



The Preservationist

A Return to Form!

NEW LONDON LANDMARKS

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After a hiatus of several years, our newsletter The Preservationist is returning and there will be some changes to the format you may remember, most notably in the graphic design. You can expect an issue bi-monthly. New London Landmarks members will receive issues a week before the public release as well as the option to be mailed a physical copy. The revamped Preservationist will keep you up to date on goings on at New London

Landmarks, as well as wider issues in preservation in New London County and surrounding towns.

We'll offer spotlights on buildings and their hidden stories, written by various contributors including board members, volunteers, and members. We will promote diverse topics, highlight unappreciated architecture, and other elements of history that make New London what it is today.



James Sweeney & Harbor School

Established in 1883, Harbor School was a New London institution for a hundred and forty years until 2023, when it shut its doors for good. The last non-magnet school in the city, Harbor School was too much in need of repair to continue operating safely. The school currently sits empty of students and teachers, but there is activity around the site. The stable first floor will be a voting site until plans for the building have been settled. The playground is still accessible, and the first floor gymnasium has been used for pickleball.

Unfortunately, the brick building itself is under threat. Recently, the building was turned over to the city of New London. There is a possibility that it will be demolished. New London Landmarks is against this plan. Instead, we advocate the adaptive re-use of the school to honor its memory and serve the community.

While there are problems with the building, that is true of any historic structure. Former schools often have an edge in re-use desirability, as they can easily and efficiently be transformed into housing. St. Mary's Place in New London is a wonderful example. Further, Harbor School was designed by the prolific local architect James Sweeney, and quality architecture gives cachet to a building. In the case of housing, occupants may be willing to pay a premium to live in a building that is beautiful inside and out.

Harbor School as an institution predates the brick building. The school began in 1883 as a two-story wooden structure. The school population increased at a rapid pace, demanding a wooden addition by 1896. The extension was designed by "J.J. Sweeney", also known as James Sweeney, who would go on to design the brick building which would take its place. Even the new structure does not seem to have been large enough; by 1906 classrooms designed to accommodate forty students had as many as seventy-five pupils squeezed in. Issues of overcrowding would plague Harbor School through the 1970s.

The construction of the brick school proved to be quite a struggle. There had been issues with overcrowding and a lack of proper ventilation, as can be expected with so many students. Conditions were described as "deplorable" and "not at all in keeping with the standard of New London Schools." Residents in the area were passionate about the need for a new, "sightly" building with modern amenities. It seems that only thanks to these passionate citizens that the new school would be built.

The fight for the current Harbor School was intense. The budget would continue to expand over 1907, rising past \$75,000 to estimates of \$103,000. This process was conducted over a series of standard and special meetings, some forcefully convened by public demand and almost always well-attended.

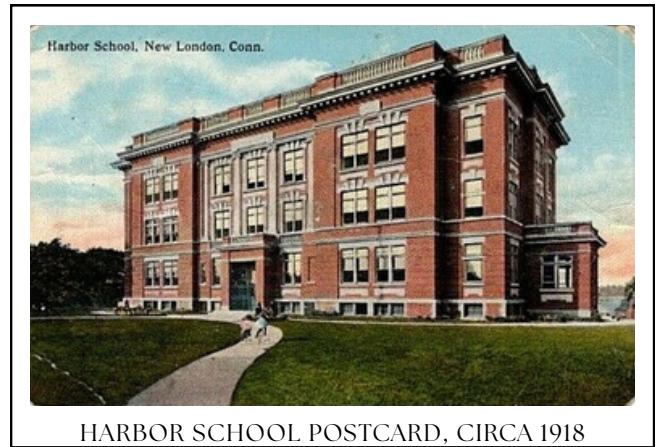
The construction company hired to create the building staged multiple work stoppages and demanded money that the city government was not willing to pay. The *New London Day* continued to document the fluctuating prices, as different city factions battled for control of the project. There were even accusations that Mayor Armstrong was attempting "to handicap that project as long as possible, if not kill it entirely." While there is no evidence that he was, it illustrates the level of frustration and hostility involved in the process. Despite the struggle for funding, the building was completed successfully and handsomely in 1909.

Harbor School would function successfully for almost all of the 1900s. In 1914 the school took on more grade levels, offering education up to 8th grade and various extracurriculars. This extended the length of time students would spend attending Harbor School and may have contributed to the strong sense of connection graduates feel towards the school.

Harbor School became a top school in the area for at least a portion of its existence. According to Former Mayor Harvey Mallove, who graduated from the school in 1940, "In its day, Harbor School was the pride and joy of this city." In a comment he gave to *The Day* on the subject, he spoke on the fact that in the 1930s, the school was able to provide programs and a quality of education that other schools were not. It's a refrain seconded by other graduates of Harbor School, as well as by their parents.

The school drew its students from both Ocean Avenue and Fort Trumbull, creating a distinct mixture of class backgrounds that seem to have added positively to the school's culture. In recollections of their time at the school, many of its graduates cited a strong sense of community and school spirit.

In the 1960s the issue of overcrowding once again inspired a call for an addition. The plan was approved in April of 1967, for which 300,000 dollars were allocated. The addition was designed by Sol Bernstein and associates. Toward the end of the 20th century, Harbor School began to face various challenges. Its age was beginning to show.



The overcrowding problems which had dogged it for most of its life had not found sustained relief. Other quality of life issues heightened a sense of decreased satisfaction, especially in the 1990s. Hot school lunch was considered “slop”, grants for repair fell through, and the school board became notorious for “its seeming inability to hold a discussion without having it degenerate into an argument”.

Another issue in Harbor School’s history was its struggle to desegregate. While Connecticut schools were formally desegregated far earlier, Harbor School failed to bring in a student base that reflected New London’s diversity due to the de-facto socio-economic segregation of New London. Up until the 1990s all of its administrators were white, though there was some variety among the teachers. Black students attending the school faced discrimination from peers and teachers alike. While desegregation is an unambiguous good, those with regressive beliefs perceived this change as a “downgrade” in school quality.

The school had closed for a time in 2016 as a result of the need for renovations, but the repairs did not seem to fix the deeper issues. The building was closed in May of 2023, initially only for a short period to assess the wear and tear on the school. The cracks in the building’s walls and ceiling were deemed severe enough that the school was closed in June by unanimous school board vote. Students who had been attending Harbor School were redirected towards other schools in New London.

James Sweeney is, to quote local expert Maggie Redfern, the “greatest New London Architect you’ve never heard of”. A prolific drafter, he designed over a hundred buildings within New London County and surrounding towns. He designed in various styles and for various uses—private homes, schools, businesses, and government buildings. If you’ve ever been in New London City Hall you’ve had the chance to see and appreciate James Sweeney’s architecture.



The fact that an architect like James Sweeney, who designed over 140 buildings, including ones which receive consistent public use, can remain almost unknown may be a testament to the richness of New London’s architectural history. New London’s architectural legacy is so rich that we are at risk of losing it before it is ever even acknowledged publicly. Harbor School is the latest example, but far from the first or last version of this phenomenon.

Harbor School is many things. It is a handsome building, designed by one of New London’s home-grown architects. It is a building that many of the city hold close to their hearts, and it is something that was fought for over a hundred years ago. We should continue to fight for it now, and examine all the ways this old building can serve new needs.

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 researches, for *The Preservationist* or otherwise.

40 Years, 600 Plaques

As of 2025, New London Landmarks' Whale Plaque program has been in operation for 40 years, during which 600 whale plaques have been completed. The program began in 1985 as a way to recognize our New London Landmarks Restoration Award winners. These are given out, usually at our annual meetings, to a structure and the individual(s) who performed the best rehabilitation in New London, featuring a special golden seal.

Designed by John Gula, these plaques were intended to have an uncluttered design. Over a grey-blue whale, the name of the original owner and date of construction are stenciled.

What was originally intended as an award soon became a highly desired item. From the 1990s anyone could commission a whale plaque for any building more than fifty years old—a standard used by the National Register of Historic Places. However, having a whale plaque does not confer any local, state, or federal historic status, nor does it prevent owners from making alterations.

The plaque program has continued to evolve. In the first five years of the program's existence, individuals received only the plaques themselves. Title histories were, necessarily, researched for this process but not provided to the owners. In the years since, we supplied the full title histories to the owners, as well as filing them in our archives. More recently, we have begun providing narrative histories of the building in addition to the title reports.

The effort to write narrative histories was inspired and spearheaded by the late Mary Beth Baker, our talented and energetic local researcher. These narratives explore the lives of title holders, relevant renters, and previous structures on the site, so far as recorded history allows us to do so.

The narratives provided for every home are different, and going into the research, one really has no idea what to expect. So far, our research has uncovered firebrand lawyers, murder mysteries, experimental hospitals, and all sorts of individuals who contributed to the culture of New London.

The history of these individual structures performs more than just a positive for the home owner. They allow us, slowly, to map out the history of streets and neighborhoods one address at a time. The process of researching has been a rewarding one.

Currently the main title researcher is Board President Tom Couser, who remarks, "When I was first asked to help with this project, I was willing but wary, hardly eager. I wasn't sure I would have, or acquire, the necessary skills or would find it engaging. As it turned out, I have found it very gratifying, and I have become adept at it. Spelunking in the vault, as one colleague refers to it, has become a major retirement activity for me."

Roland, our sign painter since the program's inception, put it simply: "I really enjoy doing them, what can I say?"

Remembering Mary Beth Baker (1948–2025)

By her friend, collaborator, and Board President Tom Couser:

"She was a stalwart preservationist who worked tirelessly to preserve and promote the architectural heritage of New London, both as a member of the Historic District Commission, from which she resigned only recently, and through New London Landmarks. She was an NLL board member for years; even when she was not, she was a very industrious volunteer who won various of our awards. In recent years, she greatly enriched our plaque program by researching and writing detailed narratives of the buildings' original owners and others who followed. She would often trace them to their entry into the United States, and her historical knowledge enabled her to place individuals in the tapestry of local and national history.

She devoted many hours to each report, and they are a pleasure to read. She had also recently succeeded in getting the city to apply for a grant to pay for a historical survey of Ocean Avenue south of the railroad, an area omitted from earlier surveys. This should lead to the establishment of another historic district. In preparation for the survey, she did her own prodigious research. My "Missing Mansions of New London" talk at our last annual meeting was based on that research. I was sorry that she had to miss it because of her declining health. Her death is a big loss to the community that she so fully appreciated."

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.



CThumanities



Studio 33 Art & Frame Gallery
Law Office of Eugene Cushman



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.



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: \$ _____
