

# Branford Center Historic District

The Branford Center Historic District was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1987. Portions of the content on this web page were adapted from a copy of the original nomination document.

## Description

The Branford Center Historic District is located in Branford, Connecticut, a small coastal town encompassing approximately 27.9 square miles of land lying roughly 5 miles east of the City of New Haven and 25 miles west of the mouth of the Connecticut River. Embracing the core south-central portion of the formerly incorporated Borough of Branford, and flanked to the east and southeast by the Branford River, the Branford Center Historic District lies roughly 2 miles north of Long Island Sound and 1/2-mile south of Interstate 95.

The irregularly shaped borders of the Branford Center Historic District encompass roughly 250 acres of partially undulating land which rise gradually toward the northwest away from the Branford River. Including garages, carriage houses and, similar substantial ancillary outbuildings, the Branford Center Historic District contains a total of 706 major structures. Of these 706 major structures, 557 (78.9%) contribute to the architectural and/or historical significance of the area.

The Branford Center Historic District is traversed by an irregular pattern of streets, virtually all of which were laid out between the mid-17th and late 19th centuries. The Branford Center Historic District's principal east/west traffic arteries are Main, East Main, Meadow, and Maple Streets; principal north/south arteries are Cedar and Montowese Streets. Spanning the northern and eastern ends of the district, Main and Montowese Streets, respectively, form the district's two principal commercial loci. Dominated by industrial architecture, Meadow and Maple Streets span the length of the district's southern end; portions of each of these two streets flank an extant trackbed associated with the former New York, New Haven, and Hartford Railroad.

East Main Street is the Branford Center Historic District's principal access road from the northeast, while Cedar Street provides the most direct link between the district and Interstate 95. Other streets included within the district (in whole or part) are Monroe Street, John Street, Laurel Street, Harrison Avenue, Park Place, Hillside Avenue, Veto Street, Rose Street, Ivy Street, Chestnut Street, Bradley Avenue, Danberg Place, Wilford Avenue, Church Street, South Main Street, Eades Street, Prospect Street, Meadow Street, Hopson Avenue, Rogers Street, Kirkham Road, Svea Street, and Rice Terrace. Like East Main and Cedar Streets, these latter roads are almost entirely dominated by architecture designed and currently utilized as residences.

The Branford Center Historic District contains several prominent park-like spaces. The most notable of these are the town green at the junction of Main and Montowese Streets, the area framed by Main Street and the semicircular driveway fronting the Blackstone Memorial Library, and the wide esplanade at Main Street between Cedar and John Streets. A large open park also abuts the southern edge of the district along Prospect Street between Church Street and Hopson Avenue. The Branford Center Historic District also encompasses two significant burial grounds:

Center Cemetery (established in the 17th century), and Saint Mary's Roman Catholic Cemetery (established in the mid-19th century).

The Branford Center Historic District's building stock includes a great variety of 19th and early-20th century commercial, industrial, municipal, and religious structures, as well as numerous single- and multi-family houses dating from the 18th through early 20th centuries. While wooden construction predominates, most of the industrial, a number of the commercial, and a few of the municipal and religious structures stand as significant examples of brick, cut-stone, cast-stone, concrete-block and/or metal-clad steel-frame construction.

Virtually all of the structures in the Branford Center Historic District range from one and one-half to four stories in height. With the exception of several of the more prominent municipal and religious structures located along Main Street, the State Armory at 83 Montowese Street, and some structures associated with the industrial complexes located along the south side of Meadow and Maple Streets, most buildings are sited relatively close (5-30 feet) to the street. On streets dominated by residential architecture, most structures maintain essentially uniform setbacks.

The principal architectural styles represented within the Branford Center Historic District include the Colonial, Federal, Greek Revival, Italianate, Gothic Revival, Second Empire, Queen Anne, Colonial Revival, Tudor Revival, and Bungalow modes. Most of these styles appear as vernacular interpretations, reflecting the fact that the majority of the area's buildings were "designed" as well as erected by local builders. However, the Branford Center Historic District also contains a handful of structures known to have been designed by professional architects. The most significant of these is the classically inspired, monumental 1893 James Blackstone Memorial Library by S.S. Beman of Chicago, Illinois. A number of other structures, such as the Branford Town Hall, the former Connecticut Light and Power Company Building, the Toole Building, and the G.A.R. Hammer Building, exhibit design qualities which strongly suggest the direct involvement or strong influence of an unknown professional hand. The Branford Center Historic District also includes a number of structures with essentially unadorned, functional lines (e.g., 19th and early-20th century industrial buildings and mill workers' houses). Despite their plain character, the massing, materials, workmanship, location, and siting of these buildings clearly mark them as an integral component of the district's historical development.

The Branford Center Historic District maintains a strong level of historical and architectural integrity. On an individual basis, approximately 75 percent of all contributing structures retain the bulk of their significant historic exterior fabric and features. Alterations to the remainder of the district's contributing structures are generally limited to the application of later siding materials, the enclosure of front porches, unobtrusive additions, and/or post-1936 storefront and signage modifications. The Branford Center Historic District has been spared from the debilitating effects of extensive demolition and modern construction. It contains only a few small and widely scattered vacant lots/parking areas. The most notable intrusion is formed by Saint Mary's Roman Catholic Church, a 1974 brick structure at the northwest corner of Main Street and Hopson Avenue, and the adjacent block of five modern brick commercial structures located immediately to its east along the south side of South Main Street between Hopson Avenue and Eades Street.

## Significance

The Branford Center Historic District has two principal areas of significance. First, the district's buildings, streets, waterfront, and open spaces combine to form a coherent and cohesive example of an 18th-century Connecticut farming/maritime village which developed, over the course of the 19th century, into the core of a small, coastal town dominated by an industrial-based economy. Second, the district encompasses a large and relatively well-preserved contiguous collection of structures representing an unusually broad range of functions and popular architectural modes dating from the 18th through early 20th centuries.

## Historical and Architectural Summary

The Branford Center Historic District encompasses the bulk of the original core settlement area of Branford. Originally part of the New Haven Colony (1639-1666), the Town of Branford was laid out on land purchased from Montowese, son of Sowheog, a sachem of the Mattabesec Indians. [1] At that time, the area was known by its Indian name, Totoket ("the Land of the Tidal River"). The first English settlers recruited by the New Haven Colony to move to Totoket were a group of 40 families from Wethersfield led by William Swaine and the Reverend John Sherman. They are believed to have arrived in the spring of 1644, some travelling by water down the Connecticut River and others coming overland, driving their domestic animals before them. They were joined the following year by settlers from New Haven under the leadership of the Reverend Abraham Pierson, who replaced John Sherman as the new community's pastor.

The choice of Totoket for settlement proved fruitful. The land was productive and the Branford River estuary proved to be the best harbor between New Haven and New London. Shortly after its initial settlement, the town's name was changed to Branford, presumably derived from Brentford, a town on the Thames River near London in which some of the initial settlers had been born.

The first setback to the town's growth came soon after the unification of the New Haven and Connecticut Colonies under the colonial charter granted by King Charles II in 1666. Displeased with the new charter's provisions for broadened suffrage, in 1667 Branford's minister, Abraham Pierson, led a substantial number of families to New Jersey, where they subsequently settled the area known today as Newark. Enough of Branford's population remained, however, to ensure the town's survival and eventual growth. More extensive portions of the community's fertile land were soon cleared for farming, while the town's harbor provided an increasingly important link to local as well as inter-colonial trade. By the end of the 17th century, Branford had begun to develop an economic base in agriculture and the maritime trades which would dominate its development over the course of the ensuing 125 years.

Relatively little remains in Branford Center that evokes its distant 17th and early-18th century past. The names of a few of the area's older roads, such as Montowese Street and Indian Neck Avenue, serve to recall the area's early Indian inhabitants. Most of Main Street, which along with East Main Street formed part of the 18th-century "King's Highway," generally follows the route of the "Totoket Path" used by early English settlers. Center Cemetery along the northeastern side of Montowese Street includes graves of a number of these settlers, and also marks the site of the town's first meetinghouse. Finally, a marker on the Branford Green commemorates the former

site of the parsonage of Samuel Russell, where a group of ministers met in 1701 to donate books for the purpose of "...founding a college in this Colony" — the present Yale University.

Prior to 1699, the Branford Green formed part of the home lot of John Taintor, who willed the land to the town for use as the site of a new meeting house and/or common. By 1699, the Branford Society had outgrown its original meetinghouse, and a new and larger one was built on the south side of the newly established Green facing South Main Street in 1701. West of the new meetinghouse were "Whipping Post Hill," where the stocks and pillory stood as constant reminder of civil and religious authority, and a smithy. With its visible symbols of religious, cultural, and social development, the Green quickly emerged as the nucleus of the expanding 18th century village commonly known as Branford Center.

The first half of the 18th century was marked by a rising tide of prosperity in the growing village of Branford Center. Through much of this century, the village rivaled New Haven in terms of commercial importance. This prosperity resulted from both the success its inhabitants met with in farming and the development of the Branford River estuary as a major port for the coasting trade. During this era, the harbor itself was improved, while numerous wharves were erected along an extensive portion of the town's riverbanks. Ships laden with agricultural products from points as far north as Maine departed Branford harbor, and returned to Branford with other cargoes such as fish for inland distribution.

The rising tide of prosperity experienced in Branford at the turn of the 18th century had been dissipated by the turn of the 19th century. Depleted of both men and money by the Revolutionary War, and with its farmland divided and exhausted, the town began to lose population. Like many New England towns, by the end of the 18th century Branford was losing many of its young farmers to the virgin soils of western New York and Ohio. With much of its fleet having been lost during the French and Indian and Revolutionary Wars, the village's once prosperous coasting trade diminished to the point where Branford could claim but six vessels of 40 to 60 tons each. In 1810, Yale's president, Timothy Dwight, found Branford to be:

"... at a stand in the progress of improvement, and ... fixed in its present state by a mere want of energy and effort. The inhabitants are principally farmers; sober, industrious, orderly citizens; not remarkable for energy; and like those of East Haven, less attentive than most of their countrymen to the education of their children." [2]

In retrospect, Dwight's assessment was unduly pessimistic, for 1810 proved to be the nadir of Branford's economic fortunes. By the early 1820s, the town's population was, once again, gradually increasing, suggesting the return of some measure of prosperity. Perhaps most importantly, like many communities in the northeast, by the 1820s Branford Center stood poised on the threshold of the Industrial Revolution.

The period 1820 through 1860 was an era of major transition for Branford Center during which gradual changes took place in the educational and architectural, as well as the economic and social aspects of village life. With an eye toward improving local education, a number of townspeople led by the First Congregational Church's minister Timothy Gillett organized a secondary academy. The Federal style frame building built to house "The Academy" on the Branford Green, stands today as a rare example of early 19th-century schoolhouse construction.

Religious pluralism became an accepted as well as an established fact during this period. In 1840, the Baptists erected their extant building, a good and highly representative example of a frame church designed in the Greek Revival style, on the site of the old whipping post. Three years later, the original portion of the present First Congregational Church, a prominent brick and stone Greek Revival style structure later modified by the addition of an Italianate style front, was erected on a nearby portion of the Green. Not to be outdone, by 1852 the local Episcopalian parish had erected the present Trinity Church, a frame Gothic Revival style structure which currently features unusually clean exterior lines. (An old photograph of the building indicates it originally featured far more elaborate exterior detail features.) With the construction of the extant late Greek Revival style Branford Town Hall and Court House, a monumental frame structure now fronted by an early 20th-century front portico addition, the architectural development of the present Green was completed.

Manufacturing would not become firmly established as the foremost determinant of Branford Center's development until several years after the advent of the railroad in 1852. However, the earliest stirrings of modern industrial activity in Branford Center which eventually led to the founding of Branford's first major industry can be traced to 1818. In that year, Orin D. Squire, who in 1809 had established a smithy in the hollow located slightly northeast of the Green, formed a partnership with L.D. Hosley and Daniel Nichols. Together, the three men erected a small building in which they manufactured cast-iron goods. By 1852, this small foundry became the Squires and Parsons Manufacturing Company and began to produce locks. Following the failure of this company several years later, it was reorganized by Thomas Kennedy, a lock maker from New York. Renamed the Branford Lock Works, within a few decades the company boasted 500 employees and a 5-acre site occupied by buildings valued at one million dollars. Some of these buildings still stand along the northern side of Main Street immediately west of Ivy Street. Eventually purchased by Yale and Towne, the company continued to operate until about 1910.

With the coming of the railroad, industrial activity got underway at Pages Point, along the Branford Center Historic District's riverfront. The first of these enterprises was a dock and coal yard built by Elizur Rogers. Shortly thereafter, the Totoket Company, recognizing the transportation advantages afforded by both the river and the railroad, occupied a site between them along Maple Street in the southwestern portion of the district. Here the company began production of malleable iron, brass, and wrought-iron goods in 1855. In 1864, the Malleable Iron Fittings Company was incorporated. Under the direction of members of the Hammer family, Malleable Iron developed into one of the largest plants of its kind, employing 1400 persons by 1915. The company continued in operation until 1970. While its earliest buildings disappeared long ago, this site retains an extensive complex of reasonably intact late-19th and early-20th century structures which today stand in mute testimony to the district's former heyday as a significant industrial locus.

The Branford Center Historic District's only other historically significant industrial enterprise, the Atlantic Wire Company, was established in 1906. The company was founded by William E. Hitchcock, Sr., for the purpose of manufacturing low-carbon wire rods. Located along the Branford River between Church and Montowese Streets, Atlantic Wire is the district's only historically significant manufacturing enterprise which remains in operation today. Its plant complex retains a number of pre-1936 industrial structures.

Industrial development in Branford Center between the 1850s and the early years of the 20th century also appears to have brought changes to the ethnic makeup of the village's heretofore predominantly "Yankee" population. While hard statistical data remains scarce, the fact that a Roman Catholic church (112 Montowese Street) and cemetery (55 Monroe Street) were established in the district by the end of the third quarter of the 19th century strongly suggests that, like other growing industrial communities, the village experienced a significant influx of Irish immigrant laborers during this era. City directories further suggest that the wave of Irish immigration may have been succeeded by a notable influx of Italian immigrant workers during the decades surrounding the turn of the 20th century.

While manufacturing would continue to be a mainstay of Branford Center's economy through much of the first third of the 20th century, the area also gradually began to emerge as the heart of a modern suburb of nearby New Haven during this period as well. As in similar communities, Branford Center's emergence as a suburban hub was fostered primarily by the and improvement in personal transportation afforded by the extension of streetcar lines running into New Haven, and by the growing popularity and use of the "family car." A review of Branford Town directories dating from the 1920s and 1930s indicates that it was during this era that Branford Center began to emerge as the heart of modern town from which a constantly increasing number of residents commuted to workplaces in the City of New Haven.

The Branford Center Historic District's historic 19th/early-20th century pattern of development is well-defined by the location and character of its extant residential and commercial neighborhoods, as well as by the location and character of its Green and industrial sites, and its proximity to the Branford River. For example, mid-to-late 19th century industrial worker's houses which line the southern end of Hopson Avenue and portions of the northern side of Meadow Street are easily recognized by their relatively plain, functional lines and close proximity to the district's riverfront industrial area. The somewhat more remote location of a group of similar houses along Monroe Street adjacent to a Roman Catholic Cemetery identify this area as a 19th-century enclave for Irish immigrant laborers.

The larger and somewhat more style-oriented late-19th and early-20th century frame houses which dominate the side streets immediately south and north of Main Street and east of Montowese Street clearly reflect the development of these areas as middle-class residential neighborhoods during this era. The Branford Center Historic District's fashionable residential loci of this era, along South Main Street and the northern side of Main Street immediately west of the high-style Blackstone Memorial Library, are readily recognized by the scale, siting, and/or more refined exteriors displayed by most of the structures standing in these two areas. Preindustrial-era roads, such as East Main and Montowese Streets, are visually noted by the survival of several colonial-era houses and their inclusion of a relatively high proportion of Greek Revival and early Italianate style residences. Main Street's early existence, as well as its development as Branford Center's principal early-20th century commercial thoroughfare, is reflected by a wide variety of architecture ranging from the Jason Atwater House of the 18th century, to the unusual Queen Anne style Griswold Block of the 19th century, and the Tudor Revival style Toole Building, late Gothic Revival style G.A.R. Hammer Building, and classically inspired Post Office Block of the 20th century.

## End Notes

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