

New History Calendar

By: Doris Sherrow

Once again, the Portland Historical Society has created a historical-photograph calendar for the upcoming year. Since 1983, members of the Society have selected pictures from private collections and from the Society's own resources to let people see--or remember--how we looked in past decades.

This year's calendar concentrates on downtown Portland--Main Street from the Connecticut River to the high 200s. The cover shows a ca. 1908 picture postcard of the 1870 railroad bridge and the first bridge for vehicles and foot traffic, built in 1896.

The calendar proceeds up Main Street geographically. January shows a photograph of lower Main Street, which would have led to the river's edge, except that in this photo, the river's edge has come to the street! The picture probably dates from the flood of 1936--that occurred in April, and the trees in this picture show small leaves rather than the full vegetation that they would have had during the hurricane of September, 1938.

Next is the **Strong and Hale Lumber Company**. Up until recently, this building served as the **Senior Center**, so many will remember it, but you won't remember it like it is in this picture! The company appears to be in celebration, with several officials on the lovely front entranceway. The original trim still remains around the windows and above the roof. The picture appears to be an anniversary celebration of the Strong and Hale, with the officials poised on the doorstep. Strong and Hale, established in 1868, was sold to Gustav Lowenthal Lumber Company in 1961, so some of you may remember the building when it was still a lumber company!

The next picture shows what is probably 106 Main Street, a colonial or Federal-style house that had taken the route of most of lower Main Street's buildings. While it is obviously a house, it also contains both a dress shop and a barber shop on the main floor. The back of the Historical Society's photograph identified **Katherine Sullivan** and **Anne Carroll** as two of the three women outside the dress shop, and the man was barber **William Callaghan**. No street number was given, but the year was 1916, and in the city directories, the 19-teens--as well as a couple more decades!-- show that William Callaghan was running his barber shop from 106 Main. So that's probably the address.

This house is a puzzlement to me: it has the "five-bay" configuration of a standard colonial house. (A "bay" is an opening in the façade, either a door or a window.) It is 2 ½ stories tall, but it looks as if the roofline has been raised at some later point, and smaller windows inserted under the eaves to render the house almost 3 stories tall. I don't know whether this is a Federal variation on domestic architecture, or whether it's a common, useful way to gain extra living space from a standard colonial house, (particularly if you've used up your first floor to make dresses and cut men's hair!) while creating a roof that can be reshingled without so much angle to make you fall off! Unfortunately, these houses seem to have occurred in more civilized regions, so that most have been knocked down to put in modern architecture. I know there are some local folks who must know the answer to this question--feel free to contact me, or the Historical Society! (You know who you are...)

The next picture, moving up the street, shows the northernmost half of the main house at 246 Main (the south wing of which is currently Kimberly's luncheonette), the little Greek Revival-style building that was 250, and the first firehouse for Fire Company No.1. Only 246, the 1804 Joel Hall Jr. house, still remains. 250, Strong's and later **Whitby's Meat Market**, was knocked down in the 1980s. It had a charming façade with a pedimented gable, though its floors lifted and sank like old oaken sea waves. The tiny firehouse, resembling 601 Main Street, the 1889 Fire House No.2, was replaced in 1923 by a similar-sized gambrel-roofed building located exactly where the entrance to **Portland Country Market's** driveway now is. (And that was replaced in 1959 by the large brick building that we all know on Middlesex Avenue.) This picture was taken before 1922, because that was the year that 248 Main, recently the East Coast Glass shop, was built.

Moving up the street, there is a picture of 258, 260, and 264 Main, a cheerful shot of 259 Main during Fire Company No.1's 75th anniversary parade in 1959 (the porch is not yet closed in!), and the old Town Hall celebrating its 1941 north addition with **Robert A. Hurley**, the governor of the state.

Another postcard view shows 267, 269, 275, and a bit of 277 Main Street. Only 277 remains intact today. The other three have been demolished and rebuilt, or in the case of 267, druggist **Charles Blodget's** Greek Revival style house, made into a parking lot.

A very early shot of the old bank building at 269 Main (now the site of **Fleet Bank**) shows the dirt road with which people once had to deal. This road--our Main Street!--appears to be dry and perhaps a bit dusty, but a good rain could make that mud ankle deep, and mire till Tuesday your heavily-loaded wagon!

The calendar offers a lovely oval shot of **Waverly Hall**, the fancy building which stood at 275 Main from 1868 to 1918, and a program from one of its productions. Waverly Hall caught fire and burned in January of 1918. Cloaked in the fears of World War I and the knowledge that the town's arms had been stored in Waverly Hall, townspeople felt sure that German infiltrators had burned down the beautiful structure. They were wrong; the heater had simply caught the building on fire.

Then there are two shots of 272 Main, which is Portland Country Market today. One comes from the town's centennial celebration in 1941. The supermarket is a decade old, and it houses not only First National but **Conklin's Pharmacy** as well. **Ruth Campbell, Dorothy Larson, "Mr. Conklin," Roland Conklin Jr.,** and **James Natalie** are standing out front, with Natalie holding baby **Billy Conklin**. In the background, you can see a little gas station, which is the featured object of the next picture.

That shot takes you back to 1929, just a couple years before the supermarket was built. **William R. Peterson's** tiny Cape Cod-style gas station stands in the center of the picture. Where the supermarket now stands is the "**The Portland House**," an old twin-chimney colonial probably built around 1800, and torn down to put up the supermarket in 1931. This photo also features a 1929 Desoto Touring Car, the only car on the street. It's not the Portland you know in the region of 272-276 Main!

So look for the Historical Society's calendar for 2002--they will be available at the upcoming Portland Fair, from the Historical Society, Box 98, Portland CT 06480. Get yourself a different view of Main Street, a sense of what it might have been like to have lived a century or more ago. Then the next time you're stuck behind a left-turner or clogged bridge traffic, or parked and walking to **Dr. Lantos** or **Bordonaro's**, you will be able to let your mind drift back in time to a quieter, leafier, gentler view... (though you wouldn't have polio shots or resuscitators or email...!)