

Stony Creek-Thimble Islands Historic District

The Stony Creek/Thimble Islands Historic District was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1988. Portions of the content on this web page were adapted from a copy of the original nomination document.

Description

The Stony Creek/Thimble Islands Historic District is located in the southeastern corner of the Town of Branford, a Connecticut coastal community situated approximately five miles east of the City of New Haven. The Stony Creek/Thimble Islands Historic District is roughly bounded on the northeast by Route 146; on the east and southeast by Long Island Sound; and on the west by Long Island Sound, the eastern side of Pleasant Point, and the northernmost portion of Thimble Islands Road. Including land and water, the Stony Creek/Thimble Islands Historic District covers approximately 1,400 total acres. Two hundred of these acres encompass the well-preserved 19th- and early 20th-century core of the mainland village of Stony Creek. The remaining district acreage embraces the sizable portion of Long Island Sound surrounding the 34 principal Thimble Islands, which retain numerous good examples of 19th- and early 20th-century summer cottages.

The Stony Creek/Thimble Islands Historic District as a whole maintains its historic integrity to a substantial degree. Including major outbuildings (e.g., garages, barns, and boathouses), it embraces a total of 487 buildings. More than 71% (347/487) of these buildings contribute to the area's historic and/or architectural significance. Roughly one-quarter (34/140) of the Stony Creek/Thimble Islands Historic District's noncontributing buildings are post-1938 outbuildings which, as a result of their scale, massing, and siting characteristics, have little visual impact on historic streetscapes. Post-World War II demolition and construction have also had a relatively minor effect on the historic visual qualities of the area.

Wood and granite are the dominant materials found in most district buildings, although a handful of buildings feature exterior walls of brick or stucco. Buildings throughout the Stony Creek/Thimble Islands Historic District generally range from one to three and one-half stories in height and have either gable, low-hip, flat, or shed roofs. For the most part, building setbacks and spacings respectively vary from between 0 and roughly 30 feet and 15 and 80 feet. Non-historic exterior alterations to most contributing buildings are generally limited to porch modifications, unobtrusive or sympathetic additions, or the superimposition of modern siding materials over original siding fabric.

The Stony Creek/Thimble Islands Historic District includes one of the region's largest and most nearly intact collections of Stick style houses and summer cottages. Among the most opulent examples of this mode is the Henry Austin designed William J. Clark House at 34 Prospect Hill Road, which was individually listed on the National Register in 1972 [Stick Style House at Stony Creek]. Other architectural styles/periods represented by buildings throughout the Stony Creek/Thimble Islands Historic District include a variety of good, substantially intact examples of Colonial, Federal, Greek Revival, Italianate, Second Empire, Gothic Revival, Queen Anne,

Shingle, Arts and Crafts, and Colonial Revival. The Stony Creek/Thimble Islands Historic District's historic architectural mosaic is completed by numerous examples of late 19th through early 20th-century houses and commercial buildings with essentially utilitarian exterior features, and by numerous 19th- and early 20th-century wharves and quays which strongly contribute to the area's maritime character.

The area's most significant contributing sites are located in the extreme southeastern corner of the mainland portion of the Stony Creek/Thimble Islands Historic District. These sites retain two former quarries (one now filled with water) adjacent to the standing ruins of a 19th-century stone wharf system leading from the quarries to the shore of Long Island Sound. Other notable sites include Stony Creek Cemetery (established 1866) near the junction of Leetes Island Road and Thimble Islands Road, Stony Creek Beach and two adjacent parks along the western side of Thimble Islands Road, and a small open public park at the intersection of Sachem Road and Thimble Island Road. Sixteen vacant lots and one parking lot are located in the mainland portion of the district, and 28 vacant lots are scattered among the various Thimble Islands. The Stony Creek/Thimble Islands Historic District also includes three other significant contributing structures. These are the Lewis Fountain, a granite monument located at the fork of Indian Point Road and Thimble Islands Road, an early 20th-century steel trolley truss bridge near the northwestern edge of the district, and a late 19th-century railroad overpass with cut-stone abutments just south of the junction of School Street and Thimble Islands Road.

The landscape in the mainland portion of the Stony Creek/Thimble Islands Historic District rises gradually in an undulating manner from the shores of Long Island Sound on the south and west toward an average elevation of approximately 50 feet near the northern boundary. Thimble Islands Road forms the principal thoroughfare running between the northern and southern ends of the village of Stony Creek. The principal east/west traffic arteries in this portion of the district are School Street and Leetes Island Road, which spans the northern end of the district. Mainland side streets include: Watrous Street, School Street Extension, Bowhay Hill Road, Ridge Road, Rextile Road, West Point Road, Sachem Road, Holly Lane, Squaw Brook Road, Halls Point Road, Indian Point Road, Three Elms Road, Buena Vista Road, Linden Point Road, Wallace Road, Long Point Road, Flying Point Road, and Prospect Hill Road.

The Thimble Islands are small granite outcrops varying from less than one to approximately 12 acres in size, and rising between roughly 10 and 50 feet above mean high water. Two of these islands, Money Island and Governor Island, have "roads" consisting of little more than open grassy public right-of-ways. Money Island right-of-ways include Pequot Avenue and Montowese Avenue; Governor Island right-of-ways include Main Street and South Street.

Significance

The Stony Creek/Thimble Islands Historic District is architecturally significant because it includes one of Branford's most cohesive and substantially intact arrays of historic architecture dating from the 18th through early 20th centuries. The Stony Creek/Thimble Islands Historic District is historically significant for two reasons. First, it forms a coherent, well-preserved example of the type of summer resort communities which developed along many portions of Connecticut's coastline over the course of the latter half of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Second, the

district retains several open quarries and the standing ruins of a related stone wharf system adjacent to Long Island Sound. In conjunction with a number of nearby surviving examples of quarry workers' houses within the village of Stony Creek, these resources reflect the emergence of granite quarrying as one of most significant industrial activities along this portion of the state's shoreline during the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Architectural Significance

The Stony Creek/Thimble Islands Historic District encompasses one of coastal Branford's two largest and most significant concentrations of pre-1938 architecture. Its buildings include both individually distinct and modest examples of major historic architectural styles and/or periods, such as Colonial, Federal, Greek Revival, Italianate, Second Empire, Gothic Revival, Stick, Queen Anne, Arts and Crafts, Shingle, and Colonial Revival. The Stony Creek/Thimble Islands Historic District also includes an extensive number of essentially plain and functional commercial buildings and residential cottages which, as a group, make an important contribution to the visual character of the district through their qualities of scale, massing, and siting.

Since the district's heyday of development occurred after the advent of the railroad through the area in 1852, examples of earlier architectural styles are relatively few in number. For example, the Stony Creek/Thimble Islands Historic District's only known 18th-century buildings are the ca.1729 Richard Howd House at 72 Thimble Islands Road, the ca.1770 frame house at 7-9 Halls Point Road, the ca. 1775 Abraham Rogers House at 14 Sachem Road, the ca. 1780 James and Nancy Palmer House at 400 Leetes Island Road, and the house at 15 Squaw Brook Road. While each of these houses incorporate nonhistorical exterior alterations to some degree, all but one continue to stand as reasonably good local examples of the large two-and-one-half story, five-bay-wide central-chimney Colonial house form. The Federal style is best represented in the district by the 1832 Watrous Howd House at 40 Thimble Islands Road. With its three-bay-wide side-hall plan form and its original front-gable fanlight and front doorway flanked by attenuated pilasters, this house forms one of Branford's better surviving examples of its type.

The emergence of the Greek Revival style as a popular local building mode during the mid-19th century is evidenced by a number of district buildings. One of the most significant examples of this style is the relatively diminutive ca.1865 summer cottage erected by New Haven builder/developer Chauncy A. Dickerman on Money Island. This cottage retains a locally unusual, original full-height four-column front portico featuring a porthole window in the gable tympanum. However, a more typical example of this style is the ca.1845 house standing at 5 Thimble Islands Road. Despite the late 19th-century replacement of its original porch and window sash with the present Queen Anne-style fixtures, this house retains its basic original form and many of its more prominent original exterior details, such as a fully pedimented front gable with an inset rectangular window elaborated with geometric tracery, and a front doorway flanked by sidelights and broad Tuscan pilasters.

Most of the Stony Creek/Thimble Islands Historic District's Italianate style buildings were erected between the 1850s and the latter decades of the 19th-century and display only very modest exterior stylistic elaboration. Like the relatively plain ca.1865 frame houses at 94 Thimble Islands Road and 529 Leetes Islands Road, many of these dwellings housed local shopkeepers, oyster

fishermen, and laborers, such as those employed by the area's expanding quarrying industry of this era.

The second half of the 19th century saw the emergence of the district as a major summer resort locus. As a result, the Stony Creek/Thimble Islands Historic District today boasts a wealth of houses and small cottages designed in the popular picturesque modes of the era. Dominated by a steeply pitched, broadly overhung gable roof broken by foreshortened gable dormers, the Chandler N. Wayland Cottage on Wayland Island provides a particularly good example of the massing typically associated with large local Gothic Revival style summer residences. Somewhat more modest examples of this mode include the small summer cottage at 17 Halls Point Road, and the small house at 250 Thimble Islands Road, where notable stylistic elaboration is essentially limited to front porch detailing.

The Stony Creek/Thimble Islands Historic District embraces one of the largest and finest concentrations of late 19th-century Stick style architecture along the Connecticut shoreline. Houses built in this style include two of the finest and most nearly intact in southern Connecticut: The Henry Austin designed 1878-80 William J. Clark House at 34 Prospect Hill Road, and the ca.1875 Isaac C. Lewis Cottage at 255 Thimble Islands Road, designed by Henry Martin Jones of Meriden. Other good, representative examples of this style include the small frame house at 3-7 Flying Point Road and the Linden Point House (originally a hotel) at 30 Linden Point Road, as well as several cottages located on Money Island and Governor Island and along the northern side of Prospect Hill Road. The pervasive late 19th-century popularity and interpretive variety of the Queen Anne style is also well-represented within the district. The former Stony Creek School (ca.1890) at 28 School Street stands as a fine, substantially intact example of a relatively monumental public building featuring restrained Queen Anne style exterior detailing. The projecting bracketed cornice of the 1889 frame building located at 504 Leetes Island Road exemplifies a typical practice associated with the design of modest commercial architecture of the era: the application of "off-the-shelf" Queen Anne style details as a means of providing some stylistic relief to an otherwise unadorned and modest facade. The popularity of Queen Anne exterior motifs is also strongly reflected by many of the island cottages and modest workers' cottages erected in the district during this era.

Particularly notable examples of architectural styles represented by early 20th-century district buildings include the 1908 Martha C. Maynard House at 224 Thimble Islands Road, "Gray Rock" (1904-11) on East Stooping Bush Island, and the 1917 Joseph Howd House at 276 Thimble Islands Road. With its broad, steeply pitched gable roof topped by shed dormers, and its prominent fieldstone chimney stack, porch walls, and entry portico piers, the highly intact Maynard House ranks among Branford's finest examples of the Arts and Crafts mode. "Gray Rock" and the Howd House, both of which retain virtually all of their original exterior features, stand as exceptionally well-preserved local variants of the Shingle style.

Historical Significance

The Stony Creek/Thimble Islands Historic District as a whole is historically significant as one of a number of areas along Connecticut's coastline which emerged as notable summer resorts during the latter half of the 19th and early 20th centuries. The village of Stony Creek is also significant

for its emergence as the center of a small but profitable commercial quarrying industry which developed in this vicinity over the course of this same era.

Like most of outlying Branford, prior to the 1840s the Stony Creek/Thimble Islands Historic District essentially formed a thinly settled coastal farming district. The land encompassed by the present village of Stony Creek was punctuated by roughly a half-dozen scattered houses and their related outbuildings. The Thimble Islands remained virtually undeveloped throughout this period.

The advent of the Shore Line Railroad through the district in 1852, followed by service by regularly scheduled coastal steamers shortly thereafter, played an important role in stimulating the rapid development of the district as a popular and readily accessible summer resort. The area proved not only particularly popular among the wealthy; it was also highly favored by members of the expanding industrial-spawned middle and upper-middle classes, who increasingly sought to utilize a growing amount of leisure summer time to escape the heat and congestion of larger nearby urban communities such as New Haven, Meriden, Wallingford, and Waterbury. By the end of the 1860s, several hotels and shops, as well as numerous seasonal houses and cottages had been erected along the district's principal thoroughfare, Thimble Islands Road, as well as on some of the larger offshore islands. As the Stony Creek/Thimble Islands Historic District's popularity as a regional summer colony continued to increase, available waterfront building sites in the mainland portion of the district grew increasingly scarce. In response to the increase in demand for such sites, by the early 1880s present village streets adjacent to the waterfront, such as Flying Point, Prospect Hill, Long Point, and Linden Point Roads, had been opened up and developed. The early twentieth century brought the establishment of a trolley link between the district and New Haven. In combination with the gradual growth in the use of personal automobiles, the trolley provided the initial stimulus for the winterization of many heretofore seasonal houses in Stony Creek and laid the groundwork for a gradual increase in the number of year-round residents who commuted to and from New Haven each workday. Stony Creek's infancy as a significant local center for commercial granite quarrying appears to date from around the late 1840s, when a hole was opened near the waterfront in the vicinity of West Point Road. While this quarry does not appear to have been worked after the 1850s, by the 1880s excavation of several other sites in the area had been initiated, as the industry entered a boom period fostered by numerous building projects in cities such as Boston, New York, and Chicago. (Stony Creek granite was used extensively in many of the major buildings designed by architect H.H. Richardson and built by master builder Orlando Whitney Norcross around the end of the 19th century.) One of these latter holes, which was located on Rogers Island, has been rendered unrecognizable as a result of early 20th century regrading. Several of the commercial quarries opened during this era which accounted for a sizable proportion of Stony Creek's resident quarrymen were located on nearby Hoadly's Neck are of adjacent Guilford. Today, the only readily accessible commercial excavation site immediately adjacent to the village of Stony Creek is located slightly west of Prospect Hill. This site consists of two excavations which were originally accessed directly from Long Island Sound by a stone wharf system, portions of which remain intact. Today, the only commercial quarry in the area still functioning is one worked in the late 19th century by the Norcross Brothers at the northern end of Quarry Road roughly a mile northeast of the district.

Endnote

See James F. O'Gorman, O.W. Norcross, Richardson's "Master Builder"; A Preliminary Report. (Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, May 1973, Volume XXXII, Number 2: pp. 104-113.)

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