**THE STORY OF THE PARK**

For over a century, much of the commerce in the Town of Worcester took place on the south side of the business section in the main hamlet. The original wagon shop at the eastern corner of Depot Street (now South Hill Road) was replaced in 1883 by the brick Knapp Building, home at various times to a pharmacy, grocery store, doctors' and lawyers' offices, photography shop, bank, feed store, glove shop, post office, the general merchandise Elm Store, and now the Worcester Historical Society and its museum.

Next door to the east was the wooden Pickett & Tripp Building, completed three years earlier. It housed a furniture store, undertaking business, piano and organ dealership, dry goods stores and shirt factory. In 1904 Lewis M. Wade opened his clothing business in the western half of the building, and was known as “Wade the Clothing Man” for 42 years. Then in 1908 Earl F. Johnson purchased the eastern half, where he operated his “Economy Store” of general merchandise for 37 years.

Carl Brownell purchased the Johnson business in 1945, later expanding his department store to occupy the whole building. Gerald and Audrey Wheeler then opened their own pharmacy and department store on the same site for 31 years beginning in 1963.

The Atkins Building, immediately east of Wheeler's, had served since 1876 as a dry goods and clothing store, barber shop, Victory Store grocery, and jewelry shop before its final occupancy by Country Boy Realty.

**The Great Fire**

Suddenly late on the night of May 2, 1994, all this history literally went up in smoke. The Worcester Great Fire, set by an arsonist and battled by 24 fire companies, partially gutted the Knapp Building, but heroic efforts by Historical Society members and other local citizens were able to salvage many of the documents and artifacts that it contained. The two wooden buildings to the east, however, were totally destroyed.

**Recovery**

There was great optimism that the business section would recover quickly, and that Worcester's reconstruction effort would move much faster than had occurred in Cobleskill, a part of whose business section had been leveled by fire a few years earlier. Public meetings took place. Ambitious plans surfaced for a three-level multi-use new commercial building to rise on the former sites of the Wheeler and Country Boy businesses. It would have included a pharmacy and general merchandise store on the main floor, with professional offices above. Beside the ground-floor entrance, there would have been a rear parking lot with an elevator up from the basement. The whole edifice would have been consistent with the architectural style of the remaining business section, which is also part of a national historic district. Another suggestion was that a new Town municipal building be built on the location. These plans never materialized, and instead a short-lived new pharmacy rose on the flats west of the hamlet.

**“Vest-Pocket” Park**

In the meantime, the Historical Society proceeded with the renovation and redesign of its museum and meeting rooms in the brick building, with the assistance of bequests and grant funds. In three years' time, the building formally reopened during the Town's bicentennial observances. Shortly thereafter, with progress toward filling in the adjacent hole stalled and revitalization of the Worcester Inn underway, Society President Gynger O'Connor and her officers conceived the idea of building a small “vest-pocket” community park on the site, complementing the hotel, at which band concerts could take place as in the past, and people could relax on benches and tables. In 2001 Gynger appointed a committee to begin planning for the park. Original members were Chair Marilyn Dufresne, Tony Barbera, Lucille Conroe and Larry DeLong. Audrey Wheeler and Edward McCabe later joined the group.

**Land Acquisition**

The Park Committee met several times and made attempts to acquire the three parcels of land that occupied the empty space on Main Street. In 2004, it achieved initial success when Audrey Wheeler and her family graciously and foresightedly made the Society a gift of the middle parcel, the former site of the Wheeler Department Store. Acquisition of the Village Inn (Haggerty/Moak Rexall pharmacy) parcel , adjacent to the Society building, was the object of nearly two years of negotiation with Helen Purdy and Timothy Wilsey, the two previous joint owners, each of whom settled separately. It was disappointing to the Committee and to the Society that the third, easternmost parcel, owned by Kenneth Krug, was not available for sale at mutually agreeable terms, and that the eventual size of the park therefore could not encompass the entire fire-blighted area.

**Initial Design**

The Park Committee decided that the park's theme should be Worcester's historical and cultural heritage. It contacted SUNY Delhi, which has an academic department teaching small park design, and which had earlier helped to develop the plan for the proposed commercial building on the site. Because of summer recess, however, the Committee was unable to meet with anyone who could provide advice or assistance. Instead, it drew up a list of features that the park might include, such as a gazebo or bandstand, ornamental fencing, benches and picnic tables, and green areas. Signs of different styles, such as on pedestals, in a kiosk or booth, or flat on a wall, might include a veterans' honor roll; directories of historic sites, public attractions, and local businesses or services; information about the buildings that were destroyed by the Great Fire; and blurbs about local history.

**Design Firm**

In 2004 the Society received a $25,000 donation from Edward McCabe and the McCabe family, dedicated solely to the development and design of what the Committee by then tentatively called the Worcester Heritage Park. With these funds, and following the nearly simultaneous gift of the Wheeler property, the Committee contracted with Walker Planning & Design of Cooperstown, a landscape architectural firm headed by Edward B. “Ned” Walker, to commence a formal feasibility study and design for the park. The firm developed a Master Plan Report with surveys, maps, drawings, and a $441,000 budget proposal. As a routine part of the service which it provides to its clients free of charge, Walker also engaged MMA, Inc. of Cooperstown to develop a web site devoted to the Worcester Historical Society and its activities, and to the park. The public may view the site at www.worcesterhistoricalsociety.org.

**Features**

The Walker plan, which eventually became a reality with a few differences, elaborated on the theme of Worcester's heritage. A nineteenth-century style iron fence enclosed a centerpiece gazebo-style bandstand and amphitheatre seating. Tributes were proposed to the five Civil War-era Union generals who had resided in the Town – Edmund B. Bigelow, Samuel S. Burnside, Abner Doubleday, Delevan Bates and Napoleon B. McLaughlen. A replica of the bugle carried by Worcester's Seth Flint, the Civil War escort bugler to General Grant, would adorn the peak of the bandstand as a weather vane. There would be a flagpole, open green space with benches or seats, landscaping, and various signs devoted to local historical and cultural subjects. An artist's concept of this initial design appears on the next page.

**State Grant Application**

Everyone realized that the costs of the park project would be daunting. The Walker firm made an attempt in 2005 to obtain initial funding by developing and submitting a detailed application to the New York State Office of Parks and Recreation for a $169,650 Parks Development grant under that year's Environmental Protection Fund Program. This document contained a thorough and impressive array of facts and proposals in support of the project, but the process was intensely competitive, and in the end the application failed to win approval.

**Trustee Approval; Fund Campaign**

On December 14, 2005, following full acquisition of the necessary property and in the face of the failure of the State grant process, the Society trustees unanimously voted to authorize the construction of the park, generally following the Walker plan and utilizing currently available Society funds to start things going and to demonstrate progress to the public. They also set in motion a public campaign to raise enough money to sustain the construction over a likely period of several years, completing portions of the park as funding became available. A major feature of the campaign was the continuous application for grant moneys, which resulted in grants from the Robinson-Broadhurst Foundation totaling more than $200,000, and in another grant from the Penksa Foundation. Another funding plan was for the sale of brick pavers to public donors, inscribed with names or phrases they requested, that would become part of the park walkway. Trustee Donna Nagle headed the paver project, which along with solicited direct donations yielded nearly $50,000. An eventual permanent plaque will list all donors. In addition, a 2006 bequest of $86,763 by the estate of Andrew E. Skinner enabled the establishment of a reserve fund to address contingent expenses.

**Construction Phases**

The Society anticipated that construction would occur over an extended time period as funds became available, and that it would proceed in two phases. The first, and most expensive at $274,000, included filling and leveling the site, which at first was nothing more than an unstable hole in the ground, two stories deep, as the burned buildings had been built on an incline. Retaining walls had to be built, and fencing, lighting, security cameras and the gazebo foundation had to be put in place.

Major contractors during Phase I included local surveyor Michael D. Austin; Lancaster Development of Richmondville; Richard Head of Head Excavation and Mark Head of Advanced Concrete, both of Worcester; King Architectural Metals of Baltimore and Steel Sales of Sherburne, which provided fence materials; Alton Travis of the A.R.T. Mechanical Co. of Worcester, who built the fence; Mariotti Painting and Decorating, Inc., of Oneonta; J Hubner LLC of Walton, which brought and installed the security system; and Gary D. Hughes of Decatur, who did the electrical work. Some of these services were either donated or provided at below-market rates.

Phase II followed completion of the first segment in 2009. Its major goal was to complete the Heritage Park's street-level components – in particular the gazebo and bandstand, the site's central feature. Bernard J. O'Neill, a structural engineer from Fly Creek, drew up the specifications for the eight-sided, 570-square foot design, and public bidding by seven firms resulted in the award of a $20,129 contract, including change orders, to Roseboom Builders of Schenevus, to build the structure. Roseboom began the job in late March, 2010, and completed it on June 2nd. Brian Ferris added the cathedral ceiling in August for $2,695. The site also received six antique benches the same month.

The entire cost of the gazebo construction was covered by a $25,000 grant from New York State, the result of a 2008 legislative initiative sponsored by Senator James L. Seward and overseen by Regional Grants Officer Cinda Pierce of the State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation in Jamesville.

Two other aspects of Phase II were the appealing landscaping, including the placement of shrubbery and the walkway, done by Brian and Carla Fredenburg of Charlotteville; and installation of a 40-foot Veterans Flagpole, complete with a large U.S. flag and a spotlight, a gift of the Iroquois Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution. The plantings include settings of hops – Worcester's major crop during the expansion period of the late nineteenth century – along the park's west wall.

**What's Left to Do**

With today's Dedication ceremony, all major features of the Worcester Heritage Park are complete. Some final touches remain, such as staining the gazebo white; placing a bugle-themed stationary weather vane, a gift of Richard and Betsy Weidman, evocative of the Civil War service of Worcester's Seth Flint; and installing plaques identifying the park and recognizing its donors. In the long run, the Society hopes to construct more signs or kiosks honoring historical personalities; promoting the town's historical, cultural and commercial features; and perhaps restoring the tradition of a public honor roll of its veterans.

**The Meaning of the Park**

After the years of effort and expenditure, and its occupancy of former commercial space, people have the right to ask what benefit the park brings to the community. The Society's responses are numerous. To begin with, it removes blight and restores an area in the heart of the commercial district which was devastated by fire a decade and a half ago and which has lain empty and overgrown ever since. It improves the appearance of the Worcester Historic District, complements the renovation of the nearby Worcester Inn in a manner consistent with the architectural integrity of the area, and enhances economic and tourism opportunities.

The park provides a focal point for community events of an historical or cultural nature, such as Memorial Day observances, musical concerts, lectures, “Worcester Day,” a revived “Saturday Night in Worcester,” and the annual Rotary Block Party. It will enhance the knowledge and appreciation of local history, as eventual plaques and markers tell the stories of events, institutions and persons prominent in the community's past. It will increase interest in the Historical Society and its museum, which are adjacent and which provide resources for casual learning and serious research. It provides more attractive parkland and recreational space in an area of the state which is underserved. Most important of all, it gives satisfaction and pride to a small community which has accomplished something positive, attractive and of enduring value.

The Worcester Historical Society hopes and believes that residents and visitors in the area will both enjoy and benefit from this new facility for many years, and it extends its profound gratitude to everyone who helped to bring it to reality. Thank you.

**BRICK PAVERS FOR THE WALKWAY ARE ALWAYS AVAILABLE.**

**PLEASE CONTACT DONNA R. NAGLE AT 397-9227**

**or at P.O. BOX 446, WORCESTER, N.Y. 12197**

**Project Narrative, PKS-08-CE-030**

**June 17, 2010**

With the completion of construction of the gazebo, the central feature of the Worcester Historical Park, the local community has achieved several objectives and gained many positive features. These include:

* the removal of blight and the restoration of an area in the heart of its commercial district which was devastated by fire a decade and a half ago and which has lain empty and overgrown ever since;
* improvement in the appearance of the Worcester Historic District, complementing the renovation of the nearby Worcester White House Inn in a manner consistent with the architectural integrity of the area, and enhancing economic and tourism opportunities;
* providing a locus for community events of a cultural or historic nature, such as Memorial Day observances, musical concerts, “Worcester Days,” “Saturday Night in Worcester,” and the annual Rotary Street Fair;
* enhancement of the knowledge and appreciation of local history, as eventual plaques and markers tell the stories of persons prominent in the community's past, such as its five Civil War-era generals;
* increased interest in the local historical society and museum, which are adjacent and which provide resources for casual knowledge and serious research;
* more attractive parkland and recreational space in an area of the state which is underserved; and
* the satisfaction that comes to a small community when it has accomplished something positive, attractive and of enduring value.