



Preservation *in* Action

Anne Crofoot Kuckro

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETER R. BROWN

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Beatrice Fox Auerbach Foundation Fund
at the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving*

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**TEN STORIES OF STEWARDSHIP: RESTORATION,
REHABILITATION, RENOVATION, ADAPTATION, AND REUSE**

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For ANNE

A NOTE FROM THE PUBLISHER

Without Anne and Lee Kuckro, the preservation community in Old Wethersfield would not look as it does today. Through a half-century of board and committee leadership and tireless work behind the scenes, they are the common thread connecting the several entities responsible for stewarding the town's history. Anne's last role was as President of the National Society of The Colonial Dames of America in The State of Connecticut, which owns and operates the Webb Deane Stevens Museum. But it was the Wethersfield Historical Society, whose board she and Lee both chaired, that became most intimately involved in preparing this manuscript for posthumous publication. With gratitude for the robust community in which we work, the Webb Deane Stevens Museum is pleased to honor Anne's legacy by bringing this work forward for publication to the credit of many and for the benefit of all.

Brenton Grom

Executive Director, Webb Deane Stevens Museum

Alice R. M. Hyland

*President, National Society of The Colonial Dames
of America in The State of Connecticut*

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FOREWORD

Ten stories of stewardship: restoration, rehabilitation, renovation, adaptation, and reuse.

The ten stories of stewardship collected in this book are a small part of the culture of historic preservation in Wethersfield. What we call historic preservation was traditionally practiced by thrifty, practical, and pragmatic Yankees for whom adaptation and reuse were normal, usual, and unremarkable. This natural repurposing can be seen with the village's public buildings.

The Old Academy, for example, built as a school in 1801-1804, also served as a site for town meetings after the separation of church and state in 1818, temporarily housed three religious congregations, became the town hall and library and then the Wethersfield Historical Society's Museum. It now serves as the Society's headquarters and houses offices, a library, and archives.

The Keeney Memorial Cultural Center was originally built as the town's high school and grammar school (what we today call a junior high) and thereafter served as the Governor Thomas Welles School (elementary grades). It also functioned as a venue for town meetings, the town court, the draft and rationing boards during World War II, and the Board of Education offices before its present incarnation.

The Baptist Church became the American Legion Hall and is now a dance studio, the Methodist Church is Temple Beth Torah, and the Grange Hall is a food establishment and private home.

And Wethersfield homeowners have maintained, repaired, remodeled, enlarged, and brought their homes up to date since the town 's founding, adapting to changes in family needs with additions that reflect the fashions of the times yet are by and large respectful of the original structures.

The formal efforts to preserve individual houses in Wethersfield date from Wallace Nutting's 1916 purchase of the Joseph Webb House because of its historic association (yes, George Washington slept there). But it was the purchase of the Webb House from Nutting only three years later by The National Society of The Colonial Dames of America in The State of Connecticut (NSCD-CT) that marks the beginning of a sustained institutional commitment to historic preservation in town. The NSCDA-CT's subsequent acquisition of the Isaac Stevens House in 1957 and the Silas Deane House in 1959 has created the Webb Deane Stevens Museum, a professionally accredited museum on an eight acre campus which includes a Colonial Revival garden, a historic barn and a new educational and visitors center, whose construction occasioned an archeological dig that discovered evidence of the very beginning of the Connecticut Colony, the palisaded homesite of Clement Chaplin and evidence of the interaction between the colonists and the native Wangunks.

Both the Joseph Webb House and the Silas Deane House are National Historic Landmarks, and the Isaac Stevens House is on the National Register of Historic Places. The Museum's historic houses, the important stories they tell, and its exhibits and activities, are Old Wethersfield's principal tourist attraction, and with its event spaces and tourist and visitor facilities the Webb Deane Stevens Museum anchors the Historic District.

In 1949 The Antiquarian and Landmarks Society (now Connecticut Landmarks) acquired the Belden Tavern (Buttolph-Williams House) and in 1971 the Wethersfield Historical Society received the Thomas Chester (Hurlbut-Dunham) House by bequest.

More significantly, the town fathers and mothers also took steps to protect the townscape, the town itself. When the state proposed routing a state road through the old village center in the 1930s, long before it had adopted zoning, the town hired New York city planner Herbert Swan to design the Silas Deane Highway to divert the north-south state highway traffic away from Old Wethersfield.

The creation of the Wethersfield Historic District in 1962, the largest and oldest in Connecticut, institutionalized the town's stewardship of the old village, reinforced the efforts of home and business owners, fostered preservation, and encouraged and attracted new homeowners interested in the challenges and rewards of restoration and the charm of living in a protected New England town center.

But despite the Historic District Commission protecting the architectural fabric of Old Wethersfield and individual property owners improving their properties, making the district more attractive and increasing property values, Old Wethersfield was still something of a backwater.

The combined impact of two floods in the 1930s, the Depression, World War II rationing of building materials, and the relocation of town offices to the Silas Deane Highway in the 1960s sapped the old village of economic vitality, leaving vacant and underused buildings.

The revitalization of Old Wethersfield started in 1984 when the Wethersfield Historical Society Board made the courageous decision to submit its proposal to the town to redevelop two vacant surplus town buildings in the heart of the Historic District, creating new businesses with foot-traffic potential: the Henry Deming house as a restaurant and the Governor Thomas Welles School as a museum and cultural center.

The agreement by the Town to entrust the Wethersfield Historical Society with the responsibility for the restoration, rehabilitation, and oversight of the Deming House and the rehabilitation and operation of the old high school has been rewarded with economic vigor, rising property values, and a thriving village stimulating new investments and reinvestments safeguarded by the oversight of the Historic District Commission.

The stories in this book range from the oldest house in town with a seventeenth-century addition added in the twentieth to a nineteenth-century commercial building whose greenhouse was repurposed for additional café seating in 2022. Some are stories of stewardship sustained over generations of successive owners, of institutions and congregations proudly restoring the buildings for which they are responsible. Some stories are of heroic efforts—buildings brought back from the brink of destruction; some are of patient incremental improvements over decades of restoration.

All tell the tale of Historic Old Wethersfield,
Preservation in Action.

Lee G. Kuckro

Wethersfield, May 2023