

WINCHESTER TOWN COMMON

By Ellen Knight¹



It has been a place of beauty, of pleasant recreation during leisure moments, a source of public pride, and a cause calling forth willing contributions from townspeople and organizations. Yet it has also seen controversy, ridicule, scandal, and neglect. It is the Town Common.

The area that colonial settlers originally used as a common for grazing cattle was not the one identified as the Common today. The current Common lies in front of the First Congregational Church. The colonial common lands lay next to Winter Pond. The road along which cattle were driven from the east side of the settlement to the pond was known as Driver's Lane, renamed as Church Street after the Congregational Church was built in 1840.

The lot that was transformed into the Town Common in the nineteenth century originally formed part of the Edward Converse farm and remained farmland for about two centuries. After Winchester was incorporated (1850), two Woburn men purchased it in 1851 for resale as house lots, but six men of the Congregational Society bought the land to prevent just that. Over the next several years the owners refused to sell the land for development, preferring to offer it to the town for a Common. After more than one Town Meeting discussion on the subject (and some controversy), the Town purchased the land for \$7,000 in 1867.

For several years the Town did nothing with the lot—leading quite naturally to some public raillery—while it remained ungraded, devoid of trees, uncrossed by walking paths. Dumped all over it were piles of used tan bark from the tannery on the other side of the railroad. Then, in 1873, a bandstand was built, the first sign of a larger vision of a public park. This vision began taking real shape in 1875, when the Town appropriated money for grading, loaming, and planting. After the Village Improvement Society was formed in 1882, that group took an interest in the Common and contributed to its improvement. In 1883, under the direction of a Common and Tree Committee, the Common was regraded and cement walkways were laid out. During this era maple trees were planted which shaded the area into the mid-twentieth century.



View of the Common, looking from what is now Laraway Road toward Church Street. A liberty pole, erected in 1882, is in the center.

The 1883 plans did not, however, include the bandstand. Initially, the bandstand was the butt of public mockery and lament, for after an inaugural performance by the town band on the Fourth of July, it went unused for the rest of the year. "What has become of our band?" queried a resident in the *Winchester Star* in October. "The stand erected on the Common at great expense has not been used." In November, when a mock town meeting warrant was printed, the band and the bandstand each formed the subject of an article of mockery. Over the next ten years, the town band did perform there, at irregular intervals, until the stand went up in flames on another July 4th.



Instead of rebuilding the bandstand, the common committee opted for a jet fountain. (A new bandstand was later built on Manchester Field.) Three years later, when a more elaborate fountain was proposed, residents rapidly responded to a fund-raising drive, and a new, larger fountain was installed that summer. From a thirty-foot pond, the fountain rose on an octagonal base to a height of 17 feet. Two sprays and one jet of water descended from two figures at the top to a five-foot basin, which rained the

water down to a lower seven-foot basin, which in turn showered the water in about a hundred fine sprays.

At first not all were pleased with the new fountain—for one reason. Atop the fountain, shocking prudent Victorians, the two cherubic figures stood in the nude. The protest that arose from certain quarters was vehement enough to force their removal. This scandal notwithstanding, for scores of years the town common, with its attractive fountain, leisurely walkways, green lawn, and shade trees, was a lovely interlude in the town's commercial district. For some years, residents even enjoyed watching goldfish swimming in the fountain's pool. In the late 1930s the town saw the return of the cherubs—this time clothed in a coat of green paint—which had stood the meanwhile near the home of the water superintendent. In 1942 they were destroyed in an accident of undisclosed origin.

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When the work outlined in 1883 was finished, it was reported, "Nothing that is done will have to be done over again."² Yet in many ways the common fell prey to the ravages of time and nature. A number of trees on the Common were lost during the hurricane of 1938. The hurricane almost took the flagpole also, but this long-standing structure was merely knocked askew.



By 1960 the Common had become an object of nostalgia and was frequently described as "run-down." The fountain had ceased to function and the spruce tree planted in 1951 to replace it did not survive. The beautiful maple shade trees, many of whose roots had been cut into for new sidewalks, were dying. For several years the Park Department made plans and estimates, and each year abandoned the plans due to the size of the appropriations necessary. Then, in 1960, with prompting from the Rotary Club, something was done. The new plan involved no new structures and changed only two walkways, but the scheme to plant the Common with flowering trees and shrubs that would keep the Common in bloom from spring until fall brought forth a succession of community contributions to supplement the Town budget.

A line of flowering dogwoods was planted along Laraway Road, thanks to the Rotary, which also contributed four yew trees, two hemlocks, and two dogwoods. A row of Chinese crabapples was placed along Church Street. Three white Japanese cherry trees were planted along Waterfield Road. The Home and Garden Club donated a hedge of Dorothy Prior roses. The En Ka Society funded Irish golden chain trees and a Korean beauty bush at the corner of Waterfield and Laraway. The Winchester Trust Company sponsored plantings at the corner of Waterfield and Church. The Fortnightly contributed a California Redwood. The Winchester Garden Club, Winchester National Bank, and the Girl Scouts also got involved. Individuals came forward to sponsor a silver juniper and Balkan pine at the center of the common, wisteria, and further flowering trees.

With the passage of time, shrubs have been lost and structures added. During the 350th Anniversary of the Winchester settlement in 1988, funds were raised for a planter whose form recalls the old fountain. In 1995, the Winchester Home and Garden Club contributed a new fountain.

In 2011, Town Meeting voted to dedicate the Common to former representative Sherman "Whip" Saltmarsh. Planning for a new structure is reportedly in progress, but a new master plan for the Common has not come forward.

¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on April 24, 1992. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² *The Winchester Star*, 17 August 1883.