

History on tour: September 18th

by Doris Sherrow, September 1999

On September 18th (1999), there will be a historical walking tour of downtown Portland. We will start at 2 PM in front of the Town Hall. Between 1852 and 1894, Town Hall was a private home. At that time, the block from Freestone Avenue to Marlborough Street held three large, elegant homes set on tree-shaded lots, each belonging to a member of the influential Hall family.

Main Street is old. It was probably created by native Americans for their own extensive trade and travel networks. But Commerce Street is also over 300 years old. Today, it may be a sleepy little dead-end street, but Portland's first two settlers, **James Stancliff** and **John Gill**, chose to live on it, plus it led to the town quarry, Stancliff's quarry, and the graveyard, established in 1713.

Unfortunately, it would be impossible to plaque these historically significant sites: they hang in thin air out over the deep, flood-filled quarry hole beyond the end of the street. In 1870, a few leading quarry owners convinced the town to sell them the old cemetery - the cemetery! - a because its soil covered good, marketable deposits of brownstone. Consequently, the sloping hill from the current end of Commerce Street down to the Connecticut River was minded away to produce profits for the quarry owners (handsomely represented by some of Portland's finer architecture) and the fantastic quarry holes, which may soon become a local tourist attraction.

In 1995, a walking tour of downtown Portland was mentioning in promotional literature for that year's **Downtown Festival**. I called around to try to get information. I had worked on the **Greater Middletown Preservation Trust's** Portland book, but we had given short shrift to downtown, because the architecture had been so altered ("transmogrified" was the word we employed; I'm not proud of it, but there it is). After several calls, I learned there would be no such walking tour, because no one knew much history about downtown Portland. So, during the next year, I researched the properties from 141 Main Street, which was a gable-to-street house demolished by **Standard Knapp** about 20 years ago, to 318 Main, the Post Office.

What I found was fascinating. The center had been home to some very influential people in the 19th century, less Puritan than the late 17th, early 18th century settlers had been. Their stories seem to have been largely forgotten, although their fortunes were large, and they held considerable power in town. Their houses, most of which no longer stand, had been large and beautiful. The downtown area had a much more "residential" feeling to it, although small shops have always been spliced into the street-scape, near their owners' houses. I suspect that their stories were forgotten largely because their neighborhood was destroyed. Sometimes we talk about the landscape we have lost, as we look at old photographs of gingerbread trimmed houses, perhaps. But we have lost several: there have actually been several waves of development, each of which has plowed under the settlement before it. The Wangunk occupancy was the earliest (unless they were preceded by other tribes). Their land was taken over and reshaped by the incoming English of the colonial period. (Back then, "we" were the "English;" that threw me for a loop when I first read it in an old petition, asking that the "English" be allowed to settle some Wangunk area).

The earliest developments would have been rather stark colonial houses. I know of one partial remnant, one possible ancient ell, and one possible survivor from that period in the downtown area. That settlement (by the "English") was wiped out without a thought by forward-thinking 19th century Americans. As theirs is the architecture that we admire in the downtown, solid buildings with graceful trim, fancy woodwork, or stonework, that would cost a fortune to duplicate today. Federal, Greek Revival, Italianate, Queen Anne - downtown Portland has a few of all these styles.

So join us at 2 PM in front of the Town Hall on Saturday, September 18th, for the walking tour. I can't show you any downtown **Wangunk** sites, but I can point out the three very old house survivals, and tell you a bit about the lives of people who built the buildings you drive or walk past every day.

When you know some of the old stories, it becomes a much richer landscape!