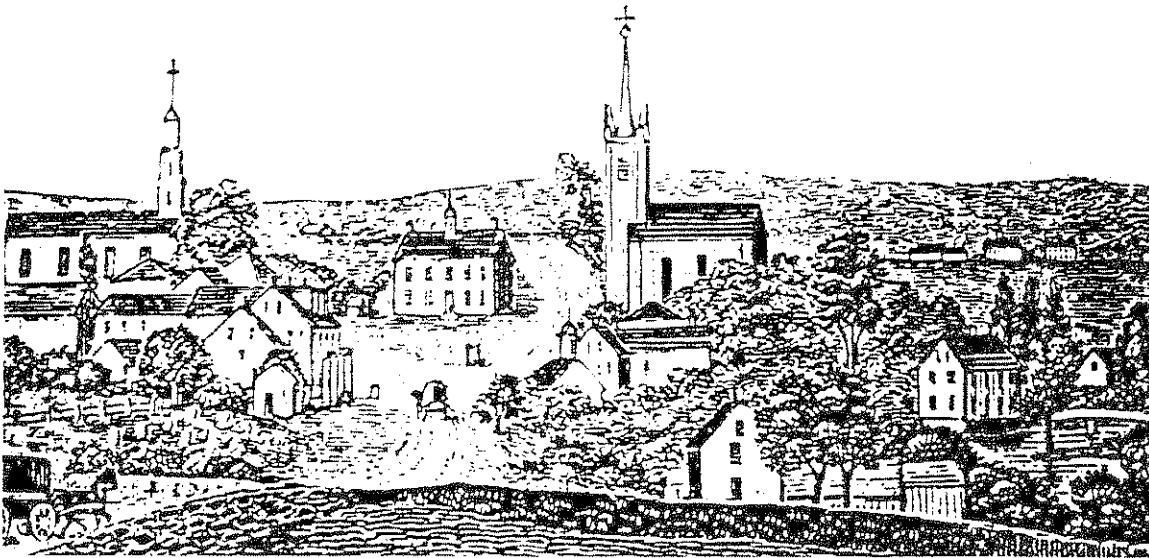


The Uxbridge Town Common

Uxbridge, Massachusetts

Landscape History and Assessment Report



1839 View of Uxbridge Common
From Barber's Historical Collections

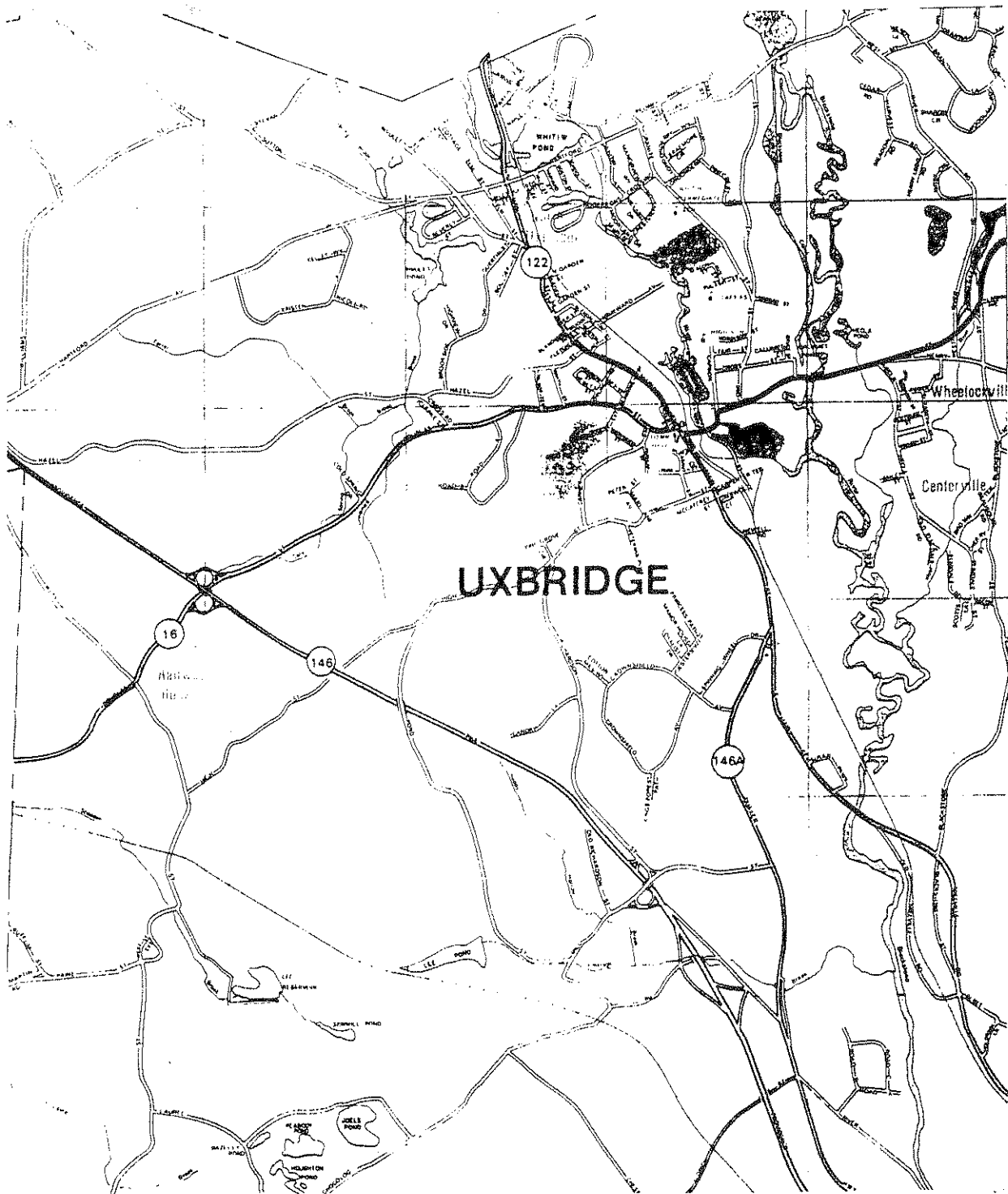
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Uxbridge Town Common Landscape History and Assessment Report

1. Introduction.....	2
2. General History of the New England Town Common.....	5
3. The Chronological History of Uxbridge Common.....	13
4. Summary of Issues.....	26
5. Upgrading the Common: Process, Treatment and Recommendations.....	28
6. Bibliography.....	42

Introduction

The town of Uxbridge, Massachusetts lies within the Blackstone River Heritage Corridor. It is located just north of the Rhode Island state line, midway between Providence and Worcester. Like so many of the smaller towns in central New England, Uxbridge began as an agricultural community. During the nineteenth century, its strategic location and easy access to water enabled the town to develop into a busy and lucrative industrial center. Despite the closing of the big mills in the early twentieth century, the town continues to grow with over 10,000 inhabitants. Many residents commute to larger cities nearby. Downtown Uxbridge retains much of its original layout. The downtown is intersected by two heavily traveled roads, Route 122, also known as Main Street, which connects Worcester to Providence, and Route 16, or Douglas Street, which connects the western towns of Southbridge and Webster via Uxbridge to the eastern town of Milford. The Worcester Railroad runs north/south through town, bisecting the mill district from the downtown center.

Uxbridge has a rich cultural and social history resulting in a fascinating overlay of historic architectural styles. Remnants from the last three centuries can be found scattered throughout town. The Massachusetts Historical Commission has designated six National Historic Districts in Uxbridge: the Common District, the Central Mill District, Wheelockville Village, the Waucantuck Mill Complex, Rivulet Village and Rogerson's Village.

The Uxbridge Common, the core of the Common District, is the subject of this report. Less than half an acre in size, surrounded by a unique blend of domestic, commercial, and institutional buildings, primarily of the nineteenth century, the Common is located near the center of town. Although cut off from easy pedestrian access on the south by Douglas and on the east by North Main Street, the Common is often used for town events and gatherings. The green is dotted with a variety of trees, an assortment of monuments, and a few park-like amenities such as benches and trash receptacles. Its benign presence belies its interesting link with the history of Uxbridge.

The Common acts as a front yard and spatial organizer for the buildings that surround it, most notably the two magnificent Congregational Churches, the Thayer Memorial (the Uxbridge Library), and the Uxbridge Academy. In a truly symbiotic relationship, these buildings along with their neighbors create a streetscape that anchors the Common in its historic context.

It is ironic that the most damaging development to the Common District since its recognition by the Massachusetts Historical Commission as a National Register District has happened while this report was in production. In the fall of 1994, the wooden buildings collectively known as the Mowry Block, located on the southwest corner of the Common, were demolished. The removal of these buildings (the oldest commercial structures in Uxbridge) has left a huge hole in the nineteenth century streetscape of Court Street and has stripped the Commons of a strong visual screen from the twentieth century sprawl down Douglas Street. New construction is proposed but it will sit off the

Common with a parking lot in between. The historic rhythm of the street has been broken.

There is a strong constituency in Uxbridge for the preservation of the Common as well as a constituency for free enterprise and development. The two groups need not be mutually exclusive. If the Common District is preserved, an important piece of the town's heritage will be saved. Properly highlighted, the Common District can become a magnet for attracting visitors and a variety of shops and restaurants which will contribute to the long term economy of downtown Uxbridge.

A General History of the New England Common

Following is a summary account of the evolution of the typical New England town common. The intent of this brief history is to put the Uxbridge Common into the larger context of New England town development.

The town common or village green as we know it has become a symbol of peace and stability to many New Englanders. Contrary to what most of us believe, however, these quiet green squares were not initially places of beauty, nor were they conceived of as "parks." Their beginnings were utilitarian, unmanicured, and humble. Typical colonial towns were divided into lots with one earmarked for the construction of a meeting house. Although eighteenth century New England settlements followed a general pattern of dispersed farmsteads, the meeting house and its lot often became the cultural node for its community. Once the meeting house was constructed, it was often joined by a parsonage, with a tavern, blacksmith and several farm houses nearby. The meeting house provided a center for social, political, and religious activities.

Clearing the common lot for the construction of the meeting house, cutting of trees for firewood and removal of stones for building were early activities that occurred on the common lot. Individual families quickly established trails, cart paths and roads to the meeting house that often criss-crossed the common lot as was convenient. During colonial times improvements to the common lot were minimal. The common lot was used for many community purposes: as a paddock for farmers to drop off their livestock for the town herdsman, as a pound for renegade livestock, as a graveyard, or military

practice field. Early descriptions typically depict the common as nothing more than a mudpit filled with stumps, strewn with garbage and slops. It was perceived and used for utilitarian purposes only.

The meeting house was the place of worship for most communities during their early development. The common lot was often used by those attending services as a place to park their horses and wagons. As attendance at two services was required on the Sabbath, parts of the common were used for informal picnicking and gathering. Some communities built warming houses on their commons for the comfort of families that lived too far from the meeting house to easily commute home and back for the second service. As communities expanded linearly across the landscape, new meeting houses and common lots were established. The earliest meeting houses often evolved into the Congregational Church which maintained a strong hold on many towns throughout the eighteenth century. Many Massachusetts residents paid taxes to the Congregational church up until 1830.

The 18th century common slowly shifted away from both agricultural and ecclesiastical affairs and became a place for public gatherings. Public debates and elections were commonly held on the common. "Pest houses" for gathering the sick during infestations, "powder houses" for storing ammunition, "hearse houses" and hay scales were set up in the commons. As the stronghold of the Congregational Church dissolved and commercial village centers were developed, many towns began to view their common more as a public space.

Travel in New England was a crude and often dangerous affair in the 17th and 18th centuries. As travel increased in New England, so did the accompanying amenities. Taverns already catering to the "nooning activities" on the Sabbath and established as popular alternative meeting places for court sessions once held in drafty meeting houses, began to serve travelers as well. Strangers eager to locate food and lodging for the night had only to search the horizon for a church spire to safely guess at the next inn location. New inns and commercial establishments such as the blacksmith and wheelwright soon joined the ubiquitous "taverns on the green." As town commons were often located near the point of intersection for all main roads converging at the meeting house, the area around the common slowly changed into a commercial district. By 1830 general stores, newspaper offices, attorneys offices and banks became common occurrences around the green. It was during the federal period of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century that the village center as we know it actually evolved.

The total disappearance of the common lot occurred most readily in port towns as they were early on subjected to many development pressures by expanding commerce and transportation needs. Businesses generated by the port often usurped corners and edges of the common without anyone really noticing or caring. With the development of a national army and navy after 1812, many towns no longer felt they needed to hold large commons intact for military drills and practice. Some businesses paid rent to the town for the use of its common lot, others bought parts of the property outright.

During the first half of the nineteenth century a major movement was afoot to reform agricultural practices in this country. Early demonstrations by the reformers

occurred on village greens but as these events became more popular and more space was required, towns began to develop official fair grounds outside of the center of town. The new fair grounds provided seating and other facilities for the growing public. Large scale events such as county fairs, Independence Day celebrations, and fireworks often shifted away from the center of town and the common. As the demand for school buildings, firehouses and other civic institutions grew, many commons without a strong constituency were simply developed by the towns that owned them. The new towns built by the industrialists of the 1840's were often designed without a common or village green at all.

Our nation experienced radical changes during the first half of the nineteenth century. Canals were built, roads improved and the railroad system began connecting small isolated towns to the big cities on the coast. The nation bulged westward and the population was in a state of flux. Huge migrations to the cities and mill towns occurred during this time. Farmers left their farms for economic reasons and wealthy city dwellers moved their families to the farms for reasons of health. Commuting was made possible by the railroad and suburbs began cropping up in areas once considered borderlands.

As mentioned earlier, prior to 1840, the town common was often described as a rather dreadful place, full of rubbish and over run by droves of sheep and hogs. The town common was a landscape full of mud and rank vegetation, with uneven and barren terrain. As towns and villages became viable centers for commerce, the villagers who looked out to the commons everyday began to promote their beautification. Armed with

newly awakened patriotism, improvement societies and associations became a national obsession. Agricultural societies, horticultural societies and beautification societies were established throughout New England. The changing aesthetic sensibilities of the village elite egged on improvements for town commons in the form of tree plantings, fencing, or curbing. Farmers and townspeople who lived out-of-town, away from the green, often viewed these improvements as unnecessary extravagances. As a result, private benefactors were often found to help finance improvement projects. Towns with large residential communities still surrounding the commons were often the first to beautify their greens.

Planting shade trees in town commons was popular during the nineteenth century. Ancient trees protected and preserved as “living witnesses” to historic events and the planting of marker trees commemorating specific events had been popular in New England since the 1700’s, but planting trees just for beauty was a novel concept. Large native species such as the elm, oak or maple were the most popular varieties planted. During the 1870’s over 200 village improvement societies were active in New England. The Laurel Hill Association of Stockbridge, Massachusetts and the Ornamental Tree Association of Amherst successfully improved their village centers and inspired smaller towns to modestly attempt the same. The attempt to establish and maintain a green velvet carpet on the town common was encouraged and promoted by the village elite of many New England towns.

After the Civil War, many towns voted to erect a memorial to their soldiers and often located these monuments in the place of their recruiting, the town common or

village green. Annual Independence Day celebrations linked minutemen with the Grand Army of the Republic and veterans insisted that the monuments and their surrounds be well maintained, resulting in a new constituency promoting the welfare of the town green. The mid-nineteenth century was an age of great wealth for the industrial magnates, and many, either for reasons of nostalgia or personal pride, donated improvements to their home towns in the form of libraries or town halls. These gifts were often erected on or adjacent to the town green. Grant's planting of an elm on the Lexington Green in 1875 encouraged many towns to do the same and the planting of Centennial Elms on the common became a popular improvement by committees involved with the 1876 Centennial. Many of these elms were eventually infested by leopard moth and elm-leaf beetles between 1870 and 1920.

Many of the village greens that had survived up to this time had been embellished with fencing, curbing, bandstands, benches and walkways, but remained primarily passive gathering places. By the late nineteenth century, telephone and electricity poles had been erected in many communities, often crisscrossing the town commons in a complex network. The trolley car companies expanding throughout New England, touted the beauty of the village greens in their brochures while, ironically, contributing heavily to their destruction by eating away at their corners, their catenary of wire resulting in the gross hacking of once picturesque tree limbs.

With the twentieth century came the nagging presence of the automobile. Traffic engineers, in the name of safety and speed, continued to cut away at the ends of what remained of the village green. Busy roads attracted more and more businesses. The

busiest roads were designated state highways often resulting in more cars and trucks passing through towns at even higher speeds. Many towns of the late nineteenth century became victims of twentieth century progress. By 1920 many commons had become too noisy for quiet sitting and strolling. In fact, many commons had become totally inaccessible to the pedestrian. The areas surrounding the village green, having evolved into commercial districts, often left the commons without a constituency. Signs and advertisements began to clutter up village centers and nobody objected. Only in small towns, especially out-of-the-way towns bypassed by large scale economic change, has the late nineteenth century common remained intact.

The hurricane of 1938 devastated many New England towns. Village greens were stripped of branches and leaves. Veteran groups and improvement societies rallied to replant the greens, but the loss of permanent residents contributed to short lived and less successful ventures than the improvement programs of the nineteenth century. In busy towns with high traffic volumes, churches and libraries once located on the green began to relocate to quieter and more easily accessible surroundings. The popularity of active recreation after the 1950's helped to further erode some town greens. If the common was large enough, basketball courts, playing fields and parking lots were installed. If the green was too small to support organized sports or ruled unsafe due to the surrounding traffic, larger parks were built on the outskirts of town. When new community centers were constructed, the common often reverted to an invisible space, forgotten by the public that no longer used it.

The bicentennial celebrations of the 1970's caused some communities to re-evaluate their village greens and their link to the symbolic well being of the community.

The availability of federal funds allowed many towns to improve their commons and to reconstruct their bandstands, fencing and paving. Tree planting programs were enacted. The passage of the National Historic Preservation Act in 1966 has allowed many communities to set up historic districts around their commons and protect them from further erosion. As these greens are improved and thrust back into the public limelight, activities such as flea markets, town fairs, church suppers, caroling, band concerts and craft shows are once again occurring. Communities with viable public greens have once again begun to place a high value on their contribution to the quality of life in their town. No two village greens began the same or evolved in quite the same pattern, but they almost all symbolize the historic cultural center of the community from which they sprang, and are important indicators of a community's self esteem.

The Chronological History of Uxbridge Common

The specific history of the Uxbridge Town Common parallels much of the general history given in the preceding chapter. The Uxbridge Town Common was donated for community use by Ebenezer Read in 1728 one year after the incorporation of the town itself. The Meeting House was constructed shortly thereafter within the fencing of Ebenezer's donated pasture on what is now referred to as the east side of the common. The First Church of Christ, established in 1730 met in the Meeting House. In 1731, Reverend Nathan Webb built a parsonage (later known as Dr. Samuel Willard's house) on the west side of the Common and in 1768 the Simon Wheelock House was built on the northeast boundary of the Common. Eighteenth century developments around the area immediately surrounding the Common consisted mostly of private homes, although there is casual mention in old records of a blacksmith shop near the northern border. The First Congregational Society formally incorporated in 1797.

Signs of prosperity and expansion were evident in Uxbridge early in the nineteenth century, especially around the Common. The Uxbridge Academy was constructed on the north end of the Common in 1819 and was officially opened as a boys' school the following year. The Masons who had contributed financially to the construction of the brick building also began using the building for meetings. In 1820 Robert Taft built the first grand style house on the Common at what is now 17 Court

Street. The following year Deacon William Capron built another federal style home across the Common at 21 North Main Street. The Richard Mowry Block, located on the southwest boundary of the Common, was also built around this time (1830-39). The original complex consisted of a mix of federal style buildings used for commercial purposes. The buildings were later altered with Victorian details.

In 1831 a schism in the church led to the forming of two new religious orders and subsequently two new churches. The First Evangelical Congregational Society built and dedicated their new church on the west side of the common in 1833. It is a fine example of Greek Revival architecture. The First Congregational Society built their church in 1835 on the east side of the common in the popular Gothic Revival style. Town meetings continued to be held in the basement of this church until 1879 when the current town hall was constructed. As Uxbridge continued to grow and expand so did the roads on the south and east ends of the Common, and in 1833 an inn, the Wacuntuck House, was constructed at the intersection of Douglas and Main Streets. In 1855-65 the Robert Taft house was much improved upon and a new stable was built.

Transportation and communication improvements continued to link Uxbridge with the outside world. By the mid nineteenth century Uxbridge had developed into a thriving industrial community. In 1847 the railroad connecting Worcester and Providence opened for business. Its success contributed to the closing of the Blackstone Canal a year later. In 1852 telegraph poles and wires begin to dot the landscape.

The Uxbridge Commons remained an important public space for the town during this period as the property around it slowly changed from residential to institutional. In

1872 the District Court began meeting in the lower hall of the Uxbridge Academy.

During the 1880's street lights, telegraph and telephone poles, and sidewalks marched up North Main Street along the eastern edge of the Common. Water pipes were laid along North Main Street in 1882. Improvement societies and associations continued to take proprietary measures toward the Common. Elms were planted along North Main Street and the Commons in 1844 by an improvement society headed by Mrs. Ebenezer Hayward. In 1881 maple trees were planted by abutters of the railroad across from the Commons. The Commons received a new flag staff in 1888, a gift from the G.A.R. Four years later the Women's Christian Temperance Union dedicated a drinking fountain on the southern end of the village green.

A major development on the southern perimeter of the Common in 1882 was the construction and opening of the Hotel Wilson. Dr. Levi P. Wilson had purchased the Wacuntuck House in 1881 and moved it to the southern end of the property. In its place he built a grand hotel unrivaled by any previously seen in Uxbridge. When it opened to the public over 500 curious and gawking visitors came to inspect the new Victorian Gothic wonder. In 1883 the hotel changed hands and changed its name to Hotel Windsor.

Limited by size even in the nineteenth century, the Commons was used mostly for passive recreation by the townspeople. Croquet and band concerts were popular events. In 1897 the bicycle craze hit Uxbridge along with complaints of drunken driving on the sidewalks.

In spite of soaring unemployment during 1893, by 1894 the Uxbridge Free Public Library was constructed on a tract of land sold to the town by the Capron Family. In

1895 the railroad built a bridge across Mendon Street south of the Common causing many to complain about its adverse effects on the John Capron House.

The Soldiers Monument was dedicated in 1898. Photos of this event show hundreds of townsmen participating in the dedication ceremonies under the majestic canopy of elms. Subtle changes continued around the periphery of the Common. In 1900 George Z. Taft sold off some of his land to the Uxbridge and Northbridge Electric Company. That same year the first automobile arrived in town. In 1901 the tracks for the electric railroad were completed on Main Street, connecting Milford and Uxbridge. By 1910 traffic had increased enough in town to justify the hiring of a highway superintendent with a backup crew.

In 1909 the Windsor Hotel was bought and reopened as The Uxbridge Inn. The Simon Wheelock House north of the common was bought the following year by Mr. and Mrs. William Hayworth and presented to the Deborah Wheelock Chapter of the D.A.R. The Town of Uxbridge planted over 560 trees throughout town in 1913 as part of a statewide competition. During this same year the elms on the green were noticeably infested and the town purchased a spraying apparatus for treatments. Starlings appeared in Uxbridge for the first time in 1913.

In 1914 the Blackstone National Bank and the Uxbridge Savings Bank built a small colonial revival brick building next to the library. This building underwent several alterations and additions in subsequent years. In 1914 the Common was graded and curbed, establishing the boundaries which exist today, a granolithic sidewalk was installed on the east side of the Common along North Main Street, the W.C.T.U. replaced

the drinking fountain at the south end, and the bandstand was demolished. The Worcester Suburban Electric Company lit the first Christmas tree on the Common in 1915, beginning a tradition still intact today. The illumination was accompanied by a musical and speaking program along with a Santa Claus who distributed popcorn and candy to the children.

Records show the Common being used for many public gatherings in the early 20th century, up to and immediately following the First World War. Patriotic committees and beautification organizations sprang up all over town. The Conservation Committee used the Common in 1917 for canning and food exhibits, public meetings, and a market. The town erected a new steel flag pole on the green in this same year and registration for military services began. In 1918 the Common played a major role in the town's celebration of the Armistice. People lined the streets and filled the Common to hear speeches and watch a parade of floats and automobiles, followed by fireworks.

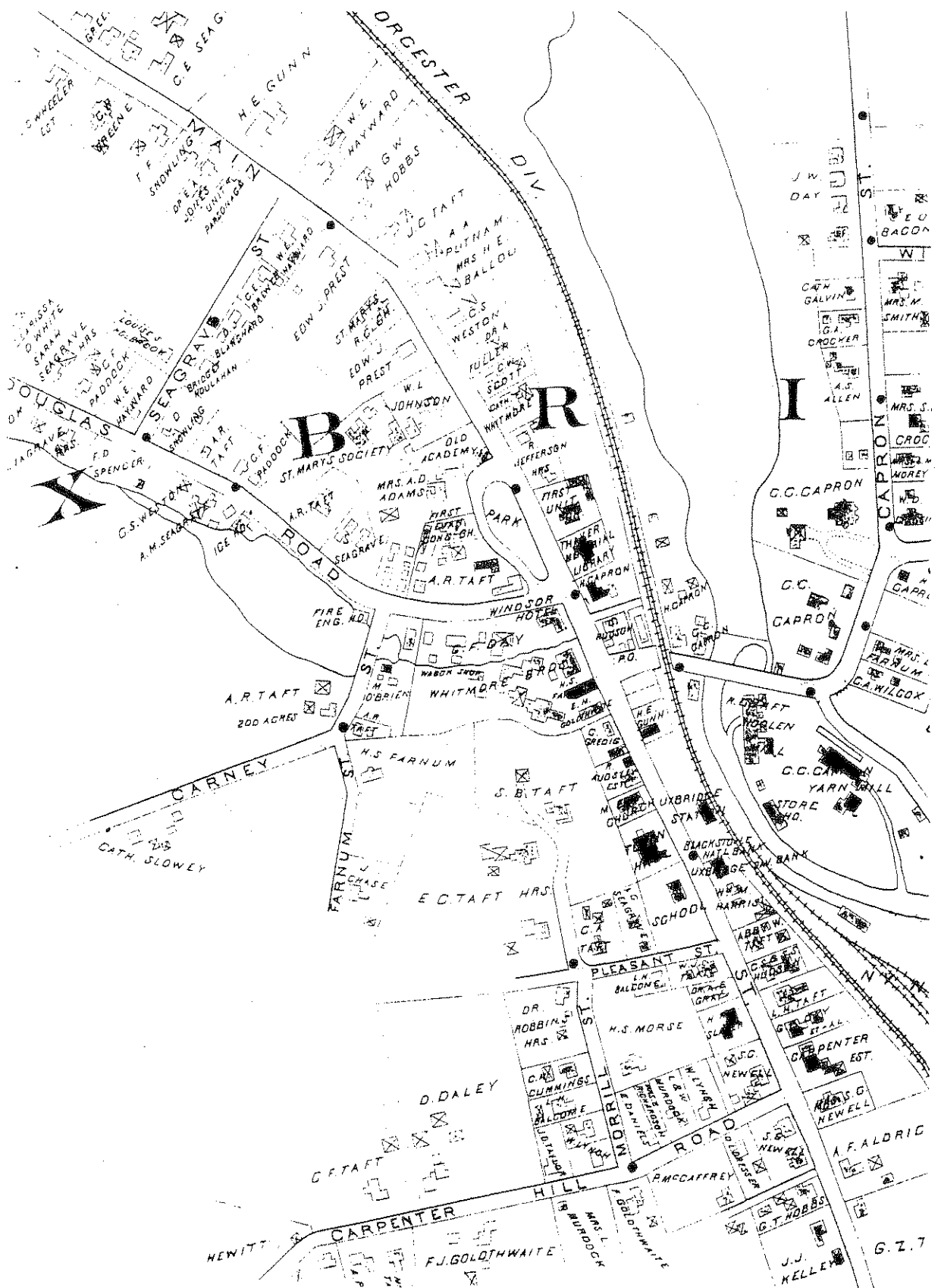
The dedication of the World War Monument followed two years later in 1921. This white marble neo-classical monument was erected on the north end of the common by the Uxbridge Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Committee. It was specifically sited in the shade of the elm trees which although still standing were on the decline. The dedication of this monument drew several thousand people to the Commons. A crippling ice storm knocked down many trees and utility poles later that year. The elms in the center of town bore the brunt of the storm, many breaking to pieces. Norway maples and birches throughout town were also damaged beyond repair.

In 1922 the First Evangelical Congregational Church bought the Arthur Taft House stable and converted it into a new parish hall. The remodeled building housed an assortment of recreational features including a bowling alley and an auditorium. In 1923 the town purchased its first tractor and a snow plow. In 1924 the town selectmen designated official parking zones throughout town, and in 1925 a new bus line opened for business running from Providence through Uxbridge to Worcester. The population of Uxbridge had reached 6,172 in 1925. By 1927, the 200th anniversary of the town's founding, the Common was still largely intact, surrounded by four major civic structures (The First Congregational Church, The First Evangelical Congregational Church, the Uxbridge Academy and the Free Public Library), three commercial enterprises (The Uxbridge Inn, the Mowry Block, and the Bank) and several prominent homes. The roads in the southern and eastern boundaries continue to be heavily used.

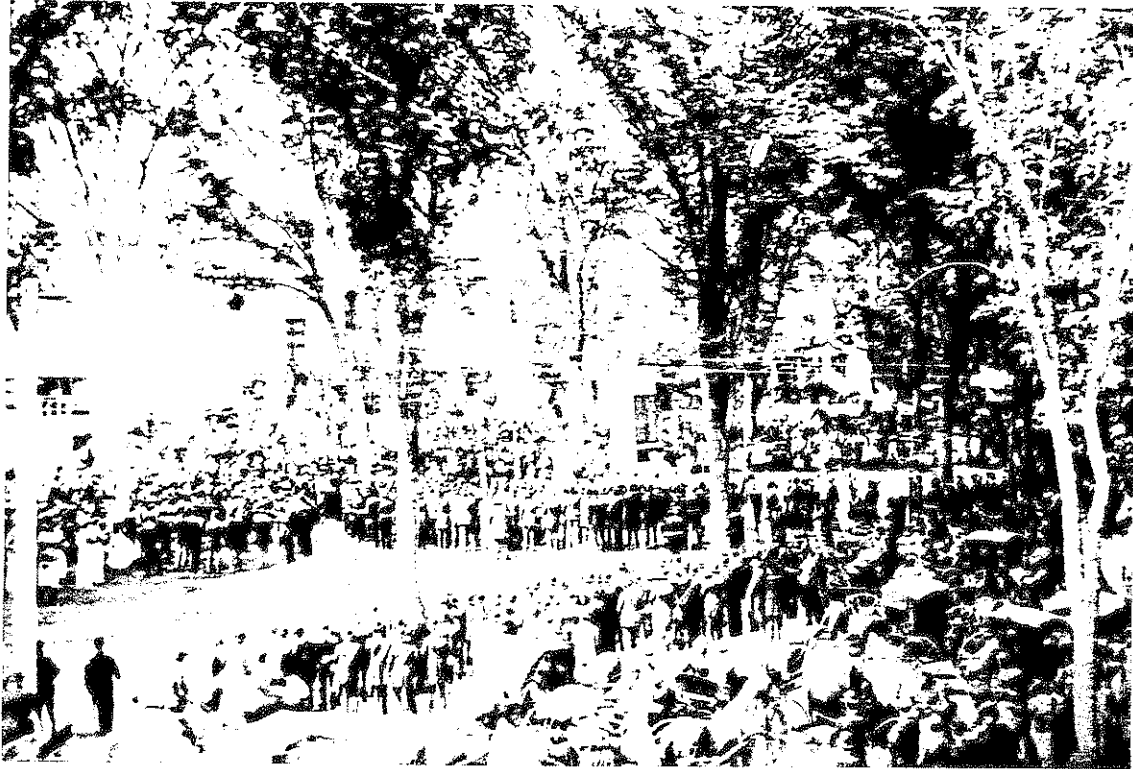
In 1937 the bank building across from the Commons was enlarged. In 1941 the Lodge Solomon's Temple A.F. and A.M. bought the Academy building at the north end of the green and District Court was moved to town hall. In 1940 the New England Telephone Company bought the Dr. Willard House and property on Court Street. This dwelling was demolished in 1960 and shortly thereafter a one story white brick building was constructed. This structure has been pointed out in previous studies and reports as being out of scale and context with the other buildings in the district.

Records of change occurring on the Common after the bicentennial are scant. Various trees and a sprinkling of shrubs have been planted without apparent rhyme or reason. Garden clubs and beautification groups have attempted to improve the Common

with new benches, trash cans and plantings of annuals, but issues of maintenance, safety and access keep resurfacing as obstacles to any permanent improvements. The commemorative booklet published at the 250th anniversary of the town's founding in 1977 highlighted the Common by reprinting historic photos. Anniversary celebrations were organized on the Common, including the burial of a time capsule north of the flag pole. In recent years the most noticeable changes to the Common have been the addition of the Korean and Vietnamese War Memorial dedicated in 1993 and the return of the refurbished cannon. In 1994 the Unibank for Saving purchased the Richard D. Mowry property. The building, the oldest commercial building in Uxbridge Center was demolished and new construction began in early 1995 for a doughnut shop and parking lot. The large fir tree located at the south end of the common was also removed.



1896 Map of Uxbridge
Source: Uxbridge Library Archives



Uxbridge Commons
Dedication of Soldiers Monument
September 14, 1898



Looking west across the Common, toward the
Unitarian Church, circa 1904
Source: Kodak Book, Augustus Story
Uxbridge Library Archives



Postcard View Across the Common
Looking East toward Library, circa 1900's
Source: Uxbridge Library Archive



View of town Common in 1908.

Source: Old Homeweeek Souvenir of Uxbridge
Uxbridge Library Archives



Uxbridge Common, 1995
Douglas Street, Looking North

Summary of Issues

During June and October of 1994, Ad-hoc Common Improvement Meetings were held at Town Hall. Many issues or concerns about the Common were brought up for discussion. Other suggestions and/or complaints have been submitted by letter to the Board of Selectmen Office. Following is a compiled list of comments thus far recorded. Most of these issues are addressed in the following section, Upgrading the Common.

General Comments:

- Common looks too busy, no longer looks like old photos
- Needs Maintenance
- Large-scale overhaul needed
- Common should cater to the living not the dead
- Not enough places to sit down, more benches needed
- Lack of benches makes it uninviting
- Bandstand should be rebuilt
- Dogs on the Common are a problem
- Use of the Common should be encouraged
- Benches should have paving under them
- Access to electricity desired by users of the Common
- Public address system desired
- walkways should connect all the monuments
- crosswalks should be added linking North Main Street to the Common
- Picnic tables should be added
- Granite stage should be added

Landscape Issues:

- Too many trees
- Evergreens endangering overhead wires
- Trees too big, making Common too shady
- Native trees should be used to replace old ones
- Trees need pruning
- Women's Club wants to continue planting flowers
- Women's Club needs access to hose bib and a place for storing hoses

Comments concerning War Memorials:

Too many

Not enough; would like to see a W.W.II Monument added to the site

Cannon should be moved to open view to the Vietnam Memorial

W.W. I Monument in need of repair

Civil War Monument missing its cannons, in need of repair

W.C.T.U. Fountain needs repair, repointing and cleaning

Sub-committee should be formed to oversee monuments in town

Grant possibilities should be looked into for defraying the cost of repairs

Special Note:

Many expressed their concern about the War Monuments, some stating there were too many on the site, some stating that more should be added. General consensus is that the existing monuments need to be better maintained and repaired. Ray Houle has contacted the Save our Sculpture Commission and information is presently being sought out about grant possibilities. The Common was never intended to function solely as a repository for public sculpture or War Monuments. By adding more to the existing a certain devaluation could occur to those already on the site. Forming a sub-committee to oversee all the monuments in town is a wonderful idea. This group could not only work on tracking repairs and fund raising, but could function as a site committee as well. There may be other sites more appropriate than the Common for additional memorials.

Upgrading the Commons: Process, Treatment and Recommendations

As the preceding chapters have shown, the Uxbridge Common is not just a passive park, but an important landmark for the town of Uxbridge. The long list of events occurring on the Common last year alone attest to its viability in spite of the complaints and issues brought up during recent meetings at Town Hall. The south end of the Common is strewn with signs, poles, and inappropriately placed plantings. The views into the green are obstructed by foliage during the summer and appear haphazard during the winter. It is time for the town to take a cold look at the realities of development and treatments appropriate for the Common and to formally adopt a statement of purpose which will set up goals and guidelines. If the historical significance of the site is to be preserved, then restoration/preservation actions need to be defined and strictly enacted. A Landscape Master Plan which will address design options, implementation and maintenance issues needs to be completed.

Planning Treatments

The federal government has worked hard to define landscape preservation treatments that are realistic and provide guidelines for management. Unfortunately there are no finite answers, as each landscape has its own set of complex site factors and cultural influences which make it unique. Most town commons evolved over a long period of time, beginning first as a shared utilitarian space and later as a public space for gathering. Respecting and preserving the inherent historical features on each site is of

utmost importance, but allowing for the flexibility of present and future uses must also be considered. Combining rehabilitation and restoration treatments is probably the ideal way to view future improvements to the Uxbridge Common. All changes should be compatible with the preservation of the four identifying landscape components of the New England town common: an over riding simplicity, a good stand of trees, use of traditional materials (cast iron, brick, wood, and granite) and grass.

Because context is so important to the viability and understanding of the typical town common, a strong commitment to stabilizing and preserving the fabric of the surrounding neighborhood is often the first step in its restoration. The protective embrace of houses and civic structures surrounding the Uxbridge Common have kept it central to historic downtown.. By allowing the demolition the Mowry Block at the south end of the Common the context for the site has begun to unravel. Replacing historic buildings and adding incompatible features such as parking lots adjacent to the perimeter is anathema to the preservation movement and the perceived value of the Common. If the town formally adopted the Common District and created a District Commission it could create a methodology for reviewing all projects within the defined boundaries of the district before they happened. If the District Commission deemed the proposed changes visually detrimental to the district as a whole, then they would have the legal authority to deny owners the right to make such alterations regardless of whether or not federal funds are involved.

Assessing and stabilizing the historic landscape features on the Common should be initiated as soon as possible. Many people, including members of various veteran associations and the historical society, have expressed their concern about the deterioration of the Civil War and World War Monuments and the Women's Christian Temperance Fountain. Ray Houle has contacted the Save our Sculpture Commission and is presently seeking out grant possibilities to defray the expense of rehabilitating these features. The suggestion of forming a sub-committee to oversee all monuments in town is a great idea and should be explored further. The trees are a crucial landscape feature of the Common. Their health and vigor should be assessed early in the planning stages of the Master Plan in order to determine their long term contribution to the green. A professional arborist should be consulted. Trees past prime or on the brink of costly maintenance should be identified. Nothing should be removed from the Common before a professional consensus is made.

The Landscape Master Plan should be developed to organize all proposed improvements for the Common. It should be examined carefully while in the planning process and once completed should be formally adopted by the town with an implementation schedule. Before the plan is initiated maintenance issues must be discussed and resolved. The town must make a budgetary commitment toward maintaining the Common on a regular schedule. Encouraging and developing new constituencies for the Common could ease the burden of some maintenance issues and give the town a vehicle for raising funds. The more public involvement the town can

generate the better off the Common will fare as a strong sense of “proprietorship” will help keep attention focused on the green. Trash will get picked up faster and problems spotted and reported before they get out of hand. Public participation in the Master Plan should be encouraged.

Planning Recommendations

1. Organizing Space and Creating a Focus

The Uxbridge Common is not a blank slate. If the history of the site is to be respected, then improvements and changes must work around the existing features. The most prominent features on the Common are the Temperance Fountain, the flag pole, the Civil War Monument, the Cannon, the World War Memorial and the Korean Vietnamese Memorial. With the exception of the latter, all are strung in a line down the center of the green. No hierarchy is established and the line-up of features seems cramped. The edges of the Common bleed out to the street. The arrangement of the trees is informal and without order. Views into the Common, especially from the south, are cluttered.

It may be possible to create a more focused hierarchy of elements within the Common by strengthening the planting around the edges of the Common, clearing out

some of the interior planting, and rearranging the location of some of the monuments.

Working closely with the veterans groups and other constituencies who have participated in setting up and maintaining these monuments, the Town needs to examine the possibilities of relocating some of the memorials. The Korean and Vietnamese Memorial does not at present have a setting that does it justice. It sits off to the side of the Common, with its back to Court Street. It is sited in a location where it has to compete visually with both the Cannon and the World War Memorial. Two alternative locations for this monument exist, owners permitting. Across Court Street, in front of the telephone building, would be an excellent site for the memorial, especially if accompanied by appropriate plantings. Located in close proximity to the other memorials, it would retain its connection to the Common and the civic downtown core. It would remain in full view during public gatherings and services that take place on Independence, Veterans and Memorial Days while also serving the admirable task of screening one of the more incongruous buildings in the Common District. Another possible location for the monument would be the corner of North Main and Mendon Road at the former Mobil Gas Station site. A new convenience store is already in the works for this lot. If the town acts quickly, it could try to negotiate an arrangement with the new owners before final plans are drawn. This is an extremely busy and highly visible corner. It would be a real coup for both the town and the veterans association to have the corner of this site preserved as a small green with the monument. The new memorial location would help to visually link Town Hall and the Common. Creating a

green on this corner would help restore some of the unique "small town" character of Uxbridge that is fast disappearing.

The newly restored cannon is a feature of interest and fun for all, but its present location looks like a hit and run decision. In the quest for more breathing space upon the Common, why not consider moving it across the street between the Capron building and the library. It would be more readily seen and accessible if it was located on this side of the street. It could be used as an entrance marker for the library or for a new pathway linking North Main Street to the town municipal parking lot below. Moving the cannon across the street will not diminish its importance in any way. If anything it will give it better visibility.

The relocation of the Korean and Vietnamese Memorial and the cannon allows the remaining features, the fountain, the flag pole, the civil War Monument and the World War Monument, to sit on the centerline of the Common with a little more grace and elbow room. All these features were in place on the Common by 1927, the year of the Uxbridge Bicentennial. All these features are products of the beautification movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Old photos from this period of time show these features sitting cleanly on a carpet of grass, shaded by tall elms planted in rows along the perimeter of the Common.

2. Circulation

The Common has enjoyed the amenity of a sidewalk on its eastern border, running along North Main Street since 1914, the same year the entire boundary of the

Common was curbed with granite. Paved pathways through the Common are non-existent and perhaps should remain so. The Common is not a heavily traveled site, nor will it ever be as long as the roads cutting it off from the rest of town continue to be such highly trafficked thoroughfares. Few people use the Common as a shortcut to anywhere. The green is not heavily visited on a daily basis, although it is a magnet for gatherings on special event days. The existing grass is probably adequate flooring for the sporadic events that take place on the Common throughout the year. It is a common pitfall for towns to want to over-urbanize their village greens. Keeping the Uxbridge Common "green" would not only preserve its integrity but would offer high visual contrast when compared to the density of development and pavement just a few blocks south.

The existing sidewalk along North Main Street functions as both a safe landing point for those exiting from their cars and as a promenade. Historically the material has always been either concrete or granolith (a combination of concrete and crushed granite). To change it to another material is not necessary unless or until the present sidewalk begins to deteriorate. At that point rather than adding paving to the interior of the site, it would seem more appropriate to redo the existing sidewalk making it wider to allow for the comfortable spacing of new benches. Adding crosswalks to link the Common back to the east side of Main Street, and south across Mendon and Douglas Streets would be very helpful in trying to create a more cohesive downtown. Traditional materials, compatible with the Common, such as brick, cobbles, or granite setts, can be used in imaginative patterns in lieu of or in combination with concrete or asphalt. Federal funding for this type of improvement will require the sidewalks and crosswalks to be handicap accessible.

If benches are to be placed within the park or along Court Street it is not recommended to pave sidewalks to them, but it is recommended to pave underneath each bench to eliminate the struggle to establish and maintain turf underneath. Worn areas such as around the flag pole or Civil War Monument may or may not warrant paving around them. If the decision is to hardscape around these features, care should be taken to choose a paving material that is soft on the eyes and easy on the foot. Using a simple brick paving in muted earth tones would be appropriate for this type of treatment.

3. Landscape Issues

It does not make sense to remove all the existing trees on the Common in one fell swoop and try to re-establish the disease-prone elms. But it does make sense to look carefully at the existing trees and try to analyze what if any function they are serving. Hiring an arborist to assess their general condition is the first step. Looking at each tree individually for placement (is it blocking or enhancing the desired view line) is the next item to review. What value does the tree have for the common? Does it provide shade, fall color or a flower? Does it work into the general goal of restoring the simplicity of the common? Many village greens up until the twentieth century were planted with tall native hardwood species such as maples, elms or oaks. This was a point of both pride and practicality for the villagers as the native species were most likely the hardiest, as well as the cheapest. Monoculture, such as the sole planting of the elms in the nineteenth century, can lead to devastating results and is no longer considered good horticultural practice. Mixing similarly sized or shaped trees would be preferable. The new trees

should be tolerant of the existing urban site conditions. They should be chosen for their ability to produce dappled shade and a vase-like or straight trunk form. Using trees of differing heights and branching patterns will not open up views through the common. Instead they will be shut off. The idea is to simplify, to unify the whole Common District, not to exclude.

A strong edge treatment to the common could be achieved if a double row of large shade trees could be planted along its southern and eastern boundaries. A single row of trees could be planted on the north and west sides along Court Street. A strong line of planting would help reestablish the Common's perimeter, formalizing its presence on the street. Using tall trees with high branching habits will create a canopy that throws shade but does not block visual access to the central features of the common. There are many appropriate tree species (maple, oak, ash, linden, honey locust, zelkova) that can be used to good effect if they are properly maintained and pruned during their early stages of growth. It is recommended that the town continue to maintain at least one large spruce or fir on the Common for the sole purpose of maintaining the eighty five year tradition of tree lighting during the winter holidays.

Flower beds around trees is not historically accurate, nor are they desirable from a maintenance point of view. The Common should be a place of stark simplicity. Small flower beds dotting the green may end up looking fussy and out of place. Anything that gets placed in the Common must compete visually with the large scale of the buildings surrounding it and the heavy traffic passing it by. Consolidating planting beds around the base of the Civil war monument or the temperance fountain will have increased visual

impact. Floating beds of shrubbery or flowers is not to be encouraged. Gardeners will be more likely to keep up with the maintenance of their adopted beds if they have high visibility and easy access. Providing a source of water is critical for the maintenance of all plant material on the site.

Do not under any circumstance attempt to create bermed beds anywhere within the green as it will look painfully artificial. Bermed beds are a contemporary phenomena. The Uxbridge Common has traditionally been maintained as a relatively flat plain of turf and trees. The space is too small to allow for the creation of rolling topography.

The existing lawn on the Common needs to be rehabilitated. Lawn experts abound and seeking out a reputable firm may be a wise investment for the town. The ground is very compacted and probably needs to be aerated. The soil is tired and probably needs to be enriched. The existing grass may not be an appropriate mix for the site conditions. Get professional help in both the analysis and rehab of the turf. Historically the grass on the Common was not picture perfect. In fact by today's standards it was probably pretty deplorable. If the area in question was bigger, the notion of maintaining such a demanding crop might be questioned, and the substitution of ground covers and low shrub plantings recommended. But this village green is quickly perceived in its entirety and breaking the ground plane into different planting treatments would only complicate the site and devalue its purity of form.

4. Site Furnishings

Furnishing the Common with new benches, trash receptacles, and new lights should be carefully considered. Quality not quantity should be the maxim for several reasons. Most importantly, the goal is to keep things simple. Good quality park furnishings are expensive, but will last longer. All new elements should be chosen for compatibility to each other and to the existing features already on the site. A style that evokes the late nineteenth century would be appropriate as many of the improvements within and around the Common happened during this period.

Existing signs on the Common need to be examined closely for necessity and optimal placement. If it is at all possible, directional signs should be redesigned to look compatible with the historic theme of the district. Coordination with the state highway department may be necessary to carry this off, but it will be well worth the effort. The southern end of the Uxbridge Common is visually obtrusive and confusing with its clutter of metal green signs and various other directionals. Standards for signage should be worked out for the entire block. There is no excuse for plastic signs and/or mobile signage anywhere near the Common. They are simply incompatible.

A new sign, properly sited and well designed, that identifies Uxbridge, the Common and/or the Common District with the date of town incorporation will help send a clear message to people that the Common area has a history and is noteworthy.

Benches should be strategically located and carefully chosen for durability and comfort. Locating benches along the sidewalk/promenade parallel to North Main Street is one option. If a double row of trees is planted the benches could be tucked under the

trees. Clustering benches either around the civil war monument or along Court Street on the western boundary is another option. A few well placed benches of good quality is preferable over many benches scattered throughout as, in the long run, they will only be seen as clutter and a maintenance headache. Trash receptacles should be located prominently but sparingly. Access for users of the common is important but just as important is the accessibility of these receptacles for maintenance workers. Avoid the bright colored metal or plastic barrels. They will be totally out of character.

The street lighting along North Main Street may be sufficient lighting for the Common. Highlighting special features or adding old fashion lamp posts with the warmer glow of low wattage incandescent lights can advantageously change the look and feel of the Common for both those on foot and those just passing through town by automobile. Giving the Common an inviting night time presence will extend the usability of the green during the evenings of warmer months and further enhance its daytime image. The cost factor of such improvements may be prohibitive however, and should be looked at carefully. Many towns have used creative fund raising techniques, such as asking local businesses to pitch in and contribute, plaquing each pole with the name of its donor.

Utilities surrounding and traversing the Common should be examined as part of the Master Plan. If there is any way to effectively reroute the myriad of wires and poles for the electric and telephone services that run along the edges of the Common it would greatly alleviate the clutter. Burying the wires would be ideal, but again cost may be prohibitive. Sources for power within the park is a matter to be addressed regardless of

whether the poles are to be eliminated or not. At present electric hook ups are either nailed to trees or inappropriately located on utility poles off Main Street. Like the issue of water access, the lack of available electric power is a critical problem for some users. Unless these problems are corrected, the number of events held on the Common may decrease as better, more convenient sites are found.

Summary

The physical improvement of the common is only part of a successful restoration program. Increasing awareness of the Common as an historic site with real value is just as important as changing it into a pretty place to visit. Attitudes about the Common have to change. Educating the public is an important tool for garnering interest as well as funds for future preservation. Interpretive displays could easily be set up on permanent display at the town library for school children and tourists. A lecture program run by volunteers could be established for presentations at women's clubs, historical societies, rotaries, veterans groups, etc.

When all is said and done the Uxbridge Common should remain a passive park. It is large enough and centrally located so that using it for community events (band concerts, dances, fairs, puppet shows, flea markets, antique shows, art shows, rummage sales, bake sales, re-enactments, etc.) remains highly desirable. In order to develop a viable constituency for the Common and its well-being, sponsoring organizations using

the site should be encouraged to become a "Friend of the Green." The Common is ringed by institutions and organizations that see the Common as their front yard. Each of these groups should have a vested interest in its well being and perhaps could be persuaded to participate in its restoration and ongoing upkeep. Public gatherings on the Common should continue and be expanded upon. Perhaps rerouting traffic during special event days, recreating the earlier car-free existence of a bygone era, would bring extra notoriety and charm to scheduled events, making them more appealing to out-of-towners. The Common was set up as a space to be shared in common for utilitarian purposes; it has evolved into a place to be shared for public gatherings. The traditional uses should be protected and special interest groups discouraged. All proposed improvements to the district and to the Common itself must be weighed carefully for fairness and overall long term benefit to the public. It is not a veterans park, nor is it a fairground. Individual and community needs must be considered against historical precedent and the impact of change. Continuing to alter the district in any shape or form could forever diminish the historic value of the Common, making it unrecognizable or indistinguishable from Anytown, USA.

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