

Branford Point Historic District

The Branford Point Historic District was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1988. Portions of this content was adapted from a copy of the original nomination document.

Description

The Branford Point Historic District is a cohesive collection of relatively well preserved late-18th through early-20th century residences located in the Town of Branford, a small Connecticut coastal community situated approximately five miles east of the City of New Haven. Roughly bounded by the Branford River (east), Branford Harbor (south), an Amtrack railway (north), and Harbor Street/Bryan Road (west), the Branford Point Historic District extends southward from the southwestern corner of the town's historic village core. [See Note]

The Branford Point Historic District is laid out on a north/south axis. Its 54 acres are bisected into relatively equal northern and southern halves by the mouth of an eastward-flowing tributary of the Branford River. The landscape in the northern half of the Branford Point Historic District and the bulk of the southern half of the district rises gently approximately 20-25' from the Branford River toward the northwest and west, respectively. In its southwestern corner, the southern half of the district also includes a small but prominent 50-foot-high hill overlooking the northern end of Branford Harbor.

In terms of physical appearance, the Branford Point Historic District maintains its historic integrity to a substantial degree. It currently contains only two vacant lots, and only a few significant intrusions have resulted from demolition and/or post-1938 construction. Including substantial outbuildings (e.g., garages, carriage houses, and boathouses), the Branford Point Historic District embraces a total of 207 buildings. Better than 75% of these buildings (158/207) contribute to the district's significance. Roughly half (26/51) of the buildings which have been designated as non-contributing are relatively small garages built after 1938 which, as a result of their siting and/or massing characteristics, have little or no significant impact on the area's historic visual character. Likewise, the modest massing, siting characteristics, and generally disparate locations of the district's remaining non-contributing buildings minimize their intrusive effects on district streetscapes. Where they have occurred, significant non-historic alterations to building exteriors are for the most part limited to modest, sympathetic, or unobtrusive additions; porch modifications; or the super imposition of man-made siding materials over original fabric.

Architectural styles/periods represented by Branford Point Historic District buildings include a variety of good, substantially intact vernacular interpretations of Federal, Greek Revival, Italianate, Second Empire, Stick, Queen Anne, Arts and Crafts/Bungalow, Colonial Revival, and Tudor Revival. All but a handful of these buildings are one-to three-story wood frame residential structures with cut-stone, brick, or concrete foundations, and gable or low-hip roofs topped by asphalt-shingle or asphalt-roll roofing. For the most part, building setbacks and spacings respectively vary between approximately 10-30' and 30-120' depending on location, and most individual lots appear to retain their pre-World War II perimeters.

The Branford Point Historic District's two principal public thoroughfares are Harbor Street, which essentially bisects the area on a north/south axis, and Maple Street, which spans the northern end of the district on an east/west axis. Side streets include Bryan Road and Curve Street, both of which are

located in the northern end of the district. The only other Branford Point Historic District Road is Parker Memorial Drive, which wends its way through the area's only public park, a large undulating open space adjacent to the northern end of Branford Harbor. This drive provides seasonal vehicular access to the park's early 20th-century public lavatory building and four privately owned late-19th/early-20th century waterfront cottages which border the park's extreme southwestern edge.

The Branford Point Historic District is visually distinguished from its surroundings by a combination of natural and man-made physical characteristics. Its southern boundary is formed by Branford Harbor. Its eastern boundary is defined partly by the Branford River and partly by groups of predominantly post-1938 residential and commercial construction. The eastern portion of the Branford Point Historic District's northern boundary abuts a relatively broad, open hollow bisected on an east/west axis by the rail line of an Amtrack right-of-way. The western portion of the northern boundary as well as the western boundary as a whole are visually defined by extensive post World War II era residential construction which dominates the areas north of properties on the north side of Maple Street and west of properties on the western sides of Harbor Street and Bryan Road.

Significance

The Branford Point Historic District is significant as a distinct and relatively compact concentration of substantially intact houses which effectively document the development of residential architecture in coastal Branford between the Revolutionary and Second World Wars. These houses include some of Branford's best surviving examples of popular historic vernacular architectural styles, such as late Federal, Greek Revival, Italianate, Second Empire, Stick, Queen Anne, Arts and Crafts/Bungalow, Shingle, and Colonial Revival.

Historical Context

The Branford Point Historic District occupies the bulk of a large area adjacent to the southwestern corner of Branford Center commonly referred to since the late 19th century as Branford Point. The northern half of the area had previously been known as the Dutch Wharf Quarter, an allusion to the Dutch traders who were said to have established a riverfront post near the present junction of Harbor and Maple Streets prior to the advent of English settlers. The southern half of the area had been known as Mulliners Neck; it was named after Thomas Mulliner, a squatter who was living there when sizable groups of settlers from the established towns of Wethersfield and New Haven first arrived in Branford 1644/45.

Over the course of the 17th and 18th centuries, Branford Point gradually developed into one of the town's principal coastal farming areas. The Branford Point Historic District retained a strongly rural flavor well into the first quarter of the 19th century. For example, by 1820 the area's dominant physical features still consisted of open fields, a few scattered outbuildings, and three scattered houses occupied by the area's principal landowners, Obed Linsley and his sons, Elnathan and John.

Well into the first quarter of the 19th century, the only overland public way between Branford Center and the district was a relatively long and circuitous route which entered the southernmost end of the area from the west/northwest. (Today, this route is roughly outlined by Bradley, Swift, and Linsley Streets, and Stannard Avenue.) Improved access between the district and Branford Center, which was afforded by the opening of Harbor and Maple Streets in 1819, proved a major factor in the district's gradual emergence as a significant summer resort and residential locus during the ensuing years of

the 19th century. For example, Elnathan Linsley, who had petitioned the town to open Harbor Street, subsequently initiated the development of the beach area at the southern end of the street for recreational use. By the end of the 19th century, the southwestern corner of this property had emerged as the site of a handful of small summer cottages fronting Branford Harbor. Between the mid-19th and early years of the 20th centuries, the remainder of this sizable harbor-front tract was utilized by George T. Parker as the site of his Branford Point House and wharf (no longer extant), and a large picnic/recreation grove. The grove and its adjacent beach, which were readily accessed by regularly scheduled coastal steamer, achieved particular favor as a local day resort during the second half of the 19th century. The survival of this latter area's essential character and function was ensured in 1912, when Parker's heirs donated the property to the Town of Branford for its present use as Parker Memorial Park.

The erection of the Benjamin Carter House (231 Harbor Street) in the 1820s, presaged the appearance of more than two dozen additional residences — many of them built for variously related descendants of the Linsleys along both sides of the southern two-thirds of Harbor Street during the ensuing six decades. Between 1880 and the early years of the twentieth century, much of the northernmost portion of Harbor Street, as well as portions of Curve and Maple Streets, emerged as a notable residential locus for employees of Branford Center's massive Malleable Iron foundry. (The extensive physical plant associated with this former company, which is currently listed on the National Register, still abuts the district's northeastern edge.)

As in much of coastal Branford, the arrival of a trolley line from nearby New Haven through the area around the turn of the century, followed by the advent of the family car shortly thereafter, led to a gradual suburbanization of Branford Point. The Branford Point Historic District's present street pattern was finalized in the early 20th century, when Bryan Road was laid out through the northwestern portion of the area. With the ensuing development of Bryan Road as a suburban-style residential subdivision, and the construction of a neighborhood school and a handful of additional "infill" houses on several of the district's few remain lots along Harbor and Maple Streets, the district's historic pre-World War II development was essentially complete.

Architectural Significance

The Branford Point Historic District forms one of Branford's best-preserved concentrations of late-18th through early 20th century residential architecture. Its buildings include several individually distinct as well as numerous modest examples of major architectural styles which emerged in Branford over the course of this era.

The earliest houses in the Branford Point Historic District are the ca.1785 John Linsley House at 99 Harbor Street and Obed Linsley's ca.1800 "Tide Mill House" at 202 Harbor Street. While exhibiting some exterior alterations dating from the mid-19th and early-20th centuries, respectively, these two houses continue to stand as good examples of early Federal period rural architecture in Branford. This era is also represented by the ca.1825 Benjamin Carter House at 231 Harbor Street, a locally rare survival of the 1 and 1/2-story, 5-bay-wide Federal-era house form.

The Greek Revival style, which achieved widespread popularity throughout most of the nation's northeast during the mid-19th century, is particularly well-represented in the Branford Point Historic District. The earliest example incorporating major elements of this style is the ca.1835 Horace Lanphier House at 136 Harbor Street, which displays a fully pedimented gable front and a prominent

Greek Revival style front entry shielded by a small Tuscan porch while retaining a Federal style fanlight in its front gable tympanum. Slightly later and more typical examples of this style include the ca.1840 Baldwin-Shepard House at 98 Harbor Street, the ca.1855 Obed Linsley House at 109 Harbor Street, and the ca.1840 John B. Linsley House at 92 Harbor Street. Featuring a front elevation elaborated by a rectangular gable window with geometric tracery, a main entablature embellished by modillions with guttae, 6-over-6 pane first and second-story windows topped by decorative heads, and a prominent Doric entry porch, this house stands as one of the finest surviving examples of its style, form, and period within the Town of Branford as a whole.

The mid-to-late 1850s proved to be a stylistically transitional era in the district, with the Greek Revival gradually giving way to the Italianate as the preferred architectural style. The Branford Point Historic District includes several substantially intact houses with exteriors which clearly reflect this stylistic transition. For example, the main block of the ca.1855 Daniel Averill House at 123 Harbor Street retains the basic massing and exterior detailing of its earlier Greek Revival neighbors, while incorporating a large and flamboyant Italianate-style wraparound porch. A similar, though somewhat less exuberant example of such stylistic mixture is also exhibited on the exterior of the ca.1860 Jared Shepard House at 70 Harbor Street. A more typical version of the local Italianate style is provided by the 1878 George Benton House at 74 Harbor Street. With its semicircular-arch front gable window, deep eaves terminating in prominent cornice returns, chamfered porch posts rising into molded capitals flanked by scroll sawn spandrels, and bracketed oriel-like first and second-story window bays, this house stands as an excellent example of the style as it had evolved locally by the post-Civil War period.

The Branford Point Historic District also embraces one of the best of Branford's few surviving examples of the 19th century Second Empire style the Daniel Beardsley House at 139 Harbor Street. Constructed as a low-hip roof Italianate in 1852, the house's present mansard roof appears to have been incorporated during the mid-1870s. (Alterations of this type were not uncommon in this portion of the state during the latter decades of the 19th century.)

Most of the Queen Anne style houses built in the Branford Point Historic District during the latter decades of the century were relatively modest structures erected for workers employed by the nearby Malleable Iron foundry. However, the district's buildings also include two of the finest houses of this style and period still standing in Branford — the ca.1885 Edward Shepard House at 108 Harbor Street, and the 1886 Frederick J. Jourdan House at 84 Maple Street. With its almost wholly intact interior and exterior (which currently features a multi-color period paint scheme), the Shepard House stands as a quintessential example of a Queen Anne style country cottage. The Jourdan House, which also retains virtually all of its original exterior massing and detailing features, is one of the town's premier surviving examples of a large Queen Anne style frame house.

Most of the residential development which took place in the Branford Point Historic District following the turn of the 20th-century consisted of infill construction along Harbor and Maple Streets, and the construction of groups of houses along both sides of newly laid out Bryan Road. Particularly notable examples of houses dating from this era include the 1904 Robert Bradley House at 58 Harbor Street, an excellent diminutive example of the locally rare Shingle style, and the frame and stone Bungalow erected for William Crawford at 62 Harbor Street in 1927-28. The emerging popularity of the Colonial Revival style in Branford during this era is reflected in both the groups of essentially intact and virtually identical, modest gambrel-, gable-, and hip-roofed houses erected along both sides of Bryan Road

between the 1910s and early 1930s, as well as by somewhat more disparate houses such as those located at 120 and 161 Maple Street.

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Note: Most of Branford's core village area was listed on the National Register in 1986 as part of the Branford Center Historic District.

1. J. Paul Loether, J. P. Loether Associates, and John Herzan, Connecticut Historic Commission, *Branford Point Historic District*, nomination document, 1988, National Park Service, National Register of Historic Places, Washington, D.C.