THE GREEN
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TEASE

NARRATOR: The Connecticut Town Green …

For nearly 400 years, the town common has been a treasured part of civic life --providing state residents with an historic sense of place.

Next, THE GREEN

OPEN

NARRATOR: The green is a central part of most Connecticut towns … a hardy survivor of 400 years and a powerful symbol of classic New England civic, social and religious virtues.

JEFFERSON DAVIS (D) CT State Representative, 50th District: There are particular parts of Connecticut that are essential to our sense of being and greens are absolutely a part of that.

ANN SMITH (Curator, Mattatuck Museum): I think the town green is the place that sums up the community's sense of itself.

JOHN DEMOS (Professor of History, Yale): This is where we come together to kind of reaffirm our most basic values and commitments to one another.

DALE PLUMMER (Norwich City Historian): Greens are somehow symbolic of our democracy, of our kind of-New England's way of life, our tradition of town meetings.

NARRATOR: More than an icon, the green remains for many towns the heart of their community.

Some of Connecticut's 172 greens are in the middle of cities … some in the countryside …some anchor residential neighborhoods … others busy town centers. Some towns have several greens … others have none.

Yet, despite their remarkable survival, the history of these public spaces is often misunderstood, reflecting four centuries of changing usage and attitudes. .

BAND LEADER: Well ladies and gentlemen I'd like to welcome you Washington town green for this BBQ.this afternoon. What a day huh?

CHRISTOPHER COLLIER (CT State Historian): I think town greens mean to New Englanders, specifically to Connecticut people, a sense of community and a tangible focus for that sense of community. This is ours. This is where we come together for activities. We can see it. We can feel it. We can walk on it. It's a¾something that is people cry out for in today's world where there's very little civic involvement.

COMMON & UNDIVIDED

CHRISTOPHER COLLIER: New England towns have really two icons. And you can go to greens all across Connecticut and you find the green that's one of the icons and the congregational church. Most of the greens in Connecticut, in fact, were commons that were part of the church green.

When New Englanders came in the 17th Century they carried with them a sense of community, a sense of commonality and, of course, community to the Puritans was tremendously important.

In the early settlements they'd lay out common wood lot, common pasturage and common areas for civic meetings, etc., and these common areas included a church site, a site for the meetinghouse.

But these common areas were thought of as town land. In some cases the church would own it, in which case it was privately owned but treated as a public piece of property.

JOHN DEMOS: One thing that's very central to the lives of these puritan communities was the notion that the community should be as fully unified, harmonious, complete and coherent unto itself as possible. The green almost always was literally at the geographical center of these places as they were initially laid out.

The most prominent citizens in the town, the wealthiest, the ones from the most socially prestigious families, the office holders and their families, would typically live closest to the green, all of which would accentuate the sense of the green as being the center point, the focal point.

THE WILD COMMON

NARRATOR: From the first settlements in the 1600s to mid-19th Century, the town common was central to daily life in most state towns.

CHRISTOPHER COLLIER: Greens were practical. They were a place that you were gonna use. They were the places that people would congregate. They would come with their horses. The greens were mud flats covered with rocks, had pigs and¾and sheep grazing in them. There would be manure all over the place.

You read accounts done in the early 19th Century, the early 1800s of people describing these greens as littered with debris and rocks, just junk that had been left there. There was no real concern about clearing it up but that was true of homesteads, too. The whole idea of cleaning up comes along in the later 19th Century.

NARRATOR: The Guilford public square, laout in 1639, was the town center of religion, commerce, agriculture and government.

As in other towns, the church and related buildings were often built right on the common.

NONA BLOOMER: The earliest use was as a cemetery, and for the militia. It was used to pasture farm animals. By the end of the 18th Century when Guilford was prospering, it already had four buildings on it. It had two churches. It had a huge building that housed schools, and it had a townhouse. It had farm animals running all over the place and on top of everything it was cluttered with tombstones. They removed the tombstones eventually. Of course, the bodies are still buried in the green.

NARRATOR: In the 18th-Century, newly established towns created new greens, to serve as highway and market center, as well as a place for the meetinghouse …

Churches, courthouses, academies, taverns, shops and craftsmen all located on and around the green.

ANNOUNCER: "Good morning everyone and welcome to the 9th annual historic "Norwich Town Days"

NARRATOR: As the character of the Connecticut colony changed from Puritan to Yankee, town greens retained their central place in the community well after the separation of church and state in the early 1800s.

DALE PLUMMER: I think you have to look at the green as sort of the focus of civic life in the 17th and 18th Centuries. I think that one of the reasons that the green has become so important symbolically is that,… this is where the American Revolution was really born in Norwich. You know, this is where the liberty pole was s et up, where the Liberty tree news of Lexington and Concord came here. It was a sort of a public meeting place, a place where people gathered when great and momentous events happened in the colonial period during the American Revolution.

FROM PASTURE TO PARK

NARRATOR: With the rise of commercialism in the 1800s many town greens were diminished as businesses were established around them. Roads were widened --many greens shrank.

As 19th Century industrialization changed the character of Connecticut – and seemed to threaten a simpler way of life -- more towns preserved or often created a town green.

Groups of middle-class citizens-- often town women -- formed village improvement societies and turned greens from debris-strewn land into something that would provide an attractive place for rest and recreation.

CHRISTOPHER COLLIER: They began first by attempting to preserve what they had and, second, trying to make it look nice. As early as the 1790s they were beginning to plant trees; elms were a favorite. Beginning in the 1830s there were movements to clean up these greens, to make monuments of them, to bring some order to them and to beautify them.

They began mowing them. Planting grass and mowing them. They tore down buildings that were on the greens. They even tore down churches and moved them to other places. Greens became a refuge from the activity and noise of commercial and industrial society.

NARRATOR: In Litchfield, the swampy and rocky green was laid out in about 1720 as part of the original town settlement.

CATHERINE KEENE FIELDS (Director, Litchfield Historical Society): It was just a road, to the point where nobody was really taking care of it. And I guess this green particularly was pretty ugly during certain points in the late 18th and early 19th Century. The Village Improvement Society really began in about the 1870s and carried on through easily the 1920s. It's a group of local residents mostly weekend and summer residents who really felt it was their obligation to beautify the town.

And from the money they raised they put in sidewalks, they graded the green, they planted trees, they put in streetlights; they did things like put a clock in the courthouse tower, they arranged for the first trash pickup in Litchfield. They drained the swamp that was up at the other end of the green and they really made it into the three parks that we know today.

NARRATOR: Greens had always been used by the militia. During the Civil War, units mustered on the green… After the war, placing war memorials on the green became a natural extension of its military uses.

Civil War monuments became the earliest monuments on the green and remain the dominant focus of many to this day.

Some greens are monument parks, established in the 20th Century.

ANN SMITH: Towns and cities tend to put the things that they hold most important about their communities on the green, and we can tell a lot about how the community sees itself by the buildings they permit to be on the green, the activities they permit to be on the green, and the way they create monuments to things that they think are important whether it's the Civil War monuments or monuments to industry.

You'll notice in Waterbury, for example, we have a clock on the green because that was one of the important industries here in the Naugatuck Valley.

Part of what gives places meanings is what happens there so that we're adding memories to our greens so that by adding memories we add more layers of meaning to them. It makes them continuing living, breathing things rather than flies trapped in amber.

COLONIAL REVIVAL

NARRATOR: At the turn of the 20th Century, increased immigration and industrialization brought great change to Connecticut. Squalid cities, rising crime and poverty caused widespread fear, even panic.

In response to this social upheaval, patriotic groups like the Daughters of the American Revolution looked to an idealized Colonial history as the embodiment of society's essential values.

The resulting Colonial Revival radically changed the appearance of town greens while making them a powerful cultural icon.

JAMES SEXTON (Historian): A lot of the sort of emotional investment which we have in greens was created as America modernized, industrialized, became more urbanized and began to be filled with immigrants, greens in New England became a foil for that. They were our good bucolic past.

ANN SMITH: Americans remembered that they had been a rural society and tried very hard to create the image of that rural society again, and so they copied classical revival details on buildings, only they got the scale wrong. The buildings are bigger and much more elaborate than they would indeed have been in the colonial period.

CHRISTOPHER COLLIER: They're trying to recreate something that probably never existed; they're trying to recreate an idealized green whereas in the earlier period they were working with what they had and just trying to clean it up. Of course, the most famous one in Connecticut is the Litchfield town green, but that's a wholly constructed thing.

CATHERINE KEENE FIELDS: And what they really did was make it much neater and cleaner and prettier than any 18th century town could ever be. It's when many of the houses in Litchfield were painted white and grew black shutters; it's when the center of town which had been really built in the 1880s and

1890s, brick Victorian buildings, were given shutters, painted white, add columns and pilasters and all kinds of colonial detail were added, and it really gave the town the look that we know today.

The first two churches were on the green. The church that we have now was built in 1826 off the green. In the 1860s the town decided they wanted a …Victorian church. So they took the steeple off this church, moved it around the corner and it became a dance hall, a movie theater, a roller-skating rink and a meetinghouse, and built a Victorian church. In the 1920s they tore the Victorian church down, moved the congregational church back around the green, restored its tower and made it into the colonial icon church that we have today.

NARRATOR: The Colonial Revival inspired towns to put in new greens often as memorial parks

CHRISTOPHER COLLIER: Where there were no greens, people were putting in greens in the 1870s, 1880s. Many of the greens that we see around now are greens that in fact didn't exist in the colonial period, didn't even exist in the early national period but were established in the late 19th Century. So many of the greens are artificial. They were put there as greens for passive recreation.

THE AUTOMOBILE AGE

NARRATOR: The revival movement began to fade in the early 20th Century as commercial and industrial development continued to chip away at the greens.

The greatest change in the 20th Century came with the rise of the automobile.

CHRISTOPHER COLLIER: They began to macadamize roads and that is the period in which we probably saw more diminution of greens than at any other era. Building roads right through the centers of greens and right across greens and crisscrossing them and having four corners on them. And then the merchants began in the 1920s to put colored fluorescent lighting and you have the green just becoming garish, commercial spot.

Milford, for instance -- its green has been chewed up so it's now just a thin strip that runs along the center of town. And it's got Subways and Dunkin' Donuts with their colorful but not very pleasing signs up that destroys the aesthetics of the green.

NARRATOR: Connecticut residents began to reconsider the relationship of road to green in the second half of the 20th Century.

In the 1950s before there was an Interstate 84, 35,000 cars a day passed right by the Waterbury green.

ANN SMITH: The proposal then was to eliminate much of the green so there would be more room for the 35,000 cars to get through and to take what was left and create parking. There was a tremendous opposition to the loss of the green at that point and the consequences, the interchange for Route 84 and Route 8, out here just a couple blocks away which has made it possible for the green to remain intact.

IN COMMON MEMORY

NARRATOR: More than just hardy survivors, greens continue to be a central part of community life throughout Connecticut.

Waterbury's town green has seen many successive waves of decay and development around its perimeter.

MARIE GALBRAITH (Director, Mattatuck Museum): I think it's a part of community memory in Waterbury. This is an historical spot. It wasn't something that was created yesterday. It has been here since the community was first established in 1677. The green has always been a center where fairs, festivals, celebrations and rallies have been held.

We've had three presidents visit Waterbury: Franklin Delano Roosevelt. President Reagan came to Waterbury and also was hosted on the Waterbury green. John F. Kennedy spoke from the balcony of the Elton Hotel. The green was filled with people who waited for his arrival.

It's a center for public expression, civic, patriotic, religious expression.

NARRATOR: The Lebanon Green was laid out in 1697 as a wide swampy road separating the settler's home lots. It is the largest surviving green in New England.

ALICIA WAYLAND (Lebanon Town Historian): It is a mile in length. It is still in agricultural use, a use that dates back over 300 years to the early days of the town's settlement, and it is the site of significant events during the Revolutionary War. And we still have many of the sites connected with the American Revolution preserved here around the green.

Well, there are many public uses that go on around the green and always have. You know, in the early days you had your militia drilling here, you had your fairs here, that type of thing, and we still use the green for those things today. In fact, that's what makes it so alive and why people love it so much. It's very active.

NARRATOR: The New Haven green has remained the focus of civic and religious life in the city since the first days of settlement.

NEWTON SCHENCK (Chairman, Committee of Proprietors, New Haven Green): New Haven Colony was first settled in 1638 and shortly thereafter the 9 squares that form the core of the city were laid out. The center square is the New Haven green which is 17 plus acres. The first settlers were given plots of land around the green and were known as proprietors, owners. And the proprietors all had an undivided interest in the green and really as a group governed it.

NARRATOR: Eventually the proprietors designated a committee of five to manage the green. These proprietors survive today as a self-perpetuating group, selecting their own members.

NEWTON SCHENCK: We're the only surviving group of its kind, I believe, in the country. The functions of the proprietors are to maintain the green, to guard it. The city's park department acts as our agent and the city funds the maintenance of the green. Our most interesting function, perhaps, is not maintenance of the green but rather governing the uses of the green. We never act as censors of that so that a political speech on the green is always permitted. So that if anybody wants to make a splash they generally will ask to use the New Haven green as the place where they can make the most impact.

NARRATOR: The Litchfield green today remains the center of town and a place for civic events…

CATHERINE KEENE FIELDS: There were a couple different celebrations that were held during the mid to late 19th Century. One was the 150th anniversary of the town. The Civil War regiment mustered here before they went off to war. Now we have craft shows, we have borough days, we have a big road race in Litchfield and that's all centered on the green, so now it's more community events. Borough Days represents the many different kinds of celebrations or activities that took place on the green over the course of Litchfield's history.

THE MYTH & REALITY

NARRATOR: Greens and many of the activities on them point to a comfortable imagined past.

JOHN DEMOS: I think they've come to symbolize in our minds an earlier time, an earlier way of life which we imagine as being simpler, more harmonious, more peaceful. Basically the green stands for the good side, the best in us because we, at some level I think we're still uncomfortable with the world we live in where individual interests really are primary so much of the time, looking out for number one and all of that. The green is the opposite of looking out for number one, and we like to remind ourselves of that.

Whether or not it's based on any reality. The Puritans did their share of looking out for number one, in fact, if you examine their lives closely. One of the striking things about early New England local history I think for many historians is the degree to which these places were actually very conflict ridden. Constant running struggles and sometimes violent struggles.

DON'T TOUCH MY GREEN!

NARRATOR: The historic symbolism –whether real or imagined – surrounding the green ironically often makes this symbol of community a source of conflict.

In Tolland, traffic, curbing and signs pit resident against resident.

REBECCA BOYDEN (Chair, Tolland Planning & Zoning Commission): Tolland loves its green and most of the citizens in Tolland are pretty passionate about it. There are people that feel that the green should be protected by curbing, that that would prevent people from parking on the green, There are other people who actually feel that that's part of the traditional use of the green, that it's a gathering place and that if you try and keep people off it, if you make it more difficult to park around the green that then in fact you're actually restricting its use a little bit. The use of signs on the green is another example of¾of some different points of view in terms of the use of the green. That some people feel, oh, all those signs! They look terrible! But, in fact, the town green is traditionally the place where you would put a sign that you wanted everyone to see

NARRATOR: In Guilford, no civic matter raises more interest than the fate of the town green.

NONA BLOOMER: People care passionately about the green and for them it symbolizes the way they relate to the town. Because of the disputes that it has aroused concerning whether more memorials should be put on, considering¾concerning what kind of trees should be put on, what kind of lamps it should have, what kind of benches, what kind of garbage pails.

NARRATOR: In Durham, maintaining the town hall's historic location by the green was a primary issue in an October 2000 referendum. Using a fix-it-here or build-a-new-one-there argument, supporters of renovation claimed that the town hall might have to move off the green unless funding was approved. In a backlash, some voters claimed scare tactics and turned down the project.

Antiques dealers Bill and Sandy Landon bought the revolutionary-era residence Redwood in Lebanon in 1986 and have been carefully restoring it since. They became embroiled in local controversy after they proposed to build a par-3 golf course behind their home, which is directly across from the town green.

BILLY LANDON: And we thought it would be an unoffensive thing for the town, that basically this would be good for the young folks and others, and we wanted to create a park here.

SANDY LANDON: One of my passions for the golf course was to bring more people here to appreciate the town and what it stands for. And what's wrong with the oldest game in the world being played where they can enjoy the historic significance of the whole area?

BILLY LANDON: And we don't expect to make any kind of a change that's detrimental to the town of Lebanon.

NARRATOR: Lebanon's town historian led the battle against the Landon's proposal.

ALICIA WAYLAND: The zoning regulations do allow for certain business uses around the green and after all, it was the center of business activity in the old days so to speak. But the point is 300 years later how intense do you want that activity to be?

NARRATOR: For most of the 20th Century, the state Department of Transportation often proposed improvements to traffic flow that significantly impacted town greens.

In the mid 1990s, the DOT proposed reconfiguring the town of Brooklyn's central roads at the expense of an already diminished green.

JEFFERSON DAVIS: And the townspeople of Brooklyn got up in arms and just said, this is an affront that we can't take, it is tearing apart what we think is an emotional center of our town here at the town green. We got the Department of Transportation to dramatically change not only their design for here in Brooklyn but to change their whole philosophy in how they approach road projects.

NARRATOR: The spread of suburbanization in Connecticut and its impact on the built environment and state culture finally led the Connecticut legislature to pass the Village District Act in 1998. The act strengthened the power of local citizens to protect the neighborhood around the green.

JEFFERSON DAVIS: It made clear for local zoning boards that they really had the jurisdiction to be able to zone aesthetics -- that the shapes and positioning of buildings and their relationship to roads were important to the feel that any area, particularly the town green, gives to a town. It's different than historic districts. It's not interested in just capturing one point in time.

As we put up subdivisions that outside of architectural style could be in any state in the nation, as we find more and more strip malls popping up everywhere across the state that again increases the homogeneity of our life, that town greens are important for the people's sense of community, it gives them their roots, it gives them a spiritual sense of being in their town, and that's important.

NARRATOR: A vital part of Connecticut for nearly 400 years the town green is a tangible link to an imagined small-town past –an everlasting, visible and central place for a cherished concept of community.

DALE PLUMMER: The reality of the green and the image that most people have of it are not really in sync. But in some ways is that-is that so important? I think that-that the greens in some ways are more of a myth, a kind of counter mythology that we in Connecticut and in New England hold together and hold very dear.

CHRISTOPHE WIGREN (Assistant Director, CT Trust for Historic Preservation): The way we shape our greens not only attempts to¾to serve the community in some¾some practical way like providing a space

for band concerts but also as a way of expressing who we'd like to be and where we think we've come from, of trying to tie ourselves to our history and to maybe pick and choose the bits and pieces of that history we want to tie ourselves to, and to say who we think we are.