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Massachusetts

TERRA FIRMA

PUTTING HISTORIC LANDSCAPE PRESERVATION ON SOLID GROUND

"Crossing a bare common…

I have enjoyed a perfect

exhilaration. I am glad

to the brink of fear."

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

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COMMON WEALTH: THE PAST AND FUTURE OF TOWN COMMONS

EVOLUTION OF TOWN COMMONS

COMMON ANATOMY

RESEARCH AND PLANNING

CASE STUDIES

A Publication of the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation's Historic Landscape Preservation Initiative

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Massachusetts

Mission: To protect, promote, and enhance our common wealth of natural, cultural and recreational resources.

The Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) is steward to over 450,000 acres throughout Massachusetts. For more information on the DCR and the Massachusetts State Park system visit www.massparks.org, call 617-626-1250, or write to DCR, 251 Causeway Street, Boston, MA 02114.

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The basis of this publication is the draft report, *Common Wealth*, prepared by Walter Cudnohufsky Associates for the Town Common Preservation 2000 Initiative.

Cover image: The Townsend Common

Town commons lie at the heart of most Massachusetts communities. Situated where roads historically converged, meetinghouses sat, and commerce flourished, commons today are windows to the past. Their development history is often representative of the town or city as a whole, with the social, cultural, and economic history of the place embedded in its form. But the significance of the common goes beyond its location and historic character – it has contemporary cultural and symbolic functions as well. The town common is a gathering place, a place for the community to observe tradition and a place to celebrate holidays. It is often the only public space that reflects the collective interests, desires, and values of a community, representing civic pride, and functioning as a focal point of community life. As such, town commons were one of the first resources identified in early historic landscape preservation efforts in Massachusetts.

The Commonwealth, along with other municipal, educational, and private partners, has implemented a number of initiatives to protect these iconic resources over the past 25 years. Initially, the City and Town Commons Program was launched in 1984 and established a grant fund for rehabilitating and/or acquiring commons and squares. In addition, DCR's predecessor agency produced a guide to public involvement – Common Sense: A Citizen's Guide to Creating and Restoring Commons and Squares. *From 1997 to 2003, the Historic Landscape Preservation Grant Program received over 4.5 million in grant requests to fund critically needed preservation, maintenance and stabilization work for historic landscapes, including town commons. Through this program, it was discovered that a lack of planning for town commons was systematic. As a result, the City and Town Common Preservation 2000 Initiative was established and created customized, town-specific guidebooks for 26 communities to develop their own town common preservation plans.*

This Terra Firma *bulletin continues the Commonwealth's commitment to town common preservation. Enclosed is a short history of the development of town commons in Massachusetts, a study of the character-defining features of common, guidance on researching the past and planning for their future, case studies highlighting timely issues faced by municipalities, and a resources section to assist in moving your town common projects forward.*

THE EVOLUTION OF TOWN COMMONS IN MASSACHUSETTS

The history of town commons in Massachusetts is a complex and layered process now in its fifth century of development. From the community-based proprietary lands of seventeenth-century Puritans to the municipally managed open spaces of today's cities and towns, commons have undergone highly individual evolutions that reflect broad and local patterns of religious, economic, political and cultural influences. The following section will identify the general patterns of town common development and show how complex their histories can be.

THE MEETING HOUSE LOT

Colonial settlements in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries generally provided common lands at the center of town in accordance with the Puritan "ideal" image of town planning with houses clustered around a Congregational meeting house and common lot, with agricultural fields lying beyond. Across the state, such common lots, as well as cemeteries, militia training fields, main roads, and common agricultural lands were all established. Still, the primary lot was usually directly associated with the Congregational church (which essentially controlled town government until the late 1700s and determined how the lot would be used). These primary common areas often had several uses, including: "nooning" or "warming" houses in which congregations gathered between services, cemeteries (or "burying grounds"), militia training areas, and the "close" in which livestock were kept before and after grazing on common pastures outside of the town.

Large, mature maples line the linear, mile-long Hadley Common.

A PLACE DIFFERENT – THE LINEAR COMMON

Early settlements often had to cut wide roadways through their towns. As a result, linear commons were formed when buildings along these roads were moved to the sides of the wide right-of-way, and the road surface itself took up only a small strip of the "common land." Some examples of linear commons are found in Northfield, Williamstown, Sunderland, Hadley, and Hatfield.

Shirley Town Common retains much of its open space and surrounding architectural context.

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THE TOWN GREEN

In 1833 the official separation of church and state occurred in Massachusetts, finalizing the loosening of Congregationalist control over town politics and completing the process of transferring meetinghouse lots from the church to municipalities. The result was a shift away from the agricultural and religious associations to primarily social, political and civic uses where public assembly was often a primary event. Roadways increased, and inns, taverns, blacksmith shops and other commercial and industrial ventures grew more commonplace as civic centers began to grow around the town commons. Concurrently, conditions deteriorated as common lands (now often referred to as "greens") became generally untended lots where animals often roamed freely and watering troughs, hayscales, powder houses, animal pounds, and horse sheds for the church were all located. Occasionally private citizens or militia groups would make improvements by leveling the land and removing trash.

TOWN COMMON IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS

In the mid-nineteenth century, many towns began allocating funds to improve the conditions of the commons. They graded soils, installed fences, planted grass, removed stumps, and planted trees – usually elms. These beautification efforts developed regionally into the Village Improvement Movement that was most active between 1840 and 1880, and was responsible for a shift towards viewing commons as public spaces worth caring for.

1: The iconic Lexington Green remains as a critical place in the history of the United States.

2: In the early nineteenth century, the Cambridge Common was bordered by numerous structures, and contained roads, long existing and newly planted trees, and fencing.

3: In the 1840s the Ipswich Common contained a large debris pile.

4: By mid-century, the Springfield common boasted grass, planted trees, fences and a fountain.

The woodcuts reproduced above are from John Warner Barber's *Historical Collections: Being a General Collection of Interesting Facts, Traditions, Biographical Sketches…of Every Town in Massachusetts*, 1840.

In the 1870s approximately 200 village improvement societies were active throughout New England.

"There is no single use for commons today, no uniform appearance, any more than there was three centuries ago. But commons remain a part of New England life, still at the heart of many communities, often revealing in their appearance and uses the people's covenant with their shared space."

JOHN STILGOE

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Following the Civil War and into the early twentieth century, more formalized efforts aimed at memorialization and civic improvement continued the efforts of the village improvement societies. The 1860s and 1870s saw the installation of the almost ubiquitous Union soldier or other Civil War monuments on commons and other public spaces all over the state, and many town halls were constructed on or adjacent to these open spaces. From the 1890s through the early 1900s the influence of the City Beautiful and other movements in urban design and landscape architecture formalized many commons with classically-inspired paths, plantings and other small-scale features such as fountains, lighting, and bandstands.

TWENTIETH CENTURY TOWN COMMONS

Consistent will all public parklands in America following World War II, town commons came under increasing pressure from active recreation and traffic mitigation pressures. Ball fields, swimming pools, and tennis courts have proliferated, along with monuments to soldiers from later wars, memorials to private individuals such as benches, flagpoles, fountains, drinking fountains, statues, markers, playgrounds, and trees. Along the edges of commons, widened roads, parking spaces, pathways, utility lines, sidewalks and other features have continued to proliferate. Only in the recent past have efforts to mitigate this process been implemented.

Developed in the mid-1800s, the linear pathways of the Campagnone Common in Lawrence represent a detail of City Beautiful design. (Map reproduction courtesy of the Normal B. Leventhal Map Center at the Boston Public Library)

THE INVENTION OF A TRADITION

If asked to describe their image of a town common in Massachusetts, a resident might likely describe a tree-shaded, grassy area bordered by large white Georgian, Federal, and Greek Revival houses, with a skyline punctuated by a high church steeple. While this image does exist on many commons, the reality of their historical development is far more complex. But how did this romantic image become so imbedded in our culture? Around the time of the centennial, the country had recently emerged from the Civil War and an economic panic, and was looking for a solid national identity and the roots of democracy. America found these in part in the structure of colonial town government in New England which traced its roots to the seventeenth century and the roots of the nation. Academics, authors, poets, and artists in turn created the myth of this image of the idyllic New England town center as being ubiquitous, representative of democracy in New England, and quintessentially American. Nineteenth-century improvement efforts latched onto these ideas as part of their imperative, and even today, this image often influences decisions on how to manage town commons and their surroundings.

TOWN COMMON ANATOMY

Character-defining features are the historic and tangible aspects of a common that have either influenced or are products of its development. Assessing these feature types, knowing when they were built or installed, and having a complete and accurate inventory is a crucial step towards planning for a common's future while preserving its past. The following are the primary character-defining feature types that are found on almost every common and should be incorporated into any research, planning and construction efforts.

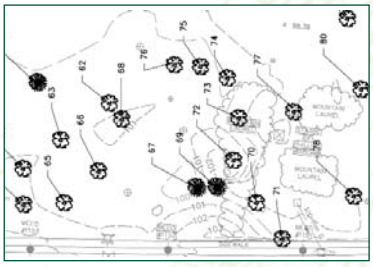
The Bartlett Mall in Newburyport contains steep slopes surrounding a small pond.

TOPOGRAPHY

Often overlooked on most historic landscapes, the underlying topography of a site is significant in understanding its development history. Most commons were graded in the nineteenth century to alleviate drainage issues and to create a more park-like setting, while those commons that remain ungraded or on a larger slope generally represent historic periods prior to town common improvement efforts.

VEGETATION

From the first elms planted on commons in the early nineteenth century to the more formally designed trees, lawns, shrubs, hedges and planting beds of the post-Civil War era, vegetation on commons is one of the most critical and changeable feature types. As living things with seasonal, perennial or decades-long life spans, understanding when and how they were planted and how they've changed is both challenging and critical when researching and documenting a common. Species, distribution, age, growth patterns, design intent and color should all be determined if possible.



This detail from the North Andover Common tree identification plan is an excellent example of baseline vegetation documentation.

A row of sugar maples on the Belchertown Common strongly define the edge of the open space.

Historic buildings and structures such as this gazebo on Petersham Common are often complemented by other historic examples in the immediate setting.

BUILDINGS AND STRUCTURES

Restrooms, bridges, gazebos, decorative fountains, large monuments, and even town halls are just some of the buildings and structures that may be found on a common. While buildings and structures have been placed on commons since their inception, careful consideration of age, function, style, materials, and alterations should include an assessment of the overall effect on the historic integrity of the common.

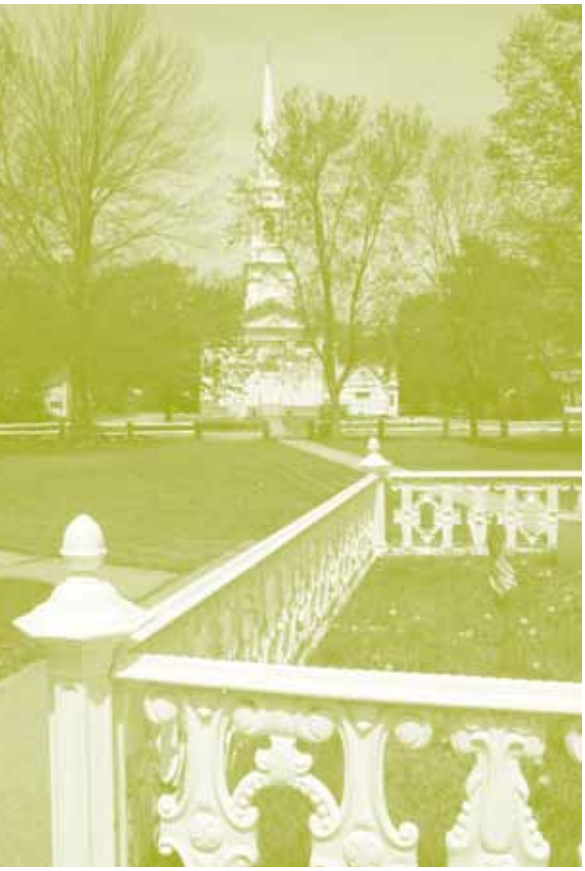
PATHS AND ROADS

Historic circulation patterns are found in almost every common and may be traced from eighteenth century town roads, through the nineteenth century formalizing efforts, to the twentieth century addition of sidewalks. Length, width, route, surface material, edging, curbing and slope are all important details.

"By way of resting myself, I crossed the Common for the third time."

LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

The Training Green in Plymouth dates to 1711 and contains curvilinear paths whose layout dates from an 1889 Frederick Law Olmsted design.



This cast iron fence surrounding a monument on the Barre Commons is in good contition due to regular maintenance.

SMALL SCALE FEATURES

A short list of small scale features includes monuments, memorials, benches, signs, light standards, fences, fence posts, drinking fountains and flagpoles. Inventorying these features can prove more difficult than expected, especially as the installation or removal of small scale features is often not documented; as a result, determining their age can be difficult. Akin to buildings and structures, small scale features should be carefully studied to determine how additions or removals will affect the overall historic character of the common.

Historic fountains are one of the most ubiquitous features on commons. This example on the West Brookfield Common has a surrounding asphalt path and lighting fixtures.

"I miss the village green

The church, the clock, the steeple."

THE KINKS
NOMA MUSIC, INC.

Adding contemporary or expanding on existing memorials is an emotionally charged issue that should involve discussion with the local historic commission. This elaborate example includes numerous contemporary small scale features including: brick paths, planting beds, shrubs, new and old stone memorials, a flag pole, benches, bollards and light posts.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Soliciting the opinions and concerns of community members is an essential step in the planning process. The public should be made aware of the effort as early in development as possible and should be asked to review options and provide comment.

RESEARCH AND PLANNING

Good stewardship of town commons relies on a deep understanding of the landscape – its character-defining features, changes over time, existing conditions, current uses and overall management goals. Developing an understanding of the common's history, specifically knowing when historic features from all periods of development were installed, provides a good basis for decision-making and is the first step in the preservation planning process.

Local library and historical society collections are excellent sources of information. Nineteenth century editions of local histories, church records and cemetery commission reports can aid in tracing the origins of a common. Changes to commons after 1850 can often be documented through plans, landscape paintings, stereopticon views, post cards, standard and aerial photographs, as well as period newspaper accounts, unpublished memoirs, oral histories, and veterans groups' records.

From the early "Proprietors" maps of the seventeenth century depicting original colonial land allotments, to the fire insurance atlases produced by the Sanborn Map Company into the 1960s, maps and atlases provide easily accessible information on the history of town commons. Bird's-eye-views from the 1870s can also provide an especially good depiction of the common and surrounding roads and buildings. Early surveys, plat maps, and tax maps also provide additional information.

Research is followed by an inventory of existing conditions to determine what, if anything, survives from the historical development of the common. An analysis of historic integrity and significance is then combined with management goals in a preservation plan for the common. These plans establish a broad vision to guide decision-making, enumerate specific steps to achieve that vision, and outline management policies affecting historic commons such as use permits and amelioration of impacts, memorial policy, and maintenance. Further, plans can also be used to generate public awareness, and be used to support funding requests to pursue recommendations.

For more information on developing a landscape Preservation Plan, see *Terra Firma #1: An Introduction to Historic Landscape Preservation.*

REDISCOVERING HAWLEY'S OLD TOWN COMMON

The original Hawley town common served as the religious, commercial, and political center of the town from 1794 to 1848, but by 1880 the area had declined and was known as "Poverty Square". Today only a few cellar holes and road traces remain. Through a project funded in part by a grant from the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities, the nonprofit Sons & Daughters of Hawley (founded in 1900) is planning to uncover the remains of the old Hawley town common, create access, erect signage, and publish a map and guide to its history. All work will be based on in-depth historical research with the long-term goal of using the information as the basis for future funding opportunities.

A 1794 map of Brimfield shows a meeting-house, tavern and mill at a confluence of roads.

By 1870, this atlas map shows that multiple paths crossed the now formalized Brimfield Common.

The Barre Commons has a mixture of historic and contemporary features in its landscape.

Detailed before and after overlays help make the Barre Commons Master Plan a successful effort.

CASE STUDIES

BARRE – STICKING WITH THE PLAN

With funds from the Massachusetts Historic Landscape Preservation Grant Program and the town, the Barre Municipal Commons Committee finalized the Barre Commons Master Plan 1999. The focus was to reestablish as much of the historic quality of the town commons as possible, reclaim green space lost due to the expansion of roadways and parking lots, provide safe and interconnected pedestrian access and to better define the edges of the commons.

Research into past uses of the Barre Commons set a guiding context and when combined with an understanding of present day uses and requirements of the surrounding commercial abutters, enabled the design team to prepare a master plan with significant improvements to pedestrian safety, traffic circulation, and parking – while providing for the historical reclamation of the commons. Numerous public meetings allowed the citizens of Barre opportunities to review and comment, and a further series of one-on-one meetings with abutting business owners provided the design team with the forum to discuss specific improvements with the community.

Implementation funding has been secured through the MassHighway Transportation Improvement Program and the Town of Barre, and the project is at the 25% design review stage, with phased construction anticipated within the next few years. The town is closely following the well researched and clearly articulated vision in the master plan, and when implemented, the combined and careful consideration of historic character, community needs, and transportation requirements will result in a greatly improved Barre Commons.

"When I came out of prison … I did not perceive that great changes had taken place on the common, such as he observed who went in a youth and emerged a tottering and gray-headed man; and yet a change had to my eyes come over the scene – the town, and State, and country – greater than any that mere time could effect."

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

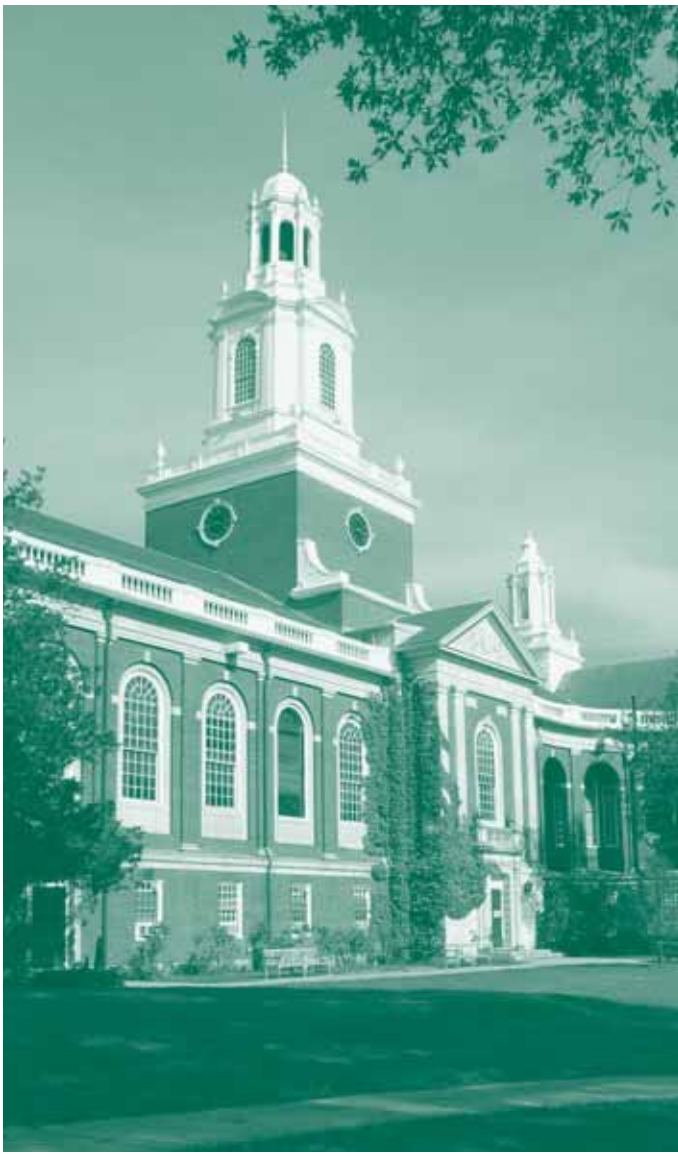
NEWTON – DEVELOPING A MEMORIALS POLICY

In 2006, Newton finalized the *Newton City Hall and War Memorial Grounds Historic Landscape Master Plan*. In this plan, the city outlined the issue of non-compatible memorials and the need for a formal policy on the historic Olmsted-designed landscape. A series of memorialization guidelines were developed to ensure that the grounds be respected, preserved, and maintained as an irreplaceable cultural resource essential to Newton's heritage. The following is an adaptation of those guidelines.

Declare a Moratorium – The appropriate town department can declare a moratorium on future installations of commemorative markers, monuments, or other non-historic additions to the common until guidelines specific to the historic landscape can be developed.

Develop Donation/Memorial Guidelines – Some cities and towns have donation policies in place for gifts from the public, but they often do not directly address their placement on town commons. Guidelines should focus on retaining the historic integrity of the common as its primary consideration for evaluating proposals. Public hearing and decision-making protocols should be delineated to include the local Historical Commission and/or Local Historic District Commission in addition to the Board of Selectmen or other agency.

Define Proposals – All projects that propose the addition of features on a common should include the following information: 1) a Memorial Definition of what or who exactly is being memorialized including the reasons for the memorial, 2) an Impact Report that describes the current and future impacts the memorial will have on the historic character of the common, 3) an Existing Conditions Site Plan fully outlining all current features in addition to the extent of the proposed memorial impacts, 4) a Preliminary Design Plan that fully identifies all alterations within the proposed affected area and includes design details for the memorial itself, and 5) Construction and Maintenance Cost Estimates should also be included.



Newton may have more protection from over-memorialization than any other historic landscape in the state.

Today, the Town Green is one of Provincetown's most sought-out landscapes throughout much of the year. Its new walks made it ADA-compliant, and with its open, colorful and welcoming feel, it has become a truly accessible public landscape.

PROVINCETOWN – ACCESSIBILITY ON THE GREEN

In 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law, requiring universal access to public facilities and establishing design guidelines for compliance. By adhering to the Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines (ADAAG) municipalities can make their commons more accessible. But accessibility also means making commons visible, attractive, and available to all. The recent rehabilitation of Provincetown's common – the Town Green – provides one example of how such access was achieved.

When completed in 1922, the Olmsted Brothers-designed green provided the sole grassy patch in the center of Provincetown, an oasis in the sandy, exposed seaside village. By the early 2000s, the walks had cracked, creating hazards for pedestrians, and the trees had matured and multiplied, obscuring the sculpture and shading the lawn. Provincetown recognized the green's most immediate need – to provide safe walkways. To comply with the ADAAG, the surface needed to be stable, firm and slip-resistant, and free of any changes in level exceeding a quarter inch. As a result, long-lasting brick pavers arranged in a running bond pattern were used to replace the concrete.

Provincetown also needed to find ways of inviting public access. To accomplish this, town crews made the landscape more visible and inviting by clearing volunteer trees and removing low-growing limbs. Next, crews planted small trees, perennials and shrubs along the walks' outside edges, adding color and texture to the green. Lastly, the town began promoting the green as a place for gatherings, festivals, and other public events to increase usage of the rehabilitated landscape.

GREENFIELD – CONSENSUS AND COMMUNICATION

In 2007 the Town of Greenfield was awarded funding from the Massachusetts Highway Department to upgrade traffic signals and intersection functions at eight locations throughout the community. As requested by MassHighway, the DPW conducted its own review of the project by circulating the 25% design plans to involved municipal boards and commissions.

The Greenfield Historical Commission has a reputation as stalwart defender of its town commons. The south "Main Street" Common is the focus of downtown – a triangular green space surrounded by fine historic buildings, and would be affected by the effort. The project plans indicated a reduction in one of the common's corners to provide for new signals and a greater truck turning radius. The town engineer met the Commission on site to see the extent of change proposed, and spray-painted the limit of work line. It was clear that this plan would substantially reduce the green, alter its classic shape, and remove one of the few mature trees on the common.

The Greenfield Historical Commission's formal comments were sent to the Mayor and the town engineer, as well as the Massachusetts Historical Commission for its review. In these comments, the Greenfield Historical Commission supported the agreed upon plans for the south "Main Street" Common intersection with the exception of the corner modification as having insufficient utility and unacceptable community impacts.

The willingness of the town engineer and the Greenfield Historical Commission to work together made this a model process. The Commission has requested a review of the 75% design plans at these two locations and believes that a proper balance between good traffic management, historic preservation, and community values will result from this important project.

Greenfield's south "Main Street" Common is surrounded by heavy traffic during the day; as a result, preventing the needs of cars from overtaking this historic space is a difficult task.

A PUBLICATION OF THE MASSACHUSETTS DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION AND RECREATION'S HISTORIC LANDSCAPE PRESERVATION INITIATIVE 251 CAUSEWAY STREET STE. 600 BOSTON, MA 02114 617-626-1250

THE LAST WORD: THERE'S A DIFFERENCE

It is important to remember that designating a town common as part of a *local* historic district provides more regulatory protection than listing in the National Register of Historic Places. Under M.G.L. Chapter 40c, towns may establish local historic districts and adopt bylaws for regulating material changes to properties within the district that are visible from public ways. Further, designating surrounding properties as part of a district can protect the landscape's historic context and deter incompatible alterations or additions. Part of any register nomination contains the establishment of a period of significance, which should be defined with care as many commons continue their use as open space to the present day. To determine if your town common is on the National Register consult the Massachusetts Historical Commission's online MACRIS database (see below for information). Paper copies of nominations can also be obtained from the MHC or your local historical commission.

RESOURCES

Americans With Disabilities Act
(see also: MA Code of Regulations 521 CMR)
800-514-0301
www.ada.gov

Community Foundation of Western Massachusetts
413-732-2858
www.communityfoundation.org

Highland Communities Initiative
413-268-8219
www.highlandcommunities.org

Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation

Historic Landscape Preservation Initiative
617-626-1250
www.mass.gov/dcr/stewardship/histland/histland.htm

Massachusetts Urban and Community Forestry Program
617-626-1468
www.mass.gov/dcr/stewardship/forestry/urban/

Massachusetts Executive Office of Housing and Economic Development
– Massachusetts Downtown Initiative (MDI)
– Business Improvement Districts (BID)
617-573-1100
www.mass.gov/

Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs
– Smart Growth / Smart Energy Toolkit
– Community Preservation Initiative
617-626-1222
www.mass.gov/envir/

Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities
413-584-8440
www.mfh.org/grants/index.htm

Massachusetts Historical Commission
– Massachusetts Preservation Projects Fund
– MACRIS database
– *There's a Difference!*
– *Preservation Through Bylaws and Ordinances*
617-727-8470
www.sec.state.ma.us/mhc

National Alliance of Preservation Commissions
706-542-4731
www.sed.uga.edu/pso/programs/napc/napc.htm

Preservation Massachusetts
617-723-3383
www.preservationmass.org

Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties With Guidelines for the Treatment of Cultural Landscapes
www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/standguide

Townscape Institute
617-491-8952
www.townscape-inst.com

U.S. Department of Housing and Community Development
Community Development Block Grant Program (CBDG)
617-788-3610
www.hud.gov

"When they reached the market-place, she became still more restless…

for it was usually more like the broad and lonesome green before a village meeting-house,

than the centre of a town's business."

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

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