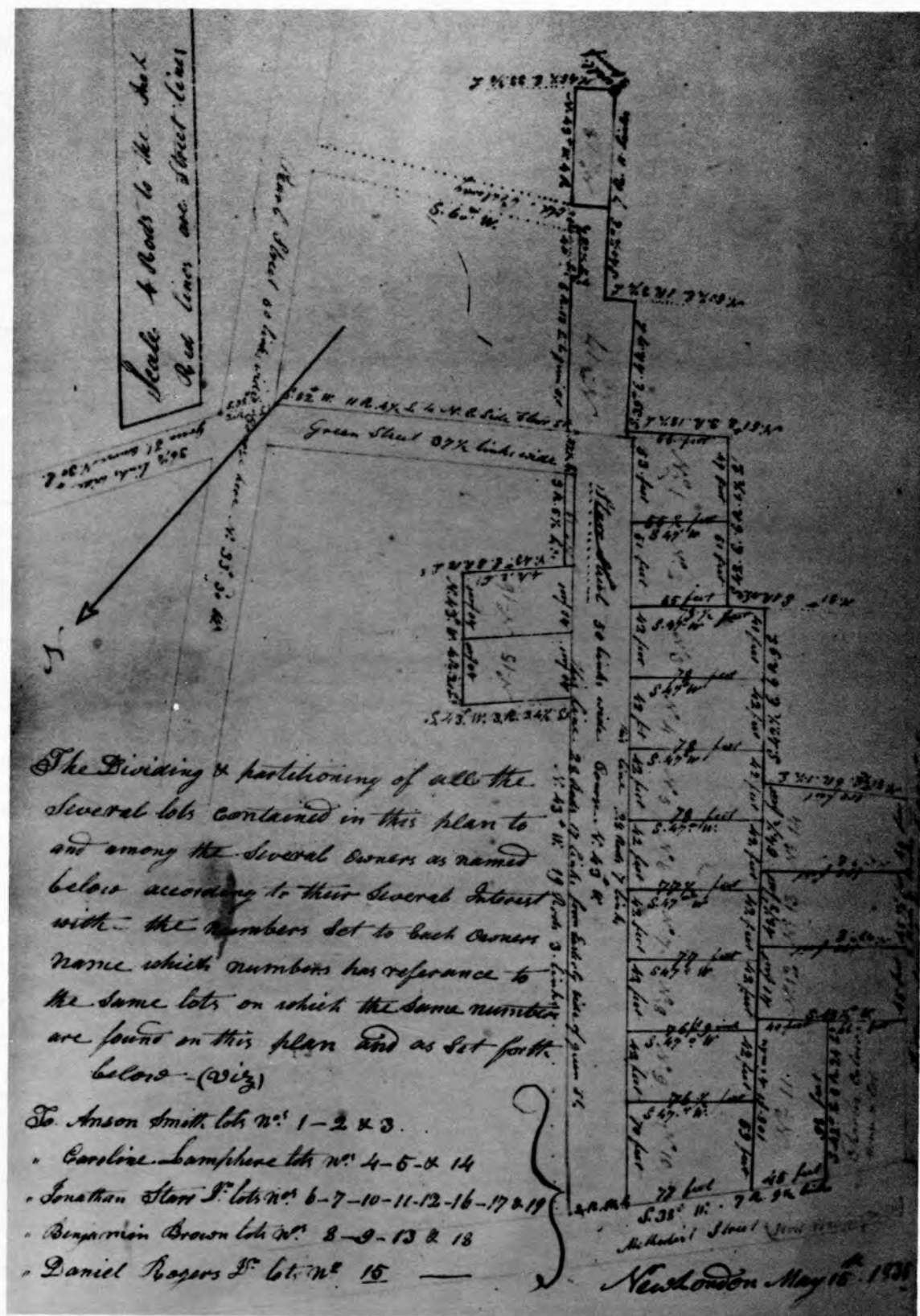


STARR STREET

by
John M. Plummer



Original Survey of Starr Street - 1835

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INTRODUCTION

In March of 1976, I attended a meeting of the New London Historic District Study Committee at which Clark Strickland and Herbert Darby of the Connecticut Historical Commission were present. The local committee asked of Mr. Strickland and Mr. Darby what areas of New London they considered worthy to be designated as Historic Districts. Both waxed enthusiastic about Starr and Tilley Streets, declaring that the preservation and restoration of those areas could give New London national status in preservation circles.

Intrigued, my wife Sharon and I, after first ascertaining where Starr Street was, took a close look at the street. The potential was there, though not too evident: the street was a compact area composed of predominantly Greek Revival style houses, most of which were deteriorating, and five of which, out of twenty-one, were abandoned. The official plan of the city was to demolish the street for a commercial plot under the aegis of the Redevelopment Agency.

At this stage, we decided to commit ourselves to Starr Street by purchasing and rehabilitating a home. The house that caught our attention was 32 Starr Street, abandoned since 1966, but of an attractive Italianate style. We met Edward York, then the head Building Inspector, at the house to determine its soundness. His first reaction was that the only thing that could be done for the building was to take a wrecking ball to it. But after examining it thoroughly from basement to the attic, he admitted that the house was salvageable.

Conversations with Melvin Jetmore, head of the Housing Conservation Program, and Jean Louhisdon, loan officer, revealed their willingness to support us not only in seeking to change the city's plan for Starr Street, but also in obtaining a loan to undertake the rehabilitation of 32 Starr Street. With this tentative commitment in hand, we then purchased the house in September of 1976. Robert Ornstein, our architect, then began to formulate plans and to advise us on the first steps of rehabilitation. We gutted the house of the plaster and lath inside, and stripped off the asphalt shingles and wood shingles which had been placed over the original clapboards on the exterior. We removed windows and had them stripped and then reglazed them ourselves. Meanwhile, our plans were submitted and approved by the Housing Conservation Agency, and put out to bid. The general contractor awarded the job, the George Field Company, began work the following summer.

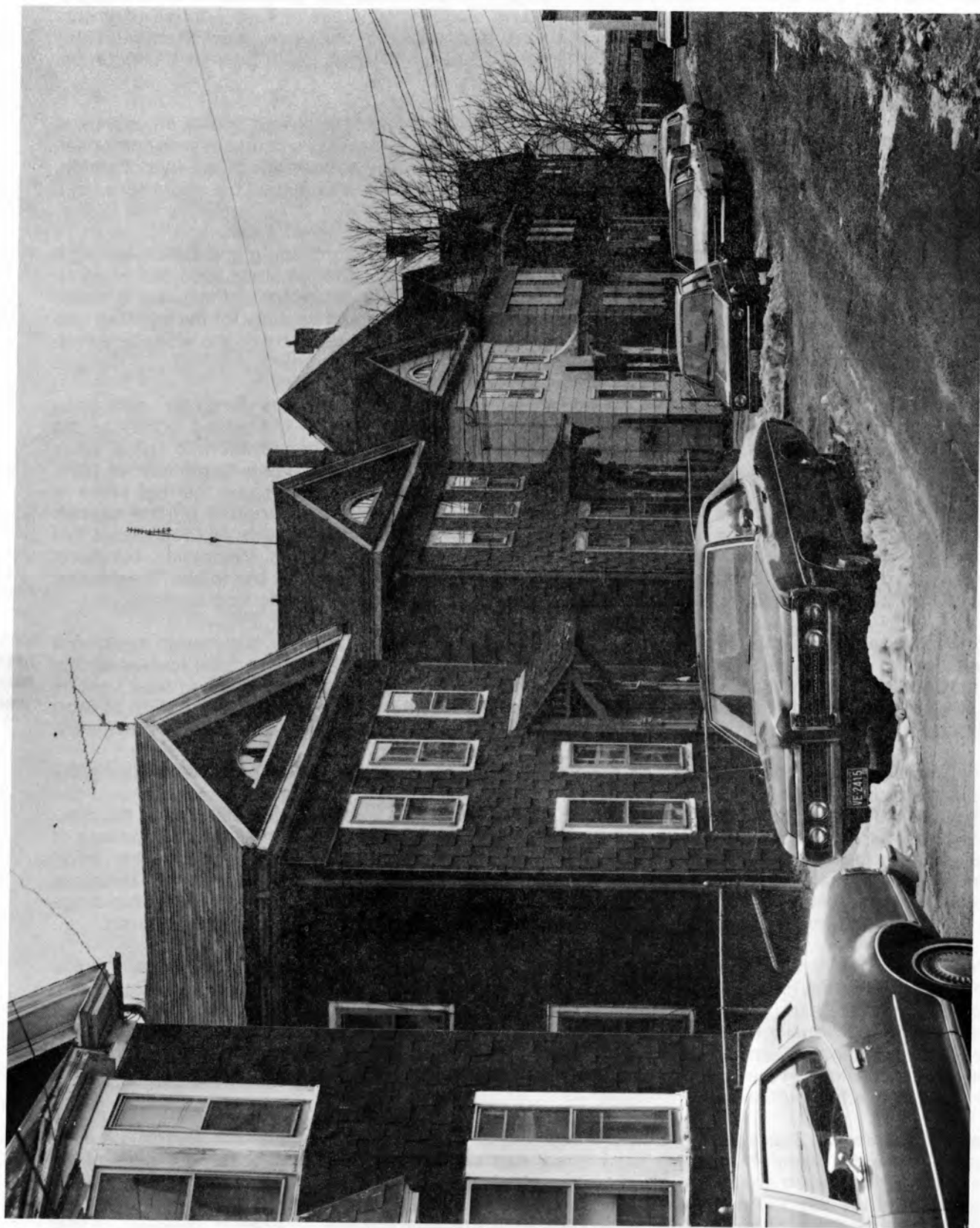
With the approval of the City Council, the Housing Conservation Agency had begun seeking a developer to rehabilitate the rest of Starr Street, and had begun to actively purchase houses on the street. After several prospective developers had been considered, the Savings Bank of New London in April of 1978 entered into an agreement with the City of New London for the restoration of Starr Street, thus ensuring the completion of the goal my wife and I had hoped for two years previously.

This booklet is the result of research done by my brother, John M. Plummer, in 1977, using the resources of the land records, city directories, census records, newspaper accounts, and the physical evidence of the houses themselves. Starr Street, always a middle class area during the nineteenth century, never received the amount of attention or documentation that wealthier portions of New London did. The paucity of information available made his task difficult, especially when information about a building is contradictory in nature. The material is presented in essentially the same form as when he prepared it in 1977, and thus the descriptions are of the conditions of the buildings at that time, and invite comparison with the current appearance, now so dramatically altered.

The significance of Starr Street is quite different than the significance of other buildings or areas considered historic. It has no association with the great events that shaped American history, nor does it exhibit the hand of the great architects of its time. Rather, Starr Street is essentially a slice of the average individual's tastes and lifestyle during the nineteenth century. The area catered to the needs of the small artisan and merchant rather than the wealthy entrepreneur, a fact reflected in the humbler aspirations of the houses themselves compared with, say, the grander pretensions of Whale Oil Row only a few blocks away.

As a neighborhood, Starr Street has always been close to the pulse of New London. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Starr Street had begun to house the successive waves of immigrants who were to shape the future of the city: Irish, Italian, Greek, Black, and finally, Puerto Ricans. Had the city not made the decision to demolish the street, it doubtless would have continued to serve the function of welcoming newcomers to New London. The result, however, of that decision was to destroy the interests of the property owners in maintaining and caring for their buildings, and Starr Street began the precipitous decline only arrested by the drastic remedial action now taking place.

*Dale S. Plummer, President
New London Landmarks-Union Railroad Station Trust, Inc.
September 14, 1979*



Bishop's Row - Built in 1839 by John Bishop

Starr Street today is a short street in downtown New London with 11 buildings on either side. But if we go back to the early 1800's, we find there was only one building on the site, a ropewalk. A long shed-like building in which rope was twisted from hemp fibers, the ropewalk ran nearly the entire length of what was to become Starr Street. Inside the approximately 500 foot long structure, horse or mule powered machinery produced both light and heavy cordage for ships and general use.

The original owner of the ropewalk, James Tilley, who opened Tilley Street in 1804, sold it to the firm of S&J Peck, of which Stephen and John Peck were members. In 1817, Charles Culver bought the ropewalk from the Pecks. His home, built in 1832 by John Bishop, still stands on the corner of Washington and Tilley Streets, an impressive example of the Greek Revival style.

One night after September 7, 1832, the ropewalk burned down. It was not rebuilt, but the site was sold by Charles Culver in 1834 to Benjamin Brown, Jonathan Starr, Jr., Daniel Rogers, Jr., Anson Smith, and Mrs. Caroline Lanpheer. Land speculators, they were responsible for the laying out of a street through the area shortly before April 18, 1835, running from Washington Street to Green Street. Although called Starr Street, after the Starr family, from 1835, it was also called Ropewalk Street for many years.

1835 saw 3 houses in a row built on Starr Street, opposite where the Masonic Lodge now stands. The first two houses, 6 and 8 Starr Street, were built by Anson Smith between April 18 and December 15, 1835. The third house, number 10, was built for Francis W. Holt, who bought the lot from Anson Smith on May 8, 1835.

The two houses Smith built were probably nearly identical. The second one, 8 Starr Street, still looks much like it did originally. It retains the triangular pediment facing the street, tapering pilasters set in from the corners, pilasters flanking the doorway, and lights above the door, all Greek Revival features. A semicircular fanlight in the pediment has since been replaced by a rectangular window. The siding and window sashes are also more recent replacements. It almost certainly had clapboard siding and window sashes with 6 panes over 6 panes when it was built. The third house was originally probably a fairly nondescript house with a side entrance.

3 more houses were built in 1836, 2 immediately adjoining the first 3, where the Green Street extension and off-street parking now is, the third across the street, next to the lot where the Masonic Lodge now stands, 11

Starr Street. Charles W. Payne, a stonemason, had begun building a house next to the first Smith house by February 5, 1836. The next house was built for Abner Bassett after that date on land bought from Payne. Payne had bought both lots from Anson Smith.

Across the street, Charles W. Payne's brother, Nehemiah B. Payne, built the third house on land obtained from Daniel Rogers, Jr. and Chauncey Arnold. A typical Greek Revival house, 11 Starr Street featured a pediment with fanlight, and a door facing the street.

After a lull of several years, there was a flurry of building activity in 1839, when 7 houses were built, 5 by John Bishop between the 15th of January and the 5th of August. These were immediately adjoining Nehemiah Payne's house on the Washington Street side. Built on land bought by Edward Pratt from Jonathan Starr, Jr., Bishop received ownership of the 4 houses nearest Green Street. Called locally "Bishop's Row," the five identical houses each have a simple entablature beneath the pediment which faces the street, fan window in the pediment, and a front doorway on the right hand side with lights above.

32 Starr Street, on the other side of the street towards the Washington Street side, was built for Elizabeth Lindsley between January 12 and May 6, 1839, on land purchased from Benjamin Brown. 28, next door on the Green Street side, was also built on land bought from Benjamin Brown August 20, 1839 by Nehemiah B. Payne.

32 Starr Street retains its long front windows, similar to those in the Tale of the Whale Museum, high basement, and most interior features. The outside perhaps looked originally much like the building opposite the Public Library of New London at the corner of Huntington and Jay Streets, with a portico and perhaps other Greek Revival features. Inside, 32 Starr Street has a black marbleized fireplace with gold streaks, a front and back parlor separated by sliding doors, high baseboards, fancy molding, high downstairs ceilings, elaborate stairway, and, until recently, the original horsehair plaster.

The second house built by Nehemiah B. Payne on Starr Street is unique in that it has the long side to the street, like the earlier Federal style. It does exhibit pediments and entablatures on the sides, though, as well as an entablature on the front. It is quite likely that originally all the entablatures were supported by pilasters. Centered in the facade is a narrow doorway with top lights. Immediately inside the doorway is a beautiful curved stairway.

18 Starr Street was built for William Stewart, who bought the land August 4, 1840 from Mrs. Caroline Lanpheer. A graceful Greek Revival house, it also has the characteristic fanlight and pediment.

Three more houses were built on Starr Street in 1842. One was built by Melville Chester, bordering the houses of William Stewart and Francis W. Holt. Chester had the land from Mrs. Caroline Lanpheer on May 26, 1842. Chester's house, 16 Starr Street, still retains its flat roof, dentils, and square pillared portico. A different kind of Greek Revival architecture, it stands alone on Starr Street, but is represented by a number of others scattered throughout New London, often of brick.

The house on the corner of Washington and Starr Streets, toward Tilley Street, together with its neighbor, were both built in 1842. The corner house was built for George Washington Crandall, who bought the lot from Albert Lyon April 2, 1842. The next house was built by Albert Lyon between January 17, 1842, and April 11, 1842. Lyon had bought both lots from Jonathan Starr. Jr.

Crandall's house, 36, is a beautiful Greek Revival house with a pediment, fanlight, entablature, portico with Ionic columns, and side and top lights around the door. The house Albert Lyon built, 34, displays a pediment and entablature, but is otherwise rather plain. It apparently retains some of the original 6 over 6 window sashes.

Chauncey R. Crocker built a house between Nehemiah B. Payne's second house and Stewart's house, 26 Starr Street, on land bought from Jonathan Starr Jr., January 2, 1845. Originally, it may have looked much like Elizabeth Lindsley's house first appeared. Perhaps he built both houses, especially as his brother later lived in Elizabeth Lindsley's house.

Thus, by 1845, the peak of New London's whaling boom, when New London was the second largest whaling port in the world, there were 18 houses on Starr Street, of which 16 still stand. Only five of those buildings now standing on the street were built after this date.

By 1850, Courtland Starr had built his soap factory across the street from George Washington Crandall's place. It was a large "L" shaped building. On the other end of the street, Jonathan Starr, Jr. had built a barn by 1850. In 1851, a marbleyard was opened on the site of Starr's barn, probably incorporating it. There were 3 "sheds," though they may not all have been original.

It was not until 1862 that the next building was put up. Albert Galiten Crocker had it built between the house built for William Stewart and the house built by Albert's

brother, Chauncey. It is the only brick house on the street, the result of an ordinance passed in 1847 forbidding the construction of wood frame structures with any heating devices in the "congested district" corresponding to what is now downtown New London. The entrance is on the side, and it seems to have had originally a flat roof.

Shortly before August 2, 1866, there was a fire at the marbleyard, but it is described as minor and the buildings apparently survived.

In 1876, a map was made of New London showing that some additions had been made to the backs of some of the houses on "Bishop's Row." About 1871, an addition fronting on Washington Street had been made to Crandall's place by Christopher C. Burdick, and brackets had been added to 32 Starr Street, probably by Franklin G. Crocker.

In the years immediately following 1876, a great deal of architectural activity was carried on. Eight of the Greek Revival buildings on the street were Italianized by the addition of Italianate hoods over their front doors, in some cases evidently replacing a Greek Revival portico. Many of the houses replaced window sashes with Italianate style ones with 2 panes over 2, often with rounded tops. Fanlights were altered into rectangular windows, and additions were tacked onto sides or backs of buildings. A nice Italianate bay window was added to the back of 32 Starr Street. Added onto 26 Starr Street was a full length 1st story front porch and an unusual enclosed Italianate porch over part of the second story. And a Queen Anne style top was placed on the brick building.

By July 7, 1879, the marbleyard sheds had been torn down, and by September 24th the barn over for use as a tool shed and blacksmith shop for the construction of a Universalist church on the site. After the completion of the church, the barn was to be torn down or given to anyone who would move it.

Work on the church began by July 12, 1879, John Bishop being the builder. It wasn't finished until after November 28, 1881, and was dedicated September 3, 1882. Romanesque in design, the major part is built of granite, with a wing of brick. It has large arched windows set between buttresses. The iron fence surrounding it is probably original, and it may also have had a steeple or tower.

Across the street, next to Abner Bassett's house, Arthur Keefe had an Italianate house built between June 3, 1886 and November 9th of the same year. It fronted on an alley coming off of Starr Street.

The soap factory, the open sewer of which had long been a source of complaint, was taken down shortly before April, 1886. Soon afterwards, George Washington Gard had 3 houses built on the site. The corner house, shaped like a fat "L", with the entrance on Washington Street, has only a narrow facade 2 windows wide facing Starr Street.

The next house, 33 Starr Street, was only lived in from 1886, but may have been built much earlier. It would seem to either have been moved to the site or to be the remnants of the soap factory. It has a pediment and an entablature over the door, as well as some 6 over 6 windows and double doors.

The third house, 31, is a fairly plain structure with a two story porch in front. A relatively tall building, it appears to be constructed with lighter framer than the older houses.

In 1890, James Greenfield applied for a permit to build an addition to his house, probably the one added onto the Green Street side. His house, 6 Starr Street, was the one built by Anson Smith closest to the end of the Street.

The last building constructed on the street was the one put up by Timothy Sugrue in 1895, 29 Starr Street, next to the 3 of George Washington Gard. The front double doors and window above are enclosed in a two story porch. The other half of the facade boasts a two story bay window.

Sometime after May 19, 1909, the windows of the Universalist Church, which had by then become the Brainard Masonic Lodge, were closed up. By 1921, all, or nearly all, of the additions had been finished to the Starr Street houses, and Nehemiah B. Payne's first house, 11, had received a stucco covering. The asbestos shingles and one paned window sashes probably came somewhat later.

1938 saw the great hurricance in September, which indirectly set fire to a few roofs on Starr Street, and also. on January 8th, the first plans to extend Green Street to Tilley. When the Green Street extension along with off-street parking lots was implemented shortly after December 1, 1955, the row of three houses on the Bank Street end and Tilley Street side of Starr Street were demolished.

1966 saw the first of the 4 abandoned houses on Starr Street. In recent years there have also been minor fires and acts of vandalism. Some of the houses on Starr Street

are well kept up like number 10, which unfortunately loses something with its modern features. Others need action soon. As a street, Starr Street retains much of its architectural and historic interest, and a study has been made looking at the possibility of renovating Starr Street for the benefit of future generations.

The people of Starr Street deserve mention as well as the buildings. From the beginning, they have been strongly associated with the maritime trades. Tilley, the Pecks, and Culver all made ropes for ships, of course. Of the five purchasers in 1834, Benjamin Brown was a whaling agent, as was Daniel Rogers, Jr. Mrs. Lanpheer's husband was the shipmaster, James Lanpheer, who died in 1831 while building the sloop James Lanpheer. The other two appear to have been professional land speculators. All five, except Mrs. Lanpheer, also owned buildings on the street.

Benjamin Brown and his sons were active in whaling from 1830 to 1861. He lived in the stone building on Bank Street across from Tilley Street, until recently occupied by DeNoia's Furniture, and operated a wharf behind his house as well as a factory for refining whale oil. From 1847 to 1863, Benjamin Brown owned 11 Starr Street. George Douglass, who was Captain of the whaleship Dove until 1849, rented the house from Brown and lived there.

On September 8, 1863, Brown sold 11 Starr Street to Captain Samuel Jeffrey. Captain Jeffrey had been a whaling captain from 1842 to 1851, serving on the Charles Henry and the Brooklyn. A copy of one of his crew lists is at the Tale of the Whale Museum. After Samuel's death, his son Charles, also a mariner, lived there, followed by Charles' widow until 1883.

Across the street at 8 Starr Street, lived Samuel's brother, Captain Charles Jeffrey, in 1874. He had commanded whaling ships from 1843 to 1871, working on the Friends, the Dover, the George and Mary, and the Acors Barns.

Some other Jeffreys lived on the street whose relations are unknown. Susan, widow of a Samuel Jeffrey, lived at 1 Starr Street from 1886 to 1918. Robert Jeffrey lived at 2 Starr Street in 1891. And John Jeffrey lived at 16 Starr Street from 1872 to 1891.

There were also Douglasses on the street whose relationship to Captain George Douglas is unknown. Perry Douglass owned 17 Starr Street from 1846 to 1852. And Elisha L. Douglass, who had a fish market, occupied 2 Starr Street from 1868 to 1874.

From 1846 to 1852, Daniel Rogers, Jr. owned 28 Starr Street in conjunction with Wanton A. Weaver, his partner in Weaver and Rogers, the whaling firm, which operated

from 1844 to 1859. Weaver and Rogers rented the place out to Albert R. Harris, grocer, who was probably the brother of Franklin Harris, the whaling captain.

No less than five other houses on Starr Street were owned or occupied by Rogers. From 1865 to 1889, George P. Rogers lived at 19 Starr Street. He was of Roger's Ice Company, later to become the largest in the state.

The house next to the one that Weaver and Rogers owned, 26 Starr, belonged to William P. Benjamin from 1847. Benjamin was also a whaling agent. His ship, the Jefferson, made whaling voyages from 1844 to 1849. By 1868, the property had passed to J.G. Butler Benjamin.

The middle of the 3 houses taken down for the Green Street extension and parking lot was owned by Abner Bassett from 1836 to 1866. He was a whaling agent from 1832 to 1849, and, like Benjamin Brown, had his home nearby on Bank Street, with a wharf behind it for his whaling operations, and a marine railway for hauling ships for repairs.

Living in the second house in from Washington Street on the Tilley Street side, 34 Starr, was Captain William Potter, who must have been the Captain Potter in charge of the whaleship Flora on her last whaling voyage from 1846 to 1849. She later went to California for the gold rush. Her figurehead is now displayed at eh Tale of the Whale. A George Potter had bought the place in 1842. William's widow lived on there until the 1870's.

Other whaling captains or agents held mortgages on buildings on Starr Street, and of course many of Starr Street's people were indirectly connected with whaling. Courtland Starr, who was undoubtedly a close relative of Jonathan Starr, Jr., may well have used whale by-products in the manufacture of soap in his Starr Street factory. His successors, Edward Pratt and Ezra C. Whittlesey, continued in the same line. William Pratt, either the brother or son of Edward, invested in many whaling voyages.

The street's ship carpenters, boat builders, ship chandlers, sailmakers, spar-makers, etc., would have helped build or supply whaling ships and other vessels. And some of the many mariners or seamen would have worked on the crews of the whalers.

It was said that "them old whaling captains didn't want anybody but Job Gifford and his man Oliver Lake to touch anything they hed to repair." Later associated with the firm of Lake & Burgess, shipsmiths, Oliver Lake owned and occupied 8 Starr Street from 1848 to 1858, a short walk to his shop located on Bassett's wharf behind Bank Street. He had bought 8 Starr Street from John Grace, who was also an ironworker. Richard F. Harris, a seacaptain,

lived with Lake for a time.

Melville Chester, lumber dealer, advertised ship's knees and decl planks in 1855. He owned and occupied 16 Starr Street from 1842 to 1872. Carlos Barry, sailmaker, and Fitch L. Comstock of Darrow and Comstock, ship chandlers, were also early inhabitants of Starr Street.

Horace Crocker, mariner, and James Crocker, sparmaker, lived on opposite sides of the street. They don't appear to have been closely related to the 3 brothers, Chauncey R. Crocker, Albert Galiten Crocker, or Franklin Gurdon Crocker, all 3 of whom owned houses on the street. While Franklin was just described as a carpenter, a shipwright's adze found in the basement of his house almost certainly belonged to him. Chauncey seems to have been a carpenter also.

Albert G. Crocker had 20 Starr Street until 1883, By 1886 he had become a grocer, occupying first Washington Market on the corner of Washington and Huntington Streets, and later the corner place on Starr Street, which used to be George Washington Crandall's.

Franklin G. Crocker, who lived at 32 Starr Street, became a travelling salesman. His son, Franklin G. Crocker, Jr., took over the corner store from his uncle, Albert, running until 1926. He occupied 32 Starr Street until 1943, shortly before his death.

There were some maritime people, esoeially during the later years, who were not connected with whaling. For instance, from the 1920's, a large number of Navy people lived on the street. They were not the first military, however, as Henry Stoll of the marbleyard had been an officer in the Civil War. In recent years, many Electric Boat employees have lived on the street.

Many residents also had businesses not particularly connected with the sea. The marbleyard has already been mentioned, as has the Rogers Ice Company, etc. The early years saw a sherrif, a minister, doctors, tailors, merchants, saloonkeepers, restraunteurs, a schoolteacher, a junk dealer, an artist, tanner, cooper, carriageworkers, musician, dancing teacher, and others living on Starr Street, many of whom woked on nearby State Street or Bank Street.

In the first house on the other side of the road from the Masonic Lodge, 6 Starr, lived Charles Cone, physician, in 1850. His medical equipment is now, 1977, in the possession of his great-nephew, Mr. Harold J. Cone, President of the New London County Historical Society.

Down the street aways lived Rev. Jabez Swan, an outspoken, fiery Baptist minister, whose picture now hangs in the

Huntington Street Baptist Church at the head of Starr Street, where Jabez once preached. That church was built by John Bishop, who built 6 of the buildings on Starr Street.

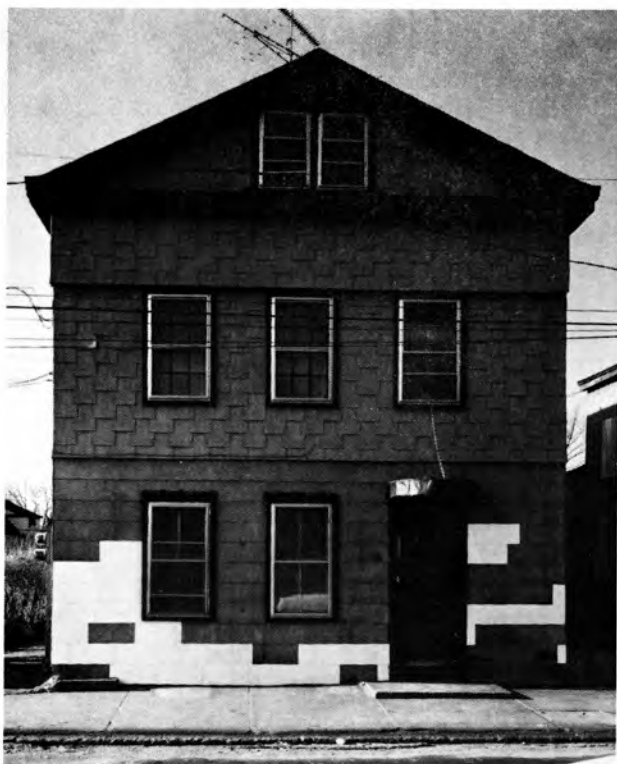
John Bishop, architect, surveyor, city councilman, alderman and state legislator, found time to build well over a dozen buildings in New London between 1832 and 1884. as well as private residences and churches, he also built railroad bridges and other structures, including 3 lighthouses erected on the Massachusetts coast in 1889 and 1890. In partnership with his brother, he also owned and operated a vast lumber yard on Shaw's Cove off Bank Street, known as the Crimea Yard.

In the later years of the century, coincident with the construction of Union Station, Starr Street counted a large number of railroad employees among its inhabitants, including engineers, firemen, watchmen, transfer clerks, etc. Factory worker, including the Brown Cotton Gin factory, came in large numbers about the same time. Many of these were immigrants, the first of successive waves that came to regard Starr Street as home.

Twentieth century occupants have also included a stage manager at the Lyceum Theater, a tailor, teamsters, watchmen, electricians, waiters, Emile Seifert of the Seifert Bakery, telephone and post office employees, barbers, employees at the Mohican Hotel, Connecticut College, the Norwich State Mental Hospital, and others.

Current owners include Connecticut College, the Masons, a New London policeman, owners of the Basket Gift Shop, the Cosmetic Shop, Globe Spirit Shop, and employees of Electric Boat and Mystic Seaport.

All Photographs by Thomas Hahn



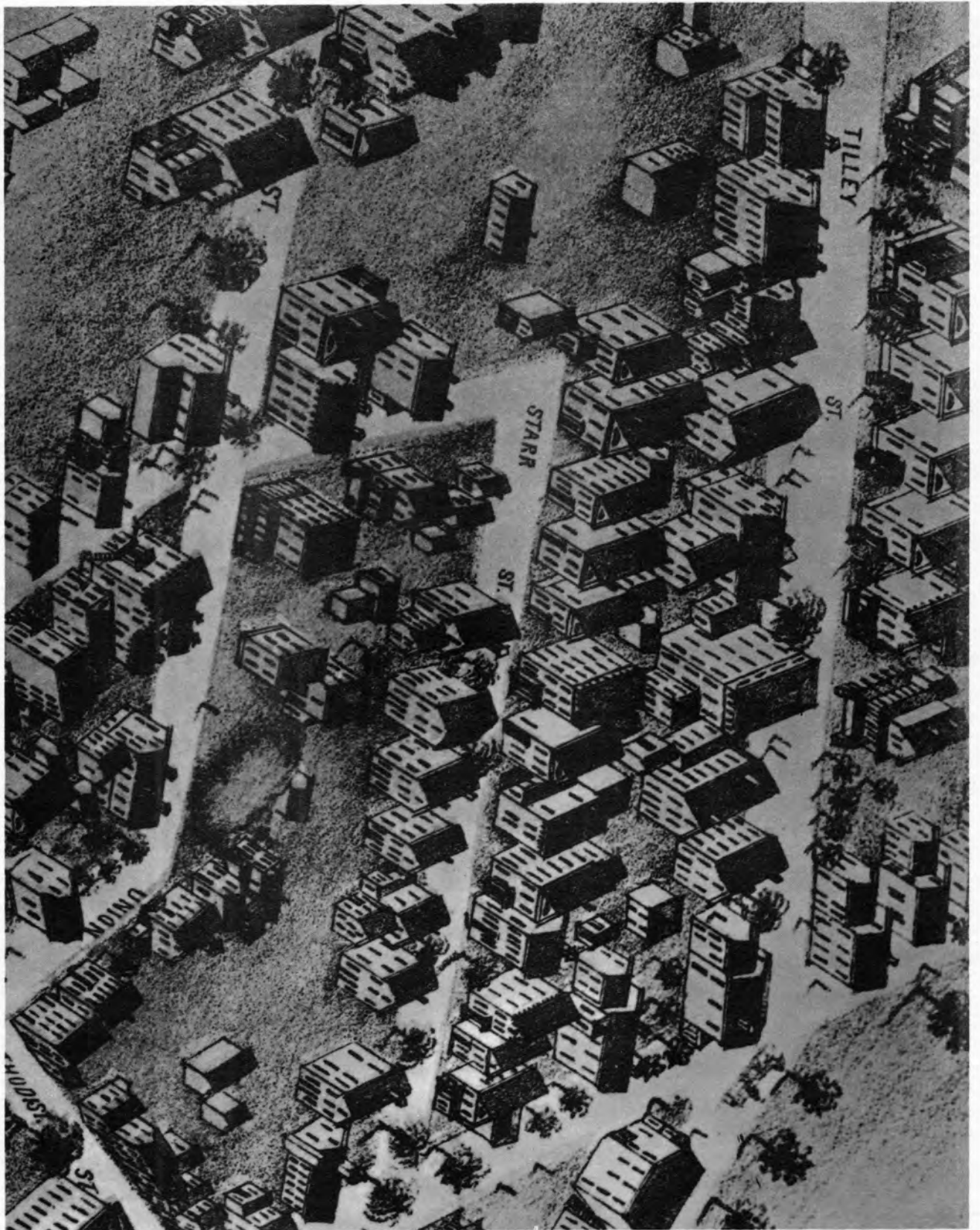
6 and 8 Starr Street built by Anson Smith in 1835. Originally identical houses.



*32 Starr Street
Built for Elizabeth Lindsley - 1839*



*18 Starr Street
William Stewart House - 1840*



Starr Street — 1876