



The Preservationist

New London's Black History Earns National Recognition

We are excited to celebrate the most recent New London addition to the National Register of Historic Places. 745 and 751-753 Bank Street, referred to as the DeSant Houses, were constructed circa 1840. Built for the whaler Antone DeSant, the buildings are of note architecturally and culturally. The buildings were accepted onto the National Register of Historic Places on September 12, 2025.

The DeSant Houses serve as a prime example of how architecture provides insight into parts of a city which no longer exist. One building's curved side, remarkably similar to the bow of a ship, owes its shape to the course of Truman's Brook, which was formerly a substantial stream, enough to water one's horse at. The DeSant Houses were built to curve away from the water. The brook, now dried and paved over, has its memory reflected in the design of the building.

The DeSant Houses also remind us that New London has always been an international city.

The whaling industry was a fusion of young men looking to make their fortune. One of the city's most well known whalers, Joseph Lawrence, was an immigrant from Italy whose work brought him to New London.

Much recent research has been conducted to accurately reflect the high number of Black Americans who worked on the Northeast coast in the whaling industry. Antone DeSant was a Black whaler born in Boa Vista, Cape Verde in 1816. He came to the United States aboard a whaling vessel, planting his roots in New London. The DeSant Houses

became the center for his home and his business, both buildings being placed on the New London Black Heritage Trail prior to National Register listing. One can read more about the DeSant family and their home on the Black Heritage Trail page, or on the National Register listing itself.

DeSant's children occupied the buildings for most of their existence. The buildings themselves went through various uses, operating as a residence, barber shop, and dry goods store. The current use is residential.

One of Antone's daughters, Julia DeSant, married William Herbert Bush, the famed organist, in 1888. The pair became just as much of a staple of New London as her father had been. Bush taught music classes, educating hundreds of New London residents. The property would be passed down through their family for almost all of the 1900s.

Antone's journals were key resources utilized for the National Register application as well as for understanding the lives of New London whalers in the 1800s. These were passed down through the family until the home was sold to an outsider for the first time since Antone DeSant had purchased the property.



NEW LONDON LANDMARKS

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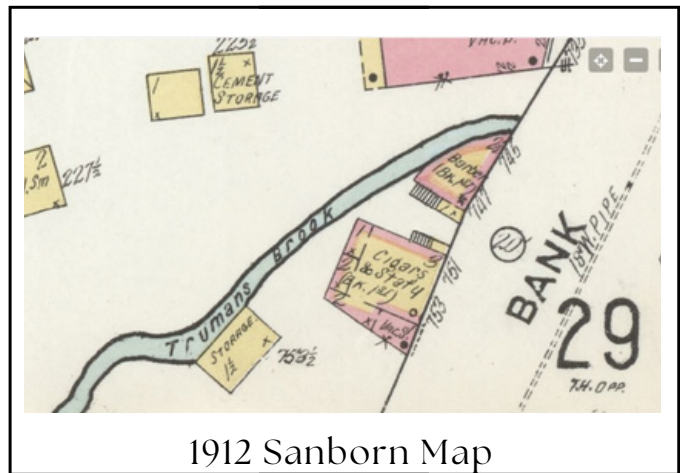
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The journals were donated to Mystic Seaport by one of Antone's descendants. The gifting of such an important family heirloom to a museum is an act of trust worth appreciating.

While National Register listing is not appropriate for every building, the DeSant Houses were a perfect fit. New London Landmarks and various other preservation organizations around the country promote National Register listing for the long term protection of these buildings. A building on the National Register is more difficult to demolish, as well as providing access to grant possibilities.

The project started under the auspices of Laura Natusch, and it was pressed forward by Alicia Primer, the former Executive Director. Various architectural historians and researchers contributed to this project, including the cooperation of owner Peter Kreckovic, those at the Public Archaeology Lab, the late Mary Beth Baker, Tom Schuch, and New London Landmarks Board of Directors. The work of Lonnie Braxton, a New London Landmarks' board member on the Black Heritage Trail was indispensable in shining a light on the life of Antone DeSant, his family, and the reality of 19th Century life in New London.



Bill Morse's *Lost New London*

On October 14th, Bill Morse released his new book *Lost New London*, which explores the structures, sights, and communities of New London lost to urban renewal. The book was available for purchase at our book talk on November 6, co-sponsored by the New London Public Library. If you missed the event, you can watch it on our YouTube channel.

Prior to this discussion, Bill sat down with me to discuss his process. Bill Morse is a former public school teacher, New London School Board member, New London Landmarks Board member, and an “old house enthusiast”. A preservationist at heart, he has been previously published in *Old House Journal* for his work on a building in the Bronx. He informed me that in addition to writing this book, he was engaged in the repair of a building in the former East Germany.

Lost New London was crafted in just over 9 months and involved an intense research process where just about every historical resource in New London was tapped. Much of his research was conducted at the New London Landmarks office, the New London Public Library, the New London County Historical Society, and the vault at City Hall. Anna Vallye's work at Connecticut College on urban renewal is an additional piece of scholarship that defines how we understand New London and urban renewal. The digitization of the New London Day's record was also an indispensable resource.

Diving into the “universe” of the now absent North Bank Street neighborhood, *Lost New London* connects a loss of structure with a loss of community. Almost every chapter details a building, or a set of buildings, and a human story which takes place in or around it. The George Oldershaw photos, bursting with character, add to that feeling. There's a bit of grief in these photos, where some of the houses have already been abandoned and boarded up.

In large part, the people whose homes were claimed and destroyed in the name of urban renewal stayed gone. People were forced out of their homes and priced out of the city. Many of the streets selected for renewal were racially and ethnically diverse and home to naturally occurring affordable housing- a much sought after resource in current day Connecticut.

Hundreds of people whose homes were destroyed never again lived in New London. In addition to being a damaging economic and social decision, it was an emotional scar. Why fight to stay in a place that clearly wants you gone?

I've had a few former New London natives reach out to me, looking to check in on the status of their childhood homes, now lost to urban renewal. I still haven't found a good way to tell them that their homes,

streets, and whole communities are gone. Sometimes, I'm lucky enough to dredge up a photo of their former home.

This is part of the reason we have to keep telling the story of urban renewal in New London. It's a story New London Landmarks has been eager to tell and retell. We have run tours and programs on the subject as well as oral history projects. It's a subject people are passionate about.

I asked Bill about his favorite story in the book, and he brought up a little saltbox house on what was 26 Hill Street. The house, photographed by George Oldershaw, had been painted a charming yellow prior to its destruction. It had originally been hand built by Boston Freeman, an emancipated Black resident of the city, circa 1816. From there, it would be passed along to his son-in-law Peter Hull in the mid 1840s. Peter was a carpenter by trade, but he had a love for the ocean. At his death in 1908, at the age of 109, he was the oldest man in Connecticut.

Buildings are rarely just their materials. New London lost far more than streets and structures; we lost a connection to our past. New London's rich social fabric was damaged and while we can still tell these stories, we no longer have physical reminders of them.

While the former buildings and residents of northern New London themselves may be gone, New London has to internalize the mistake. We cannot recreate these neighborhoods, but we can promote, protect and encourage the diverse communities that make New London what it is and the architecture which supports it.



Explore
lostnewlondon.com.

The former Main Street, George
Oldershaw Photos.

Interested in writing your own spotlight article?

With the return of *The Preservationist*, we are excited to feature spotlight articles by

New London Landmarks members, board members, and volunteers. Do you have a favorite building in New London? A New London historical figure whose story you want to tell? Please apply. Our office is always open to researchers, for *The Preservationist* or otherwise.

The David Bishop House Receives Some Care

If you've been by 49 Washington Street lately there's a good chance you've seen the cones, ladders, caution tape, and pump-jacks. The alterations were minimal this year: a fresh coat of paint and the replacement of one or two pieces of rotten wood. The building's fresh face was painted by Hanrahan's Painting and Powerwashing.

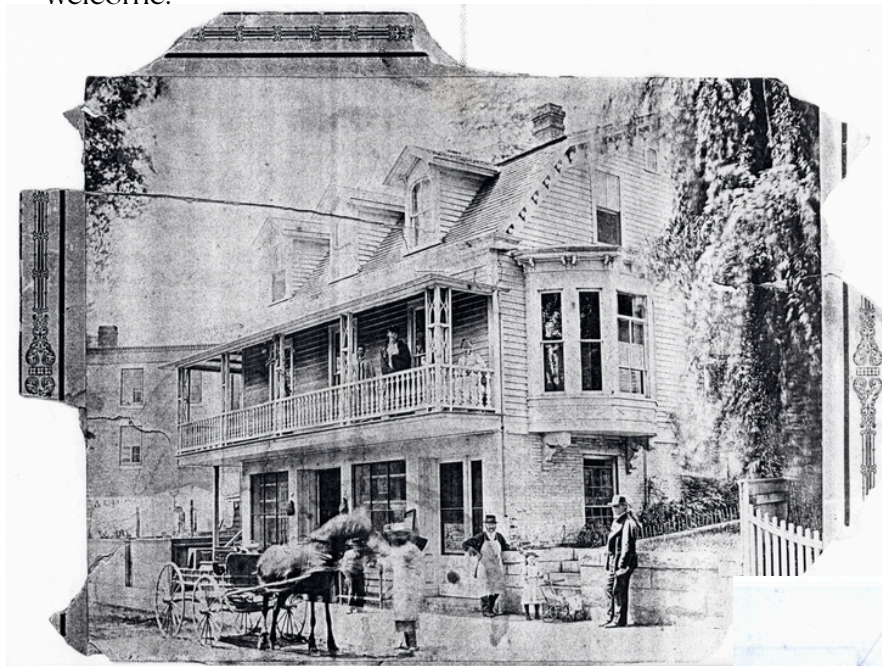
Our home, the David Bishop House, was built in 1796 and, as such, has seen a variety of life stages. It also means that our building is often in need of restoration and repair.

New London Landmarks purchased this building in 1988 for \$22,000, when it was in dire straits. At that time it was deemed structurally unsound. A previous owner had bought it with the intention of making some repairs, but after a few small fixes, decided to sell it. Perhaps he thought the building was more trouble than it was worth.

New London Landmarks thought otherwise. The process was not an easy one, considering how much of a wreck the building was, but it was certainly worth it. Repairs were completed in 1991 and the mortgage was paid off almost a decade later.

We are lucky to have this building for our home and archive. Working in a space that's been around for over 200 years is a blessing. I take great pride in inviting people into the office and being able to showcase the quality preservation work New London Landmarks has conducted.

If you would like to visit the David Bishop House, to perform research, ask questions, or simply to talk about the importance of preservation, our office is open from 9:30 to 4:30, Monday through Thursday, and Friday by appointment. Appointments are preferred, as occasionally I am out of the office, but drop ins are more than welcome!



Photos from the New London Landmarks archive. Date unknown.



An Eye on Membership

With turbulent federal funding, our members are more important than ever. Membership donations enable us to protect New London's historic places, conduct research, and create educational programs like our popular walking tours or our upcoming programming for the 250th anniversary of the United States. We will be re-working membership and improving its benefits, so this is the perfect time to sign up to take full advantage of the upcoming changes.

Become a member today.



Membership Rates

\$25 - Member \$35 - Family Membership

\$75 - Contributor \$100 - Patron

Curious about your membership status? Just ask, director@newlondonlandmarks.org.

Thank you to our funders.



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New London Landmarks received support for this project from the State Historic Preservation Office of the Department of Economic and Community Development with funds from the Community Investment Act of the State of Connecticut.

Connecticut 

**Department of Economic and
Community Development**

Interested in a plaque for your own home?

If your New London home/building is at least 50 years old, it qualifies for a whale plaque listing its date and original owner. The research we conduct for each plaque helps increase our knowledge of New London's neighborhoods and is archived in our office for future generations.

Our title researcher will study land, tax and water records, historic maps and city directories to establish your building's first owner and date of its estimated construction. If this is for a new plaque (as opposed to a replacement plaque) we will also research biographical information on the property's early owners and write up a narrative with our findings. We welcome any oral history or copies of old documents relating to your building. Please allow at least twelve weeks for completion of the research and the durable, hand-lettered and sealed hardwood plaque.

PLAQUE ADDRESS _____

NAME _____ ADDRESS _____

DAY PHONE _____ EMAIL _____

LEGAL OWNER (IF DIFFERENT) _____

APPROXIMATE DATE PURCHASED BY CURRENT OWNER _____

APPROXIMATE AGE OF PROPERTY _____

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION _____

MEMBERSHIP STATUS: YES: _____ NO: _____
IS THIS FOR A REPLACEMENT PLAQUE? YES: _____ NO: _____

Price of Plaque: \$235.00 for Members \$250.00 for Non-Members \$100 for a replacement plaque

A non-refundable deposit of \$100.00 is required with this application. You can make an online payment at www.newlondonlandmarks.org or mail us a check along with this application form.

Total amount due: \$ _____

Amount enclosed: \$ _____
