

# Which Town Center Do You Mean?

by Doris Sherrow, June 1999

**When it came time to erect a monument** for our brave boys who fought in the Civil War, that monument was, of course, erected in the center of town. And where was that center? Directly opposite the Congregational Church on the edge of Gildersleeve!

Portland was a shipbuilding town, and had been since the mid-1700s. The town "center," identified as Chatham Village on an 1826 map, drawn by students at the **American Literary, Scientific and Military Academy** (later **Wesleyan University**), was the **Gildersleeve** section. It was not called Gildersleeve back then, because **Sylvester Gildersleeve** was only 31 years old, little more than a third of the way into his long, productive life.

Even at that time, however, the area we today refer to as the "center" of town (at the opposite end of Main Street, leading to the bridge) must have had special significance. The first cemetery was put there, along Commerce Street. Quarrying had been pursued in this area since the 1600s. Just as the Gildersleeve area filled with beautiful houses built by the Gildersleeves or their sons-in-law, today's center became the location for the Hall family houses.

**Joel Hall** began buying land in the quarry area in the 1790s, and worked the quarries more actively than before. He up-scaled the quarry operation according to 19th century industrial principles, creating a larger industry – more work, more workers, more production. This thriving industry provided much of the development of lower Main Street.

It is unclear where Joel Hall lived, but his children's houses were once plentiful along lower Main Street. The set of postcards recently published by **P.R.I.D.E.** shows a twin-chimney colonial house at the corner of Main and Marlborough streets (where Brooks Pharmacy is now). This was the home of **Joseph Hall**, Joel's second son. It was probably built in the late 1700s, or early 1800s, and looked much like the house at 242 Main Street.

Across Marlborough Street, on the same side of Main, built around 1827, was Joseph's brother Jesse's house. It was a ridge-to-street Federal style, with a fanlight in the gable. There were two more, very similar, built by 1830 to the south of this one. The first was built for **Charles Williams**, who worked with the quarries, and the second for **Almyra Hall Edwards**, Joseph's and Jesse's niece. These three Federal-style buildings would have presented a lovely streetscape. Photographs in the WPA files at the State Library show the William's and Edwards' houses (Jesse Hall's is only described), with elegant woodwork, set on woody lots.

Across the street from Almyra Hall Edwards was her aunt, Joel's daughter **Emily**, and her husband **Henry Churchill**. This house stood on the southwest corner of Main and Silver streets. It, too, was a ridge-to-street, two-story Federal with a decorative entry porch over the doorway. In 1850, Charles H. Sage, who had married Jesse Hall's daughter, **Eliza**, built the Greek Revival house which we know at the Coffee Pot. The next building up the street would have been yet another ridge-to-street Federal, at 224 Main. This house belonged to **John and Hannah Hall Payne**. He was a druggist, and she the daughter of Joel Hall, the quarry owner. The daughters of **Henry and Emily Hall Churchill** had the house at 226 built for them in 1877.

The house at 242 Main was built by **Nathan Gillum**, a fellow quarry owner, in 1795. Its similarity to Joseph Hall's house, mentioned above, suggests that Joseph's house may have originally been built for his father Joel. Further research is necessary. 246 Main Street was also a Hall house, being the property of **Joel Hall Jr.**, and then his son, **Nathaniel B. Hall**.

251 Main Street also reflects the ridge-to-street Federal style (it still has a fanlight over the entry door), and while it was built by a shipbuilder named **George Bush**, it was bought by Joel Hall's son **Samuel** when he came back from living "out west" in upstate New York. Samuel Hall lived out his life here, and built the store which long-time residents knew as "**Mrs. Keane's Dancing School**." 245 Main Street (Liberty Bank) was built by Samuel's son, **Alfred**, in 1839. 231 Main Street (Portland Funeral Home) was built by Joseph Hall's son **Frederick** in 1845. The bungalow in the rear of 233 Main was built by Hall nieces. Between 1830 and 1880, there would have been Halls and their cousins all over the present day center of town.

The Halls must have been instrumental in shifting the town "center" from Gildersleeve to lower Main Street. In 1830, the Episcopal Church moved from the corner of Bartlett and High streets to its present Main Street location. This branch of the Halls were Episcopalian, and they surely

provided some of the impetus for that move. The definitive moment came in the 1890s, when Selectmen voted to acquire the brownstone house of the late **Jonathan Fuller** at 263 Main Street for a town hall. This switched the seat of government from the old Episcopal Church on the corner of Bartlett and High streets to the present downtown area.

What might once have become known as **Hall's Corner** became the recognized center of Portland.