

PICTURE QUIZ
Can You Name This?



The Chronicle Quarterly

Weston Historical Society

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THE W.S.C.

In a world full of abbreviations we are bombarded with initials such as ABC, NBC, QVC, and the ever popular O.C. Well right here in Weston we have the W.S.C. Of course we more fondly refer to this as the Weston Shopping Center. Although the Shopping Center is not part of Weston's earliest history, it is a place which initiated great changes in Weston's recent history and has forever affected our lives.

Chris Robinson, son of Peter Robinson, builder of the W.S.C., has been kind enough to donate a history of the Weston Center written by his father in 1962. He has also donated the picture of the Center in 1950 when it first opened to the public. We would like to share this history with you.

Precursor: The concept of the Center grew in the minds of the entrepreneurs as they discovered a need for staple goods and services in the community while building residences in their neighborhood. A loaf of bread, pharmaceuticals and gasoline were at that time seven miles distant in any direction.

1949

Purchased 6.22 acres of land for \$5,000 in October from Joshua

Everett and commenced site preparation and construction in November.

1950

In January, the Town of Weston enjoined the corporation for violation of its "Zoning" ordinance, 32-C, and work on the project was stopped, pending a hearing in Superior Court, Bridgeport.



The Robinson Family: L-R Chris, Margaret, Sylvia, Peter and their two dogs.

In February, the owners appeared in Superior Court, before Judge Murphy, with their attorney, Harold Cable. After hearing both sides of the issue (Dwight Fanton was then Town Counsel), Judge Murphy called us into chambers and gave us his opinion of the position: to wit, 32-C had already been ruled unconstitutional in Wilton in 1938 in the Court of Common Pleas, in the case of Town of Wilton vs. W. & J. Sloan.

32-C was a slap-dash ordinance that put Zoning in the hands of the Selectmen, in a capricious manner.

The Judge felt that if he were forced to rule in this case, he would rule 32-C unconstitutional in Superior, upholding the Court of Common Pleas. However, he did not want to rule and leave the Town of Weston totally exposed without any form of Zoning. So he suggested that he delay ruling until the Town could organize a proper Zoning Code and appoint a commission to regulate it. He also suggested that the owners of W.S.C. might be well advised to take the matter of whether or not the townspeople really wanted a Shopping Center to a Town Meeting to put the matter to a vote.

Against the advice of their attorney, the owners of W.S.C. agreed to abide by the Judge's position and take the matter to a vote. To the surprise of many, a packed Town Meeting in March voted in favor of the Shopping Center in a ratio of three to one. The Town's injunction against W.S.C. was then dropped while the Selectmen set about appointing a Planning and Zoning Commission to adopt a code. Judge Murphy later expressed pleasure at this outcome.



The W.S.C. continued

Work on W.S.C. was resumed at full tilt and in April a plan for a gasoline filling station was given a permit and leased to Standard Oil of California, through Hoffman Fuel Company, in Bridgeport. It was then subleased to Alfred Falla, a Weston resident. This was the first venture to open in the Center, but it was subjected before construction to a last-minute, last-ditch fight to have the permit cancelled. A local woman who was then a State Assemblywoman, and a political aspirant from Weston, sought in Hartford to have the gasoline permit revoked on the grounds that the service station was a danger to the children and buses entering and emerging from the school entrance and exit about 300 feet to the north on the opposite side of the highway. Officials from the highway department visited the site, and offered a median solution – face the service station in a southeasterly direction, instead of parallel to the road. This was carried out, and accounts for the “catty-corner” position of the filling station to this day.

During the Spring and Summer, leases were consummated with Peter Vetromile (Ed. Note: Peter lived in the Weston Boarding School home and ran Peter's Bridge Market in Westport) for a market, Phillips Taylor for a hardware store, Roger Manchester for a real estate agency, Frank Zack for a dry cleaning service, Margaret Van De Velde for a gift shop, and Howard Burling for a hobby shop. These tenants were all installed by late September.

At this time, no tenants had been secured for the Pharmacy building, which had been constructed along with the other buildings. Lengthy negotiations had taken place with Joseph Colgan of Westport (Ed. Note: Colgan's Drug Store was located at the corner of the Post

Road and Taylor Place, currently operated by Tiffany's), but when they fell through, the owners financed others in the setting up of the Pharmacy, retaining a partnership in the enterprise.

Further, leases were signed with Robert Ventrella for a barber shop to the west in the same building and with Joseph Simone for the operation of a beauty salon, also adjoining the Pharmacy to the east.

By the end of 1950, therefore, the Center was fully leased and the tenants installed in their respective areas in four separate masonry buildings, designated as: #1 Market Building; #2 Hardware Building; #3 Pharmacy Building; and #4 Gasoline Service Station.

At the end of 1950, the Shopping Center had only secured approximately \$17,500 in rents, but it was already showing signs of strong patronage and promise for the future. The original buildings, designed by Peter Robinson (with Paul Taylor as draftsman), had cost \$181,000 including site improvements, such as curbing and paving, landscaping, fencing, lighting and drainage. Adding land cost, the total original investment was \$186,000.

The original construction and 15-year permanent mortgage loan, placed against the premises by People's Savings Bank, of Bridgeport, before the buildings were fully leased, was in the amount of \$80,000 at 4 ? % interest.

The chief friends of the Shopping Center plan, and its hard-fought realization, had been townspeople such as John O'Brien, Fire Chief, John and George Guidera, Deputy Sheriffs; Charles and Elizabeth Brock (the latter being Chairman of the Board of Assessors); John Orr

Young, a large property owner nearby; Gertrude Walker, Town Clerk; Herbert Gifford, 2nd Selectman; Ed James, former state assemblyman; and numerous other functionaries who labored in the vineyards of Weston's problems daily, and who favored orderly growth and practical services for the community.

1952

Margaret Van de Velde failed, moved out, and Peter Vetromile signed an Agreement to lease her vacated space, next to his, if he could obtain a liquor license.

The owners gave him every aid in this matter, which he sorely needed, since he needed a town referendum to vote the town dry or wet, before going to the State Liquor Control Commission for his permit.

He was vigorously opposed at the outset by the pharmacy managers, who felt that a package-store permit would impair sales of their bottle permit which was part of the Connecticut pharmacy license.

The operators of the pharmacy gathered a coterie of supporters to oppose the application. On referendum day, the Town voted Wet, by one vote. Peter Vetromile and the owners proceeded to a hearing in Hartford held by the Liquor Commission. By this time Dwight Fanton and his firm, Pullman, Comley, Bradley and Reeves were no longer Town Counsel, and the owners had invited them to be retained counsel for W. S. C. They accepted and represented the owners before the Liquor Commission, where they were most instrumental in the owners obtaining a permit. One individual appeared as a competitive merchant opposed to the permit.



The W.S.C. continued

Peter Vetromile got his permit. He did a remarkable business immediately, but oddly enough, liquor volume in the pharmacy also increased. The pharmacy was not the slightest bit hurt, because their permit was for bottle sales only, whereas Peter Vetromile's permit was for caseloads or "Package" sales as the vernacular terminology goes.

The pharmacy liquor business increased because the single bottle purchasers preferred his merchandising to the lot sales pressed by Peter Vetromile.

1952

Early in the year, Howard Burling vacated his premises, and the owners leased his space immediately to the adjoining Hardware Store.

A little later in the year, Joseph Simone, who had been enjoying a good initial patronage for his beauty salon, lost his customers and vacated the premises. The space on the northeast corner of the inner circle of the Center remained vacant for a considerable period but the owners went at once to Einar Andersen, President of the Westport Bank & Trust Company, to offer him the location at an attractive rental. This elderly gentleman was a starched conservative who did not at that time believe in the "risks" of branch banking, even when his main office had on hand over \$1,000,000 in savings accounts lodged by Weston school children.

The owners maintained patience and bided their time, leasing the space for one year to John Dowling, Esquire, an attorney from Ridgefield.

1953

Mr. Andersen called early in the year to commit his bank to a 10-

year lease in the Center, when the Dowling lease was terminated.

The results, over the years, both for the Bank and other merchants in the Center, and the owners, have been most satisfactory. Mr. Andersen remained pleased at his own perspicacity for the rest of his life.

1954

With all tenancies now firmly established, the owners ventured to refinance the first mortgage against the property. The People's Bank seemed eager to make the loan, in the amount of \$125,000 for 15 years, at 5 %

The rest of the year was fairly uneventful for the Center, except for an inquiry from the Boston Regional Office of the U.S. Post Office Department, who wanted to know if the owners would be interested in bidding on a location for a branch office of the Westport Post Office. The owners replied, suggesting a position in the Center, north of the gasoline service station.

The Center, by this time, was generating about \$35,000 per year in gross rents, and the owners believed they could finance a Post Office, although it would require pilings to a depth of approximately 27 feet, in the swampy area back of the gas station.

The Town of Weston had by this time reached a population of about 7,000 up from 2,500 in 1949. Construction of quality homes abounded, and it was becoming clear that the Center would have to be expanded. In particular, the Taylors wanted to add an annex to the west of their stores, and Bill and Mae Chiarichiaro had approached the owners about the

possibility of a clothing store as an annex to the west of the Pharmacy Building.

1955

The year was uneventful for the Shopping Center, except for severe floods, following a record rainfall, which not only washed out sections of the Merritt Parkway, Route 7, Route 58, and Route 57, but literally made an island of a large part of Weston, including the Shopping Center neighborhood.

Gifford's Hill (Ed. Note: Weston Road going towards Westport from the Coley House down the hill was called Gifford's Hill) obliterated, and with it, River Road and stretches of Lyons Plain Road. The Saugatuck and Aspetuck rivers overflowed to the extent of submerging roads and houses along their banks. The bridge from Newtown Turnpike to Georgetown Road, at the head of Cobb's Mill Pond was carried away, and the Georgetown area isolated from the school and Shopping Center district.

For about a week during and after this deluge, the only food, medicine and automobile service in Weston was in the Shopping Center.

At this time, Mr. Vetromile, proprietor of "Peter's Market" in the Center, lived in Westport, and had no way of getting to the store, to open it to meet the emergency.

It was not surprising that in this situation, a group of the Town's most respectable citizens, some of the formerly antagonistic to the existence of the Shopping Center, broke into Peter's Market one night and took whatever staples they needed.

They later accounted to Mr. Vetromile for most of the

The W.S.C. continued

merchandise taken that night, and the storm is related here only to show how necessary the Shopping Center had become to the general welfare of the community in fair weather and foul.

1956

The storm damages to the Center and the surrounding roads were repaired, State Flood Control actions were put to work, and the community grew rapidly in this year, with a record number of housing starts. The school population had doubled since 1950 and a new middle school (Ed: Note: This was the South House which held grades 3, 4, & 5) installed. The volume of trade in the Shopping Center had also doubled since 1950.

1957

By this time the Hardware Store d/b/a "House of Wares", was handling a volume of business not only in builders' supplies and hardware, but in gifts, china-ware, glass-ware, garden equipment, tools, paints, and other items requisite to house-holding. The volume was too great for the space they held, and Paul and Phillip Taylor, the proprietors, asked the owners to submit a plan for an Annex (Building No. 5) to their store, and to attempt to get a building permit from the Zoning Board of Appeals.

To effect this construction, the owners of the Shopping Center sought out E.F. O'Dwyer, a resident architect, who was noted for his expertise in New England Colonial design.

At about this time, William and Mae Chiarichiaro also approached the owners for space in which to open a small clothing store. (Ed. Note: Currently the bank building). Mr. O'Dwyer thereupon drew a plan for an Annex (Building No. 6)

to the Pharmacy building, which would be in balance with the Annex across the circle.

Late in the year Mr. O'Dwyer's plans for both Annexes were presented by the owners to a formal hearing by the Zoning Board of Appeals and thirty days later, building permits were issued. Bids were let out through Mr. O'Dwyer, and Samuel Clark and Son of Norwalk, was selected to erect both additions.

1958

The Annex to the Hardware Store was erected first, completed in early Spring to accommodate the Hardware Store's summer garden business.

Later in the year, the Chiarichiaros' store was completed in time to meet the Back-to-School September trade.

Both buildings proved to be enhancements of the Center as a whole, and the business enterprises they housed flourished.

1959

An agreement to lease, with specifications spelled out was received by the owners, from the regional U.S. Post Office headquarters, early in this year. Again, Mr. O'Dwyer was chosen to design a free-standing Post Office building, with offices overhead, in the swampy northern section of the Center property, with an entrance and exit to the rear of the gasoline service station. The building would require pilings.

The attractive plan was submitted to the Zoning Board of Appeals, and a noisy hearing ensued with two neighbors in particular objecting vehemently to the plan. They did not object to the Post Office, but felt that offices might cause competition to an already

established dentist. The Zoning Board of Appeals granted a permit for a one-story Post Office, which was constructed at heavy expense because of the pilings required. The Post Office lease, by itself, was not economically rewarding, and second-story offices would have made up the economic difference, so the Post Office was for some years a financial burden, although it drew traffic to the Center, and added to the prosperity of the merchants.

1960

Early in this year, Dr. Michael Burnham, Chairman of the Planning and Zoning Commission, asked the owners if they would make a 20-year projection for possible growth in the Weston Shopping Center. The owners agreed to do this at their own expense, and employed E. F. O'Dwyer to make a schematic drawing and an elevation showing the direction and size of the Center for the 20-year period.

To do this, a survey of the property, including the 5.2 acres annexed to the Center at its northwest corner, which had recently been acquired from Charles and Elizabeth Broch, was undertaken. Mr. O'Dwyer placed a major supermarket, of about 10,000 square feet, free-standing, in the center of the newly acquired property, and the existing "Peter's Weston Market", was converted to other uses, such as a restaurant.

The development plan was formally presented to the Planning & Zoning Commission early in the Autumn, at a cost of about \$2,000 to the owners. The propriety of this hearing was destroyed by the uninvited appearance of the Chairman of the Town Finance Board.

The W.S.C. continued



Photo of Weston Shopping Center After its completion 1950.

Unfortunately he had no business at this meeting which had earlier been placed on a “confidential basis,” by Dr. Burnham. However when the uninvited guest intruded, Dr. Burnham made no move to remove him. While this meeting was not a formal hearing and “off the record”, the guest’s heckling and capricious criticisms ruined any possibility of serious discussion, and the owners left the meeting feeling that the cost of this courtesy to the Planning and Zoning Commission had been a waste of time, thought and money.

Presumably, the secretary of the Commission, Mrs. Gertrude Walker, still has the architectural renderings for that projection on file in the Town Hall.

It should be noted, in closing out the activities of 1960, in Weston Shopping Center history, that acquisition of the Broch property had included a right-of-way over Willow Lane, a private road, giving the Shopping Center a second access, when and if it became necessary.

1961

This was an uneventful year in Weston Center’s development except for refinancing the first mortgage with People’s Savings Bank. A new mortgage, in the amount of \$275,000 for 15 years at 6% was placed against the premises. Gross income at that time had reached about \$50,000 per annum. Net, after debt service, was about \$14,000.

1962

In this year, one of the stockholders in Weston Shopping Center, Inc., namely Peter C. Robinson, sold his interest to John B. Strater, and a new era of management and development began.

This was written by Peter C. Robinson, co-builder of the Weston Shopping Center with Margaret S. Robinson, on or about the time of the transfer of his interest to John B. Strater.

As you can see, the W.S.C. has not been without its controversy as with all major changes in Weston’s past (e.g., the Saugatuck Reservoir, cell towers,). People often feel threatened by changes in their lives, but the Weston Shopping Center has become such an integral part of our lives and our history that it seems impossible that the Center has a relatively short history. Mr. Robinson had a vision which he saw through to fruition and he saw a need for goods and services for our community. Think of all the extra driving we would have to do for that loaf of bread, or to cash a check, mail a letter or fill our tanks.

Our sincere thanks to the Robinson Family for sharing this part of our history with us and for their support of the Weston Historical Society and its future archival facility. This recorded story and picture will certainly become one of our most treasured possessions.



OUR FIRST ISSUE

As we begin our 25th year of the Chronicle, we thought it would be fun to share articles in the very first issue. This newspaper was originally conceived and written by Herb Day, a former trustee, president of the Society, and curator of our barn museum. Following is his first editorial:

THE PRESIDENT'S CORNER

Welcome to our world! We are the Weston Historical Society Trustees and our world is the History of Weston and the surrounding areas. Many of you are members of our Society joining because of an interest in Weston history or because of a civic sense of responsibility to support a local organization.

We hope you joined for both reasons because we need your support for which we pledge that we will continue to expand our historically related program to bring you closer to the history of Weston and New England.

One way we plan to do this is to send this quarterly newsletter to members. We hope the information and stories published in the chronicle will bring us closer together.

Weston Historical Society Trustees:
Eda Bardsley, R. Geoffrey Bardsley, Reeve Biggers, Sylvia Bowles, Colin Campbell, Rev. Robert Greene, Ralph Greenwood, Lou Harper, Ruth Lockwood, Edna Lutz Emeritus, Anson Morton, Marge Schneider, Marion Stoff, Barbara Van Suetendael, Rev. Michael Thornburg, and Herbert Day, President.

This is the first issue of the Chronicle—a quarterly newsletter

written for members of the Weston Historical Society. We have published newsletters in the past, however. This is the first issue of an expanded revision we know you will be proud to receive just as we are proud to send it to you.



The Chronicle will be a quarterly newsletter containing regular items and some feature stories we know you will enjoy. However, to keep the Chronicle of interest to you, we welcome any ideas you have for format and stories. Just write to the Editor, The Chronicle, P.O.Box 1092, Weston, Ct. 06883.

Future issues of the Chronicle will contain stories on Weston History, a list of many of the old houses in Weston and some articles on genealogy.

We have sent this first issue to the residents of Weston. If you are not a member of the Weston Historical Society, you may wish to join so you can receive future copies which will be sent to the membership.

HELP

Will you share your talents with us? See article on page 2 for areas where we need help.

THE WESTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY WHO WE ARE

The Weston Historical Society was formed in 1961. It already held a substantial backlog of history to investigate, record and preserve. It was in 1671 that the forest land which is now Easton was marked off in long narrow divisions called "long lots" by the early settlers of New Fairfield on the Sound.

Weston officially became a town in 1787. Before that it was known as Norfield Parish and at the time what has become Easton and Weston was one area, but because of geographical and transportation problems of the day had difficulty functioning as a community.

The region was primarily devoted to farming but water power from the several branches of the Saugatuck River were soon put to use for driving grist mills, saw mills and in the 1800's for small industrial uses.

Weston's Historical Society saw the rapid changes taking place and concluded that positive action was needed to preserve articles and records so that both present and future generations could be aware of the town's heritage. As a result, it has been active on many individual projects, directed as the By-Laws express it, as "Preserving the Past for the Benefit of the Future."



BARN MUSEUM

The first major program was the acquiring and remodeling of an early working farm barn to house the gifts and acquisitions which flowed to the Society. Today this is a valued collection of early farm tools, furnishings, papers, clothing and records depicting how the early residents lived and made an often precarious livelihood. It is housed in the Barn Museum located on Weston Road. It is open at published times or by appointment for groups such as school children or interested adults. Open House at the Museum frequently includes demonstrations of craft work such as weaving, spinning or caining of chairs.

PICTURE QUIZ

If you can name the item in the picture, send your answer and your name and address to the Editor: The Chronicle, P.O. Box 1092, Weston, Ct. 06883. The answer will appear in the next issue.

(Ed. Note) For many years Herb always presented us with a picture quiz of an item located in the barn. Sometimes one of our readers was able to identify something that we were not sure of, but most times people were stumped. Herb had a lot of fun giving our readers a piece of past history.

Although we have now moved much of our furniture, clothing, and papers into the house, the barn remains full of antique tools and equipment used by many of Weston's residents for their own personal use, and for the small businesses that they ran. As Herb asked in his first issue, we are still in need of your help, with your talents and your contributions as we look ahead to our very own archival facility, and I hope that we have

continued to embrace Herb's vision of a newspaper for our members which conveys our goal in "Preserving the Past for the Benefit of the Future."



VALENTINE WINNERS

We would like to congratulate the winners of our second annual Valentine Contest. Our First Prize winner was Zach Regenstein of the 4th Grade, Second Prize went to Cate Cataldo who is in kindergarten, and our honorable mention prizes went to Gabriela Low, Nathan Edelman (kindergarten), and Juliana Hartman (Grade 3).

Our thanks to the other entrants who included Hayley from PK, Vanessa Eliasson, and Mallory Bennhoff from Kindergarten, James Cataldo, Claire DiMarco, and Charlie Paishow from Grade 1, Caroline Laplaca, Jane Cataldo,

Andrew Folger, Maggie Miller and Chase LaFontaine from Grade 2, Miriam Low, Susanna Clark, and Karrienne Rogers from Grade 3, Dylan Weiss Sydney Fain, Emma Finegan, and Matthew Folger from Grade 4, Helena Low Grade 5, Sydney Weiss Grade 6 and Morgan Folger Grade 7.

All the entries were colorful, inventive, and clever. It was a very hard job to pick just 5 winners. Our thanks to Judy Albin, chair of the event, Karin Giannitti, and Lyette Sygedahl for helping with the judging and to all those who participated to make our Valentine Contest a great success.

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