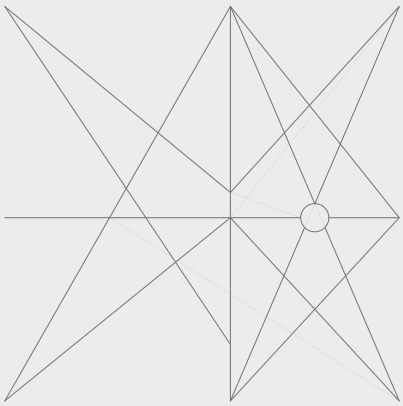
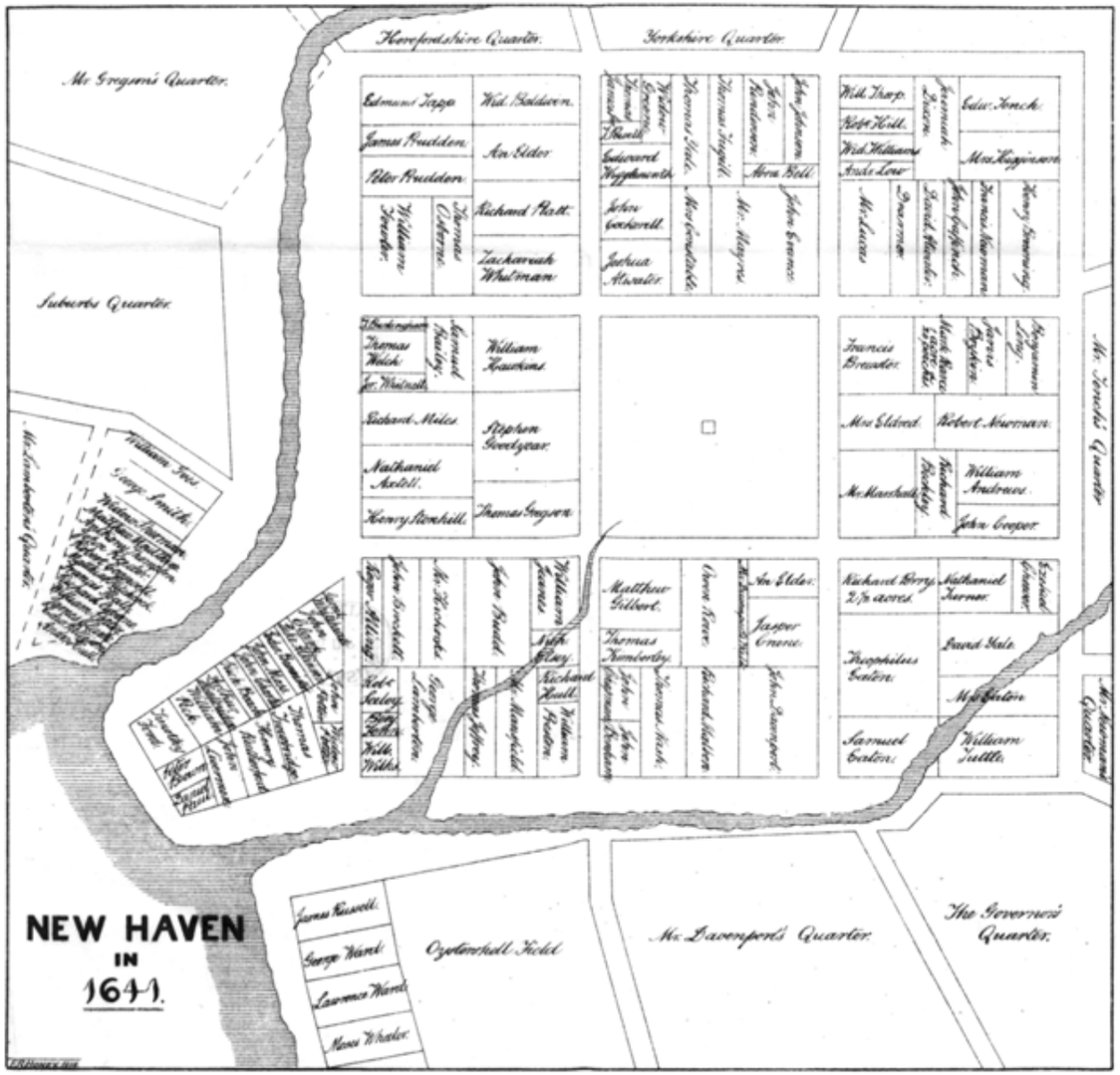
Many Lives of the New Haven Green





1641 map of New Haven Colony, surveyed by John Brockett.

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Entering from Upper Green, the canopy of elm trees obscure the surrounding buildings and offer recluse under its shade. One may expect to find picnickers, or loungers, but instead pedestrians cross the Green steadfast on footpaths extending to each corner and each church that punctuate its central axis. Upon reaching Lower Green, sparsely planted elms give way to a large open field, revealing the geometric pattern of the intersecting paths. Is the Green a park? It certainly presents itself as such, with its picturesque planting offering a change of scenery for the city in the same way that Central Park and the Commons do for New York and Boston. Yet here, the people that set foot on the Green do so briefly, traversing on their way to destinations beyond it whether by foot, by bicycle, or stopping by to wait for a bus transfer. Only a handful of idlers occupy the scarce benches scattered throughout. As much as the Green appears to be a park, this was never its raison d'etre. As Reverend Leonard Bacon

orated in 1879, the Green "was designed not as a park or mere pleasure ground, but as a place for public buildings, for military parades and exercises, for the meeting of buyers and sellers, for the concourse of the people"[1], comparing it to the Roman Forum and Venice's St. Mark's Square.

The Green was at the ideological and physical center of the Puritans' nine square grid at the conception of New Haven Colony in 1638. As illustrated by the 1640 map by John Brockett, the eight outer squares were divided into parcels for each household that subscribed to the founding of the colony, where more prominent subscribers were assigned plots immediately adjacent to the Green, or the marketplace as it was referred to at the time[2]. At this time, it was an untamed land with marshy areas at its lower-lying east end. A meetinghouse occupied the center, used for both religious and governmental affairs as the Puritans governed strictly by the Bible. It was soon joined by a burying ground at its rear, as well as a courthouse, county house, jail, and school, side by side near present-day College Street. A stock and whipping post were used on the Green until whipping was banned as punishment[3]. As a result of the Great Awakening, the late 18th century saw the establishment of two additional churches, Unity to the north and Trinity to the south of Center Church.

It was at this point that our modern image of the Green began to emerge, as beautification efforts took place — the earth was raised to cover marshy land and to reduce the severity of the slope across laterally, elm trees were planted all along its perimeter, and a fence

1 Henry T. Blake, *Chronicles of New Haven Green from 1638 to 1862* (New Haven: The Tuttle, Morehouse & Taylor Press, 1898), 10.

2 *Benham's New Haven Directory and Annual Advertiser, No. 24.* (New Haven: J. H. Benham, 1863), 54; Edward E. Atwater, *History of the colony of New Haven to its absorption into Connecticut.* (New Haven: Printed for the author, 1881), 107.

3 Henry Peck. *The New Haven State House with some account of the green.* (New Haven: H. Peck & G. H. Coe), 69;

Thomas Kensett, William Lyon, James S. Wadsworth. *A plan of the town of New Haven with all the buildings in 1748*. New Haven, 1806.

4 Ibid, 86.

5 Ibid, 150.

was put in place to mark the boundaries of this public space[4]. All three churches were reconstructed in the 1810s facing the new Temple Street which bisected the Green. As New Haven was a co-capital of Connecticut along with Hartford, a State House was located on the Green, at first beside Trinity Church, then relocated west of Center Church after the burying ground was leveled in favor of establishing Grove Street Cemetery. It was demolished in 1889 after the dual capital system was scrapped[5]. Some changes were made in the 20th century regarding paving, planting, and the addition of the World War I memorial flagpole, creating the Green as we know it today.

Throughout the evolution of the Green, there is a continual, reciprocal conversation with the urban dwellers making use of it. These interactions can be categorized into ones involving individual persons and actions by collective publics, each type affecting the character of the Green in different ways. Documenting and examining the history of these more closely can reveal much about its morphology of the public forum, the plasticity of this space, and its ability to hold memory.

Vandalized sign on the Green. Author, 2022.

By Persons (Everyday)

The Green has long been associated with religion, due in part to its Puritan origins, the three churches anchoring it, but also the shapes that its straightarrow footpaths form, which locals speculate to be religious symbolism persisting as a vestige of the city's Puritan past. In reality, the paths are an continually evolving

artifact that document the persisting patterns of movement from the 17th century to the present. As soon as the first meetinghouse was erected at the center of the market-place, pedestrians and wagons made their marks toward it every Sabbath day and meeting day, the more popular routes etched more persistently on the earth. This is evidenced by William Giles Munson's 1805 painting, one of the earliest surviving depictions of the Green, where erased patches of grass produce straight, diagonal lines across the expansive field[6]. More were added as people took shortcuts to various places. By the time these desire paths were formalized in the mid-19th century, the near-symmetrical network of footpaths reflected the common journeys around downtown New Haven. Wealthy families living north of Elm Street, as well as students of Yale College on the west of College Street, would cross the Green by foot and by wagon to reach goods and services — many dry goods and fancy goods shops, tailors, booksellers, shoe sellers, and physicians took up shop on Chapel and Church Streets[7]. In the second half of the century, civic buildings began to take prominence on Church Street in the form of City Hall, a post office, and a public library. This distribution of land use is similar today, although the boundaries of Yale University have extended north of Elm Street, taking over the previously residential area. The fact that there are no prominent desire paths on the Green presently hint at the commonalities between the everyday uses of those living two centuries ago and the students, library-goers, shoppers, and working professionals that cross the Green today.

The amount of traffic, and the nature of this traffic, has nevertheless changed throughout the life of the Green.

6 William Giles Munson. *New Haven Green (Version 1)*, oil on canvas, 1805, New Haven Museum.

7 *Benham's New Haven Directory*.

8 *Map of New Haven trolleys and Branford Electric Railway*. New Haven, 1902.

9 "Waiting Room on Green," *The daily morning journal and courier*, May 28, 1896.

In its daily use, it is less commonly the destination of a trip as New Haven's population becomes increasingly secular; its churches are reminders of the city's religious past. The social congregational aspect of the Sunday church service has been decentralized and scattered across the city in various community and hobby groups. It morphed into the predominantly transient space as its present form. The introduction of electric trolley cars to New Haven during the industrial revolution of the mid-19th century took shape in a hub and spoke rail network centered at the Green, stretching from Westville to East Haven, from Hamden to City Point[8]. This brought a new demographic of frequent users to the Green, the working class commuters who relied on the trolley service to travel to work and back each day. Trolley stops dropped people off at each side of the Green. As these passengers awaited connecting cars, they occupied its edges, adding a new functional capacity for the Green as a transit terminal. With this new influx of users came the question of how to accommodate them, namely in the addition of a waiting room at the corner of Chapel and Church Streets. This proved to be a contentious subject at the turn of the 20th century, at public meetings. While some argued that it was not within the purview of the city to interfere with activities related to the private rail company, especially when it infringed upon the Green, others argued it was the reasonable course of action to provide shelter, or at least seating, for the commuters. One Philip Pond spoke in favor of the waiting room, "the city furnishes seats on the Green for the tramps. Why cannot the women be supplied with seats at this crowded corner?"[9] The decision ultimately landed on the side of no new construction, choosing instead to

preserve the history of the Green.

Whether intentional or not, the refusal to build a waiting room set a precedent for an unwelcoming environment. Scenes of loiterers were familiar to the Green, people sitting on the same benches for long periods of time each day while not in homeless shelters. Perhaps it was due to this occurrence that many benches were removed during the 1950s replanting of elms. As a result of the Dutch elm disease that spread two decades earlier, these new trees were disease-resistant. However, they were not planted to the same fullness before; the pairs of elms that previously lined promenades all around the square's perimeter were now replaced with a single row of trees, none in some spots on Lower Green. The reduction in seating and shade proved to hinder any type of stay on the Green. It seemed to serve as a reminder to keep moving, that the Green was ultimately not a recreational park.

By Publics (History)

The Green, in its empty, everyday state, appears waiting in anticipation for its next gathering. The space was intended as a convergence of spiritual, political and civic life for the people of New Haven. The first congregational uses for it were often related to the permanent physical markers — the meetinghouse brought together households to hear the word of God, the whipping post gathered curious passers-by to warn about the repercussions of crime, and the grammar school convened young men in the name of learning. A second course of establishing use arose through the

10 Peck, 70.

11 Blake, 233.

12 Peck, 70.

gathering of people alone, where farmers from the outskirts clustered at the Green to sell their produce and goods, and on each Fourth of July all were invited to witness tributes to democracy. The preservation of open space without structures on the Lower Green allowed, and continues to accommodate, the creation of multiple and infinite publics within the larger population.

Annual military training days, customary in the first half of the 19th century, gathered perhaps the widest range of the population. It was a public holiday created to call together the uniformed companies and state militia in a demonstration of military strength, succeeded by a day of celebration of public life on the Green[10]. Whereas social gathering was a byproduct of attending church on the Green, it was the primary motivation for these training days in an era predating county festivals. Fourth of July celebrations of this time were not participatory events; they involved a coordinated sequence of parade, flag raising and oration[11]. By contrast, these general training days produced a sense of patriotism by engaging the population. The space was shared by urban and rural residents, upper and working classes. Businesses sold food in a row of booths, children clustered around games on the pavement while adults engaged in games of gambling and debates[12]. Various publics coexisted and interacted in this ritual that encouraged community cohesion. The formality of public space, exceptionally heightened by the symbolism of the churches and the state house that stood as monuments to these institutions, was broken down simply by the activity of these people, at least for the duration of this

holiday.

In the 20th century, political activism found its platform at the Green. Racial tensions and anti-war sentiments were collectively voiced here; these were effective exercises in shifting the power structure between individuals and the state. Most prominently, the May Day protest of 1970 drew a crowd of over 15,000 people, consisting of New Haven citizens and Yale University students alike, to challenge the wrongful persecution of two Black Panther leaders in the murder of another[13]. To date, this was the largest turnout for a protest on the Green. Activists crowded in and formed a sea of people, a single entity with a unified demand. The spatial order of the Green — regulated by the fences and trees delineating its border, pathways that direct movement and segment occupancy — could no longer be followed after reaching a critical mass of participants. The imagery of this defiant display, in clear view from above in City Hall and nearby from surrounding streets, amplified the anti-establishment sentiment of the protesters.

13 Sarah Schmidt, "Bulldog and Panther: The 1970 May Day Rally and Yale", Yale University Library Online Collections.

The physical space of the Green was again redefined in the past three decades, with the founding of New Haven's annual International Festival of Arts and Ideas in 1996. These cultural and musical performances on the temporary stage of Lower Green receive an audience spread across the Green, coming from within and outside New Haven. They bring with them beach towels, picnic blankets, camping chairs, and occasionally a camping tent. Using these paraphernalia allow these festival-goers to not only hold space in the public realm but to create spheres of private life within,

1970 May Day, Thomas Strong.

thereby domesticating the public space. Individual bodies have an ambiguous range of personal space in which contact is deemed intrusive, but the appendage of a blanket or chair extends the boundaries of this space and clearly defines it to others. This extension inherently gives the individual more space for personal expression. Whereas previous public gatherings on the Green have often held the binary relationship of performer, or speaker, broadcasting to a receptive audience, at the Festival the positioning of the high stage combined with the seated public simulates an environment akin to the living room, where a person watches a spectacle through the tv screen, which in this scenario is the frame of the stage set. The members of this public are able to simultaneously experience the more intimate connection with the performance at the domestic scale and engage with the reaction to it with each other.

Festival of Arts and Ideas, from festival website.

14 Karel Kosík, *Dialectics of the Concrete*. (Dordrecht: Springer, 1977), 44.

Whatever the mood of the people, it is amplified at the Green. It has the capacity to hold appropriate space, both physically and socially, for the extensive variety of events in its lifetime. In the same way that the everyday can be seen as neutral ground, and history as a transcendental entity disrupting it[14], the profound effect of collectivity can be attributed to the lack of physical interruptions to the fabric of the space, particularly Lower Green. When these events end — as the crowds disperse, as protest signs are cleaned up and camping chairs folded up, it returns to its latent state with no imprint of their occurrence. However, a record is kept in the form of the collective memory of each public generated by the gathering.

By Proprietors

Whether enacted by persons or publics, the morphological changes on the Green are mediated by its governing body. Unlike other squares in the city or greens of other New England cities, New Haven Green does not belong to the city. Instead, it is owned and governed by the Committee of the Proprietors of the Common and Undivided Lands in New Haven, and has been since 1805. It originates from the common ownership of the Green by all settlers of the colony, but as the city was established and population grew, it became untenable to arrange for all owners to convene. Thus, a committee of five members was selected to gain legal rights to the land, to oversee its maintenance and protect its role as a public space[15]. The first proprietors were descendants of prominent settlers and were elected for life; when one member passed, the remaining would select a new member. Even today, the committee includes a direct descendant of a founder of the colony, amongst other members including a retired banker, district court judge, a former college president, and a local non-profit organization director[16]. While they have granted authority to the city's parks department for upkeep and permitting, the proprietors retain the power to approve or deny proposals. The idea of public space under private ownership may resemble agreements between cities and commercial property owners, but the unique nature of this stewardship structure engenders in practice conditions similar to those of public parks. The insertion of the proprietors in this equation is the insertion of memory, carrying over colonial legacy in their responsibility to uphold the historical appearance and meaning of the Green.

15 Atwater, 107; Rollin G. Osterweis, *The New Haven Green and the American Bicentennial.* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1976), 97.

16 The New Haven Green. https://www.newhavengreen.org/; Paul Bass, "Green Proprietors Enter 21st Century", *New Haven Independent*, January 20, 2017. https://www.newhavenindependent.org/article/tgreen_

17 Osterweis, 106; Ice Skating Rink New Haven Files, Southern Connecticut State University, 2000. https://collections.ctdigitalarchive.org/islandora/object/470002:173028#page/10/mode/2up.

In previous decades, they have thwarted plans to build an underground parking lot as well as a proposal for a skating rink on Lower Green[17]. Their guidance has reduced chances of the Green reshaping due to changing tides of political and economic trends but has also withheld the possibility of expanding its definition to adapt to modern patterns of the everyday, if not only because of its mission but also the insufficient representation of New Haven residents in the members of the committee, racially and socio-economically. At the same time that it memorializes, it has yet unfulfilled capacity to look forward.

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The Green acts as an interface between the present and the past, containing within its earth the material remnants and on its surface the etchings of everyday lives past. As Henri Lefebvre describes, memory is a process of accumulation[18]. And this public space, through the culling forces of persons, publics, governance, and time, accumulates the everyday and transforms it into the history it embodies. Ostensibly, the temporal nature of use by any publics would not allow them to enter into memory, however, there is a distinction in the facet of memory it affects. The memory of the individual and everyday is retained in the material reality of the Green, in its paths and benches, while the histories created by the public is reflected in a social, collective memory by way of the symbolism of the Green itself.

18 Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World.* (London: Allen Lane, 1971.) 61.

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