newport, Rhode Island, and planned to meet Washington to discuss strategy—that conference ultimately lead to the Yorktown Campaign, and the defeat of Cornwallis that ended the Revolutionary War. This conference came at a crucial point in the War, “after a frustrating year of defeat and another devastating winter encampment for the American troops.”

The meeting took place in the southeast parlor of the house, as was traditional, and the room today is referred to as the Campaign Room; the bedroom where Washington spent the night has also been dubbed the Washington Bedroom.

Washington stayed at the House from May 19, 1781 to May 24, 1781, with the infamous conference taking place on May 22. It is thought that Washington was, at the very least, entertained at the Webb House during his first visit to Wethersfield in 1775 because of his familiarity with the Webb family, particularly with the second son, Samuel

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Webb. As mentioned, Webb served closely in Washington’s staff as an aide-de-camp, and Joseph Webb, who shared his father’s merchant-builder trade, was heavily involved in supplying the Continental Army throughout the Revolution.\(^{37}\)

Webb, unfortunately, suffered enormous financial losses after the War, and the house passed out of his hands before 1800.\(^{38}\) However, stories of the so-called Yorktown Conference traveled, and the fame of Washington’s visit to Wethersfield grew between the turn of the nineteenth century and about 1830. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the Webb House was little short of a shrine to Washington, and to patriotism at large.

The House is recognized today as one of the best examples of the elaborate, gambrel-roofed type of Connecticut Valley house. Its plan consists of a central hall, four rooms per floor, and a garret with a height almost equal to that of the lower stories. This attic is of special interest because of the items that were kept in it—in addition to serving as slave and servants’ quarters, the attic was used for extensive storage (fig. 9). It features a gallery with a rail, an old smoke closet for curing meat, and a collection of domestic articles that would have been common in the time of the home’s building. The front entryway—an important feature of Colonial houses—is a traditional Connecticut type, with an X in the lower panel. Almost all hinges and hardware in the home are originals, speaking highly to the great care that has been taken to preserve ‘Hospitality Hall’, despite it having been used as a personal home until 1916.

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\(^{37}\) Douglas Kendall, “Wallace Nutting at Wethersfield”.

\(^{38}\) “Hospitality Hall” informational pamphlet, courtesy of Wethersfield Historical Society, ca. 1940-65 (date based on appearance).
The elder Webb purchased the lot at what would be known as 211 Main Street (Main Street then went by High Street), where there might have already existed a small, single-story brick structure. It is thought that Webb, perhaps, took that brick structure and rotated it around on the lot to create the rear ell of the surviving house, and around it built up a large, Georgian house with three stories, two chimneys, and raised the old brick structure up to two stories to match the rest of the new structure.

This home that was built up between 1752 and 1753 was a prototype of the large dwellings built in Wethersfield during the second half of the eighteenth century. It represented the emerging class of wealthy merchants who wanted to showcase their prosperity and power. The windows are notably large, and inconsistent with other 1750s houses—a feature which Kevin Sweeney, of the Webb-Deane Stevens Museum, made a point of noting in his 1983 assessment of the house’s architecture—meaning that it could have been exceptional for houses in the time, or that Joseph Webb, Jr. enlarged the size of the window openings. Whatever the case may be, it is certain that the windows were at their present size by the time the wallpaper was installed in the Washington bedroom, as the wallpaper was undisturbed by any such renovation. It originally featured two chimneys of equal size—one at the north end and one at the south end—although today, the south chimney is significantly smaller than the north. Nails in the roof patches seem to suggest that the change was made in the mid to late-19th century. Much of the other restoration that Sweeney describes is typical for maintaining a colonial house—such as replacing rotting clapboards. However, when historian and restorer Wallace Nutting

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40 Douglas Kendall, “Wallace Nutting at Wethersfield”.
purchased the house for restoration in 1916, many extensive interior changes were made—and ultimately undone by the Colonial Dames—as he prepared to open the house as a museum for the first time in 1919\(^\text{42}\). Nutting purchased the house with several intriguing features leftover from the time of building—such as the checkerboard floor in the hall—but also wrote extensively in his reports about the authentic colonial furniture featured in the house, despite the fact that he had added all of it, and chosen what he added for strictly aesthetic purposes\(^\text{43}\). He also mentions the British castle scenes that are painted on the first floor walls, though historians uphold that these may not be original, and furthermore, may not even be true to the original style.

Regardless of Nutting’s changes, the truth remains that the Webb House symbolizes epitome of change after the first century of life in Wethersfield. The stylistic conservatism that had been preeminent in the earlier phase of building, exemplified at the Buttolph-Williams House, had all but disappeared by this point in Wethersfield’s history. No longer was it held to be inappropriate to display wealth through the size and form of a home—mostly gone were the medieval-derived garrisons so common in Wethersfield’s earlier days, replaced by what we may now see as the solid grandeur of the Georgian home. Where the Puritan houses may have emphasized the modest enjoyment of wealth, choosing simpler house forms and materials—namely, the wood frame and the large central hearth—over the symbolic implications of brick and peripheral or multiple chimneys, the Revolutionary colonial phase in Wethersfield meant the visible enjoyment of the wealth that the successful merchant class—perhaps more concisely dubbed the

\(^{42}\) Douglas Kendall, “Wallace Nutting at Wethersfield”.

bourgeoisie—displayed through the construction of large, elegant homes, typically with peripheral chimneys (like at the Webb House), and, increasingly, brick construction, although the Webb House and both of its neighbors, Deane and Stevens, are wood-framed. By now, the industry in Wethersfield had grown, though not changed: agriculture remained preeminent, as well as trade coming off of the Great River into the Wethersfield Cove, sometimes known as Blackbird Pond. Although religion was still an important part of life, the stability of the town meant that architectural trends could be passed along, and followed; furthermore, as the town had grown, so had its religious diversity to include not only Puritan villagers, but also Anglicans and other denominations. This is another factor contributing to the shift toward showier houses featuring these symbolically significant traits that would have been rejected by the earliest Puritan settlers.

The Webb House features another important element that is representative of the new wealth enjoyed by some residents of Wethersfield: a rear garden, used less and less for utilitarian food-growing, but more as a source of exercise and recreation. Today, the Webb House’s gardens are home to many beautiful flowers and small vegetable plants, a nod to the original use for the rear garden at the time of the house’s use as a family home. Furthermore, it was around the time of the Webb House’s original construction that room specification began to be widely practiced in domestic architecture, and so the ground floor plan begins to make more and more room for ceremonial spaces—like, for instance, the southeast parlor where the Yorktown Conference took place. Room specification also speaks to the financial stability of the homeowners at the time, displaying that they have enough disposable income to have spaces—and furniture—that are only used on special occasions, rather than making careful use of every item to the utmost degree. The earlier
phase of building was known for the multi-functionality of rooms, working at once as hall, as dining room, as living room, and, sometimes, as a sleeping space. However, the Webb House not only has four bedrooms, but two parlors, a kitchen, and a dining room, each clearly designated, with unique items of furniture that would have been arranged around the room, rather than against the walls for easy storage and flexibility.

Similar to the Buttolph-Williams House, the Webb House presents a somewhat dishonest image of the general character of Wethersfield in the mid- to late-eighteenth century. Many of the homes in town still were not large—even some of the larger houses were more in the style of the notably more modest Stevens House on the North side of the Webb House (examples figs. 10 and 11)—and even more common still were even smaller forms, like the one at present-day 141 Main Street, the John Loveland House (fig. 12). This house is small, like a cottage, accompanied by a barn in the back of the property, and much more typical of the style of homes and the tenor of the town at that time. As discussed earlier, that English Medieval vernacular style of building that was seen at the Buttolph-Williams House hung on until the middle of the eighteenth century, and houses of that appearance, though perhaps not the size, continued to be built through the middle of the eighteenth century.

As Wethersfield moved into her second century of growth and prosperity at the heart of the Connecticut River Valley, it was clear that there were many changes on the horizon—not the least of which being a new United States of America—and the industrious little village continued to plunge forward, passionately engaged in its agricultural role (both internally and in trade) as well as its position in commerce along the Great River. The increasingly wealthy merchant class began to take a firm hold of the
culture of Wethersfield, particularly its architecture, creating an aesthetic tone that would shape the nature of development in town for centuries to come.
Chapter Three: The Nineteenth Century

The Silas W. Robbins House

The nineteenth century was a time of booming nationwide—the excitement of westward expansion, the prosperity of a new nation, and the thrill (and turmoil) of a country on the brink of still more great change in the Civil War. In Wethersfield, as well as in the Midwest, the nineteenth century was a time of blooming, namely in the horticultural industry. Wethersfield was home to a number of important seed houses, like Comstock, Ferre Company and Johnson, Robbins & Co. Seed Company, and it was precisely the owners of these companies who enjoyed the greatest financial success in Wethersfield in the nineteenth century.

The seed industry boomed as it became fashionable to keep flower and fruit gardens—that is, as personal farming took a backseat to recreational gardening. This boom was directly correlated to a worldwide exploration and interest in plants, and was biggest between 1850 and 1880—coincidentally aligning with the dates of the Second Empire Style’s peak popularity in the United States. Many publications partnered beautiful landscaping with moral virtue and even intelligence, encouraging many people to buy into the seed industry via this incentive.

Seedsmen like Comstock, and, the focus here, Silas Robbins, had been involved in the seed industry before the huge nationwide boom, as Wethersfield was famous for its specific strain of red onion, which had been grown by the original settlers and is

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45 Jenness, “Planting a Seed”. 
recognized widely as a common breed of onion. The Wethersfield red onion was in high demand, and naturally, local seedsmen were the ones who met this commercial challenge. For reference, in 1867, the railroads in Western New York (not quite local, but near enough) are recorded to have carried over eight thousand tons of trees to be sold and shipped, with a net value of over $1.5 million, and over a quarter of the letters received for processing at the Rochester, NY post office were seed orders for Vick’s Seed Company, which was the leader in that region. More than that, though, the Wethersfield seedsmen became community leaders, as their wealth allowed them to form a sort of upper echelon of society in a small, agriculturally focused area like the Connecticut River Valley. Robbins and the Anderson family are recognized as having built two of the grandest nineteenth-century homes in Wethersfield, which at the time were right next door to one another. The Andersons were—and are—a farming family who made their fortune growing and selling food in town. The house, on Broad Street, is a simultaneously charming and forbidding carpenter gothic mansion, and to this day, the Anderson Farm stand is operated on the house’s front lawn.

This agricultural focus that had been such a huge part of Wethersfield’s founding and infancy had not diminished in its second century of life, and many of the houses that were built up were of the large, blocky, yet attractive farmhouse type that line the Green and Hartford Avenue. The important factor of these homes was the access to large plots of land that would have allowed for small, personal crops to be kept, and livestock or horses as well. However, Wethersfield was beginning to break away from the days of

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46 Jenness, “Planting a Seed”, 389-90.
needing each family to support itself in lieu of a merchant class that, as it had in the eighteenth century, continued to blossom and grow into something resembling a bourgeoisie. What was slightly different now than it had been in the eighteenth century was that the agricultural and trade aspects of Wethersfield’s economic life were less and less separated, culminating in the ultimate success of individuals like Comstock and Silas Robbins, who synthesized the two primary industries in town in order to turn the maximum profit.

Silas W. Robbins went into business with his father-in-law selling seeds, and soon had amassed a significant fortune in Wethersfield. He purchased the land at 185 Broad Street, facing Broad Street Green, and built there for himself and his family a massive Second Empire home on a stunning estate. The estate was of particular importance for Robbins, who, not only a successful seedsman, was known as a breeder of various animals, particularly Jersey cows and English pheasants. Henry Reed Stiles’s 1904 publication on the history of Wethersfield notes that Robbins was one of the first breeders of this sort of cow, establishing his own herd in 1859. The plot of land was large, allowing for planting and grazing livestock, and abutted the neighboring Anderson farm at its southern edge. It was a lovely spot on the Green, which was otherwise populated with more modest homes (fig. 13), occupied primarily at that time by Wethersfield’s ship captains.

Robbins’s beautiful estate, however, was not the focal point of his possession; rather, this was the enormous, Second Empire home he built on the plot of land where his

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wife’s ancestral home had once stood\(^{49}\) (fig. 14). In 1873, Robbins completed the elegant, three-story mansion that survives today, with its three-tiered central confection, mansard roof, and iron cresting—all trademark qualities of the Second Empire Style (fig. 15). The Robbins House is the only Second Empire house in Wethersfield of this monumental size and grandeur, and certainly makes a bold statement of its owner.

The façade of the home, as mentioned, is dominated by the three-part entry confection, which culminates in an elaborately patterned iron crest. It includes the entry porch and the balcony of the second floor and roof, all with slim columns whose capitals evoke an exotic, almost oriental mood. The roof gable forms the third-floor living space including a ballroom and small bedroom\(^{50}\), whose center window is enclosed beneath a broken triangular pediment, standing out from the hexagonal-slated mansard roof. The entryway—always a focal point in Wethersfield’s architecture—features a large, double-leaf door with arched and circular panes of beveled glass with a stylized, abstract leaf and flower pattern. The Robbins House has many windows, many of which are paired, sometimes topped with segmental or semi-circular heads and some stained glass details. A projecting pavilion from one side houses the tearoom within, and a porte-cochere with a matching mansard roof extends from the other side of the main body of the house.

The interiors of the Robbins House are, sadly, not original, as the house was extensively renovated both by its most recent previous owner, Charles Moller, but also by Albert G. Hubbard, restorer and developer, before the interiors and roof were severely damaged in a fire in 1996. For several years after the fire, the house sat in a state of


\(^{50}\) Private house tour given by innkeeper Shireen Aforismo, April 27, 2014.
disrepair, until the present owners, John and Shireen Aforismo, who aimed to convert the mansion into a bed and breakfast, purchased it and completed an enormous amount of restorations and renovations between 2001 and 2007. Though it is not a museum today, the innkeepers have carefully restored it in period décor with antiques gathered from numerous salvage yards and auctions, and so the original opulence and atmosphere of the home’s interiors remain.

Upon entering the house, one is met by a long hallway (fig. 16), with an antique light fixture overhead—although, of course, the gas lamps have been converted to electricity, probably initially by Albert G. Hubbard, the Wethersfield real estate developer, when he purchased and restored the home for his family’s personal use in 1927. The first floor is home to a modern eat-in kitchen as well as a formal dining room, a tearoom, and a parlor, as well as a den and the innkeepers’ office. The ceilings are extremely high and beautifully decorated—in several rooms, the coffered ceilings are decorated with Greek key patterns and acanthus leaves, as well as other stencils. The second floor is home to a small sitting room over the porte-cochere and four bedrooms, only one of which originally had an en-suite bathroom. These bedrooms have each been given a particular theme by the innkeepers, such as the Fleur-de-Lis room, or the Cupids and Roses room. There is a mix of period wallpaper and period-inspired paint to make the rooms both historically accurate and appealing to the modern eye—nevertheless, not a detail has been spared in the process of recreating the monumental home’s original flair.

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51 Interview with Shireen Aforismo, April 2014.
52 Interview with Shireen Aforismo, April 2014.
The design of the Silas Robbins House is an unequivocal departure from anything else seen in Wethersfield’s earlier history—despite the fact that the Webb House represented an enormous change from the earlier modesty of Puritan domiciles, the extent of the Georgian and Federal styles could not approach the opulence and grandeur that was the Second Empire Style. Gone are the tempered concerns about visible displays of wealth, symbolized in chimneys and materials, brought about, again, by the growth of Wethersfield that brought along with it increased social and religious diversity, diminishing the influence of Puritanism on the housing culture of Wethersfield. The ceremonial spaces seen in the Webb House grow and multiply in the Robbins House—culminating in the third-floor ballroom where Robbins and his wife purportedly hosted many elaborate social events\(^5\) —although much of the stiffness of eighteenth century ceremony is dispensed with in the nineteenth century, and slightly less distinction drawn between the formal rooms and those intended for more highly trafficked daily use.

The Second Empire Style, which is sometimes known as Second Empire Baroque, represents a number of things for Wethersfield, not the least of which being the financial requirement of building a home of this size, which Robbins, of course, gained through success in agriculture and trade, the two cornerstones of Wethersfield’s economy in its younger days. The Second Empire style lends itself well to large homes of affluent families, and sits comfortably on large plots of land, like the situation Robbins was able to forge for himself and his young wife, thanks to her inheritance of her parents’ property. But more than that, the style represents the possibility and the variety that not only was important in America on the whole, but in Wethersfield—in many ways a

\(^5\) Interview and private house tour given by Shireen Aforismo, April 2014.
microcosm of the country at large. The potential to make something of oneself—much like John Oldham, his Ten Adventurers, and their families—and to make that something significant was something that was held dear by the residents of Wethersfield, like the Webb family, and like Silas Robbins himself, who was, first and foremost, a self-made businessman.

The attitude of mixing and matching that was one of the fundamental characteristics of the Second Empire Style was indicative of a deeper philosophical element of being an American at this time in the nation’s infancy, the high time of the original ‘American Dream’, of manifest destiny and pioneering. Right on the brink of the era brought to modern attention by stories like *Ragtime*, the Silas Robbins House, through its style, is symbolic of the possibility in America to cultivate a style that is at once indicative of a worldly cultural awareness and also personalized—the eclectic, curvaceous, exciting exterior of the Silas Robbins House is a testament to this exact mindset.

The nineteenth century brought much of this sort of development with it, and also included an important addition to Wethersfield’s social and commercial landscape: the railroad. The railroad tracks were cut through Wethersfield sometime in the first half of the nineteenth century (the date remains somewhat unclear) and the first official transit system to run between Wethersfield and Hartford started in 1863, carrying passengers from Main Street, Wethersfield, to Main Street, Hartford and back on a regular daily schedule. Stagecoach lines did run between Wethersfield and the capitol city before 1863, but the Horse Rail enabled a greater level of commuting, and easier transport to

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55 Borrup, “Transit to Wethersfield”.
Hartford’s department stores and cultural attractions, like the Wadsworth Athenaeum, which opened its doors in 1844\textsuperscript{56}. These trolleys converted to horse-drawn sleighs in the winter to allow for easy travel in the snow, although frequently runaways would interrupt the system and other variables inevitably presented by unpredictable animals. The tracks were electrified in 1894, although a segment running between the stables on Wethersfield Avenue in Hartford and Main Street in Wethersfield spanning three miles was electrified in 1888. The need for electrification became clear in 1872 when an epidemic of horse flu swept the nation, devastating the population of horses that made rail service and postal service possible\textsuperscript{57}.

The Silas Robbins House is one of the finest examples of nineteenth-century architecture in Wethersfield, and is doubtless the result of countless factors, both social and economic, which crossed paths in town at the same serendipitous moment as agricultural and trade synthesized in the town’s livelihood (town map fig. 17). The self-made businessman was not only the face of the Silas Robbins House (and its owner), but also the face of Wethersfield in general—a town made up of individuals who had invariably modest roots in Puritan or Anglican colonists, or other immigrants, and a story that was not unique to Wethersfield, or any town in the Northeast, by any means. What was really remarkable about the nineteenth century in Wethersfield was the stage it set for the major developments that were near in the future, in the first quarter of the twentieth century. The introduction of horse rail and trolley transit between Wethersfield and Hartford would be an important factor in the transformation of the agricultural

\textsuperscript{57} Borrup, “Transit to Wethersfield”.
village into a bustling suburban town by A.G. Hubbard and James Goodrich, and the expansion of Wethersfield in large numbers outside of the historic district.
Chapter Four: The Twentieth Century

The Hubbard Community

Until the twentieth century, Wethersfield’s growth came on the backs of individuals and families building homes and lives in town, some starting out fresh and others having roots in town dating back to the time of Oldham or Webb. Because of this, the town that young upstart Albert G. Hubbard found when he arrived in the first fifteen years of the twentieth century was little more than the quiet, yet industrious town that it had been in 1650. Despite the prosperity that its residents had achieved, Wethersfield had previously lacked a systematic, strategic growth plan, and instead had experienced this organic, mix-and-match style of development.

The key to the development of Wethersfield in the twentieth century lies in transportation. At first, of course, this means the horse rail and trolley system that had been running since the middle of the nineteenth century, which enabled, importantly, a commuter population to move between Wethersfield and Hartford. However, as the trolley system phased out of primary usefulness—it would eventually stop running in 1941, though the Hartford bus line still runs roughly along the same route—it was replaced by the exciting new technology of the day: the automobile. The automobile increased the ease of commuting into Hartford—not only did it eliminate the unpredictable variables of horse-drawn transport, but also moved faster than the trolley.

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59 Borrup, “Transit in Wethersfield.”
that ran at only six to fifteen miles an hour—and thus, Wethersfield became an attractive living option for those who wanted to escape the relative bustle of Hartford.

Albert G. Hubbard was born in 1886, and moved to Wethersfield from Simsbury in or around 1910. It is known that he worked on at least two houses in Hartford, but left the city to build three houses on Wolcott Hill Road in the foursquare style, which he sold to fellow developer James Goodrich. In 1912, Hubbard began the strategic development of Wethersfield by purchasing land and building homes on what would become Willard Street and Hubbard Place, which today lie on the outskirts of the Hubbard Community. These early houses that were built were of an arts and crafts bungalow style, with large front porches and dramatic overhanging eaves, with the central upper-story windows peeking over the porch roof. This bungalow type was the one that Hubbard would recycle most frequently in his building of a community numbering over two-hundred homes, although even these, which looked similar on their exteriors, had plans that were variations on variations—no two houses seem to be exactly alike, at this point.

The demand for these houses grew between 1912 and 1916, when seventeen more homes were completed, and already many more orders had been placed for Hubbard-

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60 Borrup, “Transit in Wethersfield”.
63 Map of Wethersfield with highlights demarcating the development of the Hubbard Community, 1984.
64 Discussion on the design of Hubbard houses with fellow resident Martha Smart, Research Librarian, Wethersfield Historical Society, March 2014.
designed and –built houses. The next phase of building took place on Church, Woodland, Belmont, and Center Streets, which were completed between 1918 and 1928 (figs. 18-22). These houses were perhaps the most varied in appearance on a street-to-street basis—the uniformity of bungalow after bungalow standing side-by-side on Willard Street simply does not exist in, say, the Belmont Street houses, where some of the houses are of the Willard-variety bungalow style, while others were built in stucco, and still others had an appearance somewhat reminiscent of the early Richardsonian Newport cottages (fig. 23), with a rounded entry to the porch and a low-slung appearance with a horizontal emphasis.

The latest phase of building in the Hubbard Community took place from 1929-1938, and included Garden Street, and Lincoln, Dorchester, and Deerfield Roads. With the completion of these houses—again, a varied mix of bungalow, Foursquare-reminiscent, Colonial and Jacobean Revivals, without the regulated rhythm or feel of contemporaneity of the earliest part of the development. What these later phases of development captured was the variety that had existed before Hubbard came to town, when the natural rhythm consisted of the seventeenth century homes beside Georgian or Federals, beside Victorians, beside Second Empire or Cape. Hubbard’s many different plans echoed the character of the neighborhood as it had existed before—a nod to the rich and long history of Wethersfield and its unintentional eclecticism.

Hubbard advertised extensively in order to grow his development into the suburb he imagined Wethersfield could be. Thanks to his efforts, the community became one of

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Connecticut’s first truly suburban neighborhoods, enabled by automobiles\textsuperscript{68}. In one of his early promotional pamphlets, Hubbard encourages Hartford businessmen to move their families to Wethersfield, saying, “Wethersfield has much to commend it to the man who would be near his office, yet away from the city’s turmoil.”\textsuperscript{69} Hubbard’s emphasis on Wethersfield’s usefulness as a haven from the bustle of Hartford was eclipsed only by his unending promotion of the quality of his homes, which he lauded for their handicraft and supervised the building himself.

The Hubbard homes were built of local materials, with whose suppliers Hubbard built personal relationships as a means to knock down price. In Nora Howard’s article for \textit{Wethersfield Post}, she notes:

\begin{quote}
Hubbard, like many Wethersfield master builders who preceded him, knew that he was leaving a legacy of well-built and appealing homes. At the same time, he was consciously creating for ‘his’ homeowners something that is timeless. Writing about 1930, he said that, ‘There are no dividends to compare with comfort and contentment, no returns equal to the personal pride felt by the man who owns the home that shelters his family.’\textsuperscript{70}
\end{quote}

The legacy of homes consisted of a slew of ‘modern’ conveniences that Hubbard took great care to include in the homes as a means of increasing not only monetary value, but also the appeal of moving away from city convenience to suburban peace. Among these conveniences, which Hubbard was sure to list in his many promotional brochures, were things as simple as bathrooms, to what truly were amazing inclusions in the mid-1920s, like a two-car garage and a paved driveway.

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\textsuperscript{69} Howard, “A.G. Hubbard”.
\textsuperscript{70} Howard, “A.G. Hubbard”.
\end{flushright}
Conveniences that a few years ago would have been considered luxuries even in the most expensive residences, are a matter of course in these moderately priced homes, including: attractive vestibules, center halls, staircase and large living rooms with fireplaces, cheerful dining rooms with corner cupboards, side parlors with cozy fireplaces, modern kitchens with convenient built-in cabinets and sunny breakfast nooks, first floor lavatories, two to four large, airy bedrooms on the second floor, a beautiful tile bath, large open attic or sometimes a finished one. The roofs are covered with a heavy asphalt shingle, the warm rich beauty of autumn blends of russet, old gold, burnt orange, browns, blues, greens, and yellow, which harmonize with the body colors and trim. An attractive velvety lawn with shrubs and walks, a good rear yard, with a flower or vegetable garden for that outdoor exercise, a one- or two-car garage which completes the setting and makes it a complete modern home.\footnote{Albert G. Hubbard, Promotional Brochure, ca. 1925-30.}

These homes were, indeed, moderately priced, ranging between $4,500 and $20,000, which, when adjusted for inflation, is equal to about $60,000 and $268,000\footnote{Calculated using Bureau of Labor Statistics CPI Inflation Calculator, http://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm.}, respectively. Hubbard was able to downsize these costs, again, by using local materials, and by supervising the construction himself, which, although it slowed the process somewhat, allowed him to make sure that the houses were being built to his standard and eliminated the need for a foreman.

The element that made the Hubbard Community unique was not the reasonable pricing of its homes, or especially the homes themselves, but rather the mood of community. In order to unify the neighborhood, Hubbard installed a distinctive street sign (figs. 24 & 25) to mark each street in the community, featuring a house and a tree, and marked some corners with large stone pillars topped with flower urns (fig. 26). Furthermore, he and his wife, Isabel, made it a point to be familiar with their
homeowners, but as the community grew, it became harder and harder to do this casually. In the middle phase of building, in March of 1925, the Hubbards held a dinner at the Masonic Hall in Old Wethersfield for the Hubbard homeowners. One-hundred-eighty-six guests attended, and became familiar with one another and with the developer and his wife. One month later, the Hubbard Community Club as founded, and held its inaugural event. The idea of an established, official community had become so entrenched in the neighborhood that the permanent club was founded and officers were elected to organize and oversee events. The Community Club went on to host such events as picnics, concerts, charity auctions, dinner parties, and masquerade balls on a regular basis, and soon the community ideal became such that the homeowners fancied that their community experience was one that could not be found elsewhere—that the friendship and comfort of the Hubbard Community was entirely unique. Hubbard himself described the character of his new suburb: “There is no town in the state that has the community spirit and good old New England stock as has Wethersfield.”

Hubbard took special pride, not only in his homes, but also in the quality of life he saw in potential in Wethersfield. In the same promotional brochure, he lists:

Fifteen years of successful building in Wethersfield center, in which time I have built over one hundred homes and every home has made a friend…Wethersfield has fine Schools, Churches, and Parish Houses for our children. Low taxes and all improvements. A close suburb of Hartford—10 minutes by auto, 20 by trolley…Anchor yourself to Real Estate and reap the benefits of Progress. Near the great city that knows no limit.

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73 Meehan, “Wethersfield’s Homebuilders”.
74 Howard, “A.G. Hubbard”.
75 A.G. Hubbard, Promotional Pamphlet, ca. 1925-1928.
76 Hubbard, Promotional Brochure, 1925-8.
Hubbard, after the completion of the Community (fig. 27), and even to some degree before and during it, completed various restoration projects on historic homes in Wethersfield through the 1950s, though the most extensive renovation he undertook was on the Silas Robbins House, which he purchased as his personal home in 1927. He took the estate, which was occupied by a large number of evergreen and maple trees, among other things, and chopped it up to create Robbinswood Drive (fig. 28), which today encircles the Silas Robbins House and is populated mostly with Colonial Revival and English Manor-type houses. Hubbard lived in the house from 1927 through the 1960s, when it was sold to Charles Moller, who owned it until the 1996 fire.

While Hubbard may have enjoyed restoring old homes, it seems that he planned on avoiding such a hassle for his homeowners, as the homes of the Hubbard Community have, indeed, lived up to their promise of good quality and longevity. Routine maintenance—such as replacing roof tiles and cleaning out chimneys—has been necessary on the Hubbard houses, but the only major restorative project that the majority of homes have been forced to take on is window replacement. The original windows in the Hubbard homes are single-pane double-hung windows with a pulley system, and, over the years, the ropes and pulleys rust, and the ropes become stiff. Layers of paint pose another threat to the functionality of the pulley, which can get clogged with new paint that then dries and fixes the window closed. The exteriors of these homes have, in many cases, remained originals, but some have changed—for instance, at 48 Belmont Street, the original stucco has been covered or replaced by clapboard. Although there

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77 Notecard in Hubbard’s own hand listing historic homes restored from 1910-1953.
78 Information on struggling with window pulleys gleaned from personal experience with original Hubbard windows at 16 Belmont Street, c. 1927.
have not been extensive maintenance needs, like at the very old houses, the Hubbard homes have presented issues for modern day buyers that have required structural changes, and many homeowners today have built at least one-story additions.

The truth is that, despite being of good quality, in a charming neighborhood, with relatively fair-sized plots of land, the Hubbard plans (figs. 29 & 30) have been subject to massive change by modern or recent owners. The ground floors have a lot of walls—creating four or five small to mid-size rooms rather than the currently-popular ‘great room’ concept—although there is a roundabout feeling to them, meaning one could pass from room to room on the ground floor in a perfect circle unobstructed, typically through double-wide doorways or archways. The Hubbard kitchen is typically rather small, which can present a problem for entertaining, and in one case, the original space used for a kitchen in a Hubbard house on the corner of Woodland and Belmont street has been converted into the first-floor full bathroom and laundry room without a gross excess of space.

The original intent of the Hubbard plan was to provide convenience for families—hence eat-in kitchens and dining rooms, to promote spending family time together around the table. This also translated into an openness of plan to help a housewife to monitor children without always being in the same room as them, using these doorways without doors, and many windows, especially out onto the front and rear yards. This feature is one that Hubbard doubtless lifted from bungalows, as they, too, were intended to facilitate the lives of housewives, once they became popular in America.

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79 This is my parents’ house, 16 Belmont Street, extensively renovated in 2000.
Upstairs, the Hubbard homes suffer more for the modern homeowner, as, although Hubbard excitedly advertised his ‘two to four light, airy bedrooms’, the message buried beneath that was that these bedrooms, as their number increased, would shrink and shrink in size. Outside of the master bedroom, which is typically accompanied by a large or walk-in closet, the other bedroom or bedrooms usually will not fit a full set of furniture with any bed larger than a twin without sacrificing floor space. These bedrooms, are, indeed, light-filled from at least two large windows, but their airy quality can, at times, get lost among the bulk of items and furniture that have become a staple in today’s homes. It is upstairs, too, that the only other major restorative concern tends to show itself: cracking or settling walls. Hubbard houses today are the sorts of old houses that talk at night—creaking and groaning as the foundations and walls settle. But the result of this talking is a seemingly constantly increasing number of cracks and fissures in the walls, sometimes resulting in flaking plaster and almost always leading to uneven ceilings and floors. These cracks can be easily repaired with spackle, or, more expeditiously with a product available that resembles a sort of tape, but is made solely for repairing cracked walls. Rather than presenting any serious structural issue, though, this seems to grant the Hubbard houses simply their next generation of charming qualities: phasing from new, modern family homes to charming, old houses of character.

Perhaps the strangest thing about the Hubbard Community is that, even after the club disbanded its official leadership many years ago, the community spirit that Hubbard strove for and his homeowners so valued has not died. The neighborhood remains, in fact ‘the neighborhood’—a tangible, recognizable body of friendships and histories

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81 Personal, first-hand experience.
intertwined. In Wethersfield on the whole, the Hubbard Community is unique, in that it contains only one elementary school—Alfred W. Hanmer School—against the ‘new’ district’s four; it is a neighborhood where, invariably, everyone knows his neighbor; and the atmosphere is such that it feels, not so much like a neighborhood, but rather like a family, a deep preservation of the small, insular village from which today’s Wethersfield truly emerged.

The Hubbard Community is the culmination of all that Wethersfield has been since its outset: a town of hard work rewarded by prosperity, of close-knit friends and family, of personality and character. Each century in Wethersfield is commemorated with a home, a family history, a living entry in a textbook. Old Wethersfield has barely changed, either in looks or in character, since the 1930s (fig. 31), and it is that nature of slow change, of preserving the best parts of the past, that has characterized Wethersfield from her infancy. Wethersfield has survived three-hundred-eighty years this year, weathering storms, major wars, the Great Depression, and even a tornado in 2006. Nonetheless, the Buttolph-Williams House has survived; the Webb House has survived (with its neighbors, Deane and Stevens), Silas W. Robbins has survived, and Hubbard’s two-hundred homes have survived—except for one, cut in half by a fallen tree during the tornado. The solidarity of a community has been marked by the endurance of its homes, the tolerance in its rhythmic variety of styles and time periods. Wethersfield is where both homes and heart truly reside, nailed into pre-Revolutionary timbers and soldered into copper piping, poured into asphalt driveways. The history of homes in Wethersfield is a long one, but it is not complicated. The common denominator, always, is the emphasis on community, on homeownership, and on cultivating a life for oneself and
one’s family that will transcend one’s own time, and persevere in another day. Wethersfield, of course, is a town of historic transcendence and perseverance, building from the ground up.
Fig. 1: A map of Wethersfield as it appeared 1634-40. Scan from Nora Howard’s *Stories of Wethersfield*.

Fig. 2: A chart demonstrating the growth of Wethersfield from Oldham’s arrival to 1990. Scan from Howard, *Stories of Wethersfield*. 

How the population of Wethersfield increased

The community was founded by just eleven men who soon brought their families in, and in nine years, by 1643, it was a thriving community of 125 families.

How many souls total? Averaging perhaps five per family, just over six hundred. By the time the Revolution, 1,910 individuals were counted in Wethersfield—and not much changed in the farming community during the 19th Century until the population explosion of the 1930s when the total nearly doubled. There has been a slight decrease in the past twenty years.

John Oldham and the Ten Adventures

1910 individuals

125 families

Fig. 3: Hubbard’s first three Wethersfield Homes, c. 1910.

Fig. 4: The Buttolph-Williams House, seen from Marsh Street. Photo taken by author.

Fig. 5: The Ezra Webb House, c. 1730. Photo taken by author.
Fig. 6: A recreated 17th-century interior at Buttolph-Williams.

Fig. 7: The recreated 17th-century kitchen at Buttolph-Williams.

Fig. 8: The Webb-Deane-Stevens Museum. Webb House at center. Photo taken by author.
Fig. 9: The Webb House attic. Scan from Howard’s *Stories of Wethersfield*.

Figs. 10 & 11: Other contemporary homes on Main St. (L) and Garden St. (R). Taken by author.

Fig. 12: The John Loveland House. Photo taken by author.
Fig. 13: A view of other houses around Broad Street Green. Photo taken by author.

Fig. 14 & 15: A sample of a typical Second Empire House next to the Silas W. Robbins House, 1873. Photo taken by author.
Fig. 16: Floor plan of the Silas W. Robbins House. Scan from promotional brochure, compiled by John and Shireen Aforismo, 2007.

Fig. 17: Map of Wethersfield, c. 1855. Scan from Howard’s *Stories of Wethersfield*.
Fig. 18: A view of Woodland Street, c. 1928-30.

Figs. 19-21: Examples of Hubbard homes on (clockwise) Belmont, Church/Woodland, and Woodland Streets.

Fig. 22: A Hubbard house on Woodland Street under construction, c. 1929-30
Fig. 23: Newly completed homes on Church Street, seen from the rear on Garden Street, c. 1927-30.

Figs. 24 & 25: Special Hubbard street signs showing a house and tree. Photo taken by author.
Fig. 26: Stone pillar topped with flower urn at the corner of Woodland and Belmont Streets. Photo taken by author.

Fig. 27: An aerial view of the Hubbard Community, c. 1933-35.

Fig. 28: The Silas W. Robbins House, showing houses on Robbinswood Drive. Photo taken by author.
Fig. 29: (Single photo cropped into two for ease of viewing) Floor plan of 67 Hartford Avenue, a Hubbard bungalow.

Fig. 30: Tercentenary Map of Wethersfield showing sites of cultural and historical importance. Photo taken by author.
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