

THE AUTOMOBILE ERA

By Ellen Knight¹



First car in Winchester, a 1903 Stanley Steamer, owned by Charles F. Bacon

Once automobiles entered the town, the impacts were felt in many ways. They spurred the development of a system of paved roadways and sturdy bridges, but they also led to nuisances and dangers requiring the creation of a whole new set of laws, giving the Police Department new duties and cares. Parking became a persistent problem for merchants and planners. The automobile developed into a key consideration in the economic prosperity of the downtown retail district of the 20th and 21st centuries.

MUNICIPAL NEED

Automobiles changed the way municipal departments worked.

On a Sunday afternoon in September 1909, a group of about 15 boys from South Boston who came to Winchester on the trolley raided orchards at Symmes Corner. The police were called. “Mr. Napoleon Goddu picked up the officers as they left the station in his big touring car and started for Symmes corner.” The gang was spotted heading for the parkway, “so the car was run down Bacon Street to intercept them. When the car met the crowd the bunch scattered.”²

As reported in the newspaper story headlined “Chased Fruit Thieves in Automobile,” which indicates this was an unusual event, the police captured seven of the boys, but of course they could not go on borrowing automobiles. Police officers and firefighters needed motorized equipment. This involved new expenses for both the machines and the buildings to house them.

By 1915, the police had an automobile—one automobile—but, after being driven over 20,000 miles by nearly all the men in the department without sufficient supervision by expert mechanics, after 18 months it already needed to be replaced. It also had to be supplemented with more vehicles.



In 1915, the Town Engineer also had an automobile. In the background, the Converse Bridge is under construction.

LAWS & SPEED

Annually the Police Department became more disturbed by automobiles. In 1904, the first arrest for an automobile violation was made, for speeding. In 1905, though drunkenness was still the main cause for arrest, "fast auto driving" was becoming more common, being listed in order of frequency between assault and battery and violation of Lord's Day.

In 1906, the police chief reported nine arrests for reckless automobile driving, and the selectmen voted to erect "'8 mile' signs on the main thoroughfares, on dangerous corners and in the thickly settled portions of the town."³

The first traffic safety signage to protect children went up in 1911. The School Department had signs posted on streets near school buildings that read "AUTOMOBILES / LOOK OUT / FOR / SCHOOL CHILDREN."

A sign that the age of the automobile had well and truly arrived by 1913 is found in the selectmen's recommendation that space be made at the rear of Town Hall to provide a parking space for automobiles. Another is found in the Police Chief's report where the violation of automobile laws stands third in the list of most frequent causes of arrest (31 cases) after drunkenness (146) and assault and battery (50), and ahead of larceny (20), gaming (14), and disturbing the peace (13). Sadly, among a multitude of other accidents, 1913 saw a child struck and killed by a car on Cambridge Street.

In 1913, traffic rules and orders were written to take effect on Jan. 1, 1914. These applied to both horse-drawn and motorized vehicles and covered such subjects as passing, turning (with diagrams provided to show proper right and left turns, with no cutting corners), right of way, speed, stopping, and standing. Automobiles could not have been too numerous given that the instruction, "In rounding a corner or curve motor vehicle drivers shall sound their signals to give warning to other vehicles and pedestrians of their approach," would have produced a constant cacophony of toots and beeps with many automobiles.

Parking was a consideration, even in 1913. "No vehicle shall be left standing in any public street in the business section for more than thirty minutes except hackney carriages at their licensed stands and the vehicles of physicians or clergymen while the owners or users thereof are in actual attendance upon the sick."



Traffic laws developed gradually over time, as did their enforcement. One of the big controversies of 1915 centered on the old elm tree that stood in the middle of Church Street. The tree was not centered in the roadway. Motorists would drive around the tree on its widest side, whether that meant passing on the right or left, so the Board of Selectmen suggested taking it down.

At a public hearing and in the newspapers, people argued to save the “noble” tree. So the selectmen decided to enforce a traffic regulation that autos keep to the right of the tree. There was a fuss about this, too, since it was considered “common law” that people could drive anywhere they liked, as long as they respected their fellow motorists.

Although the rule of passing on the right worked, traffic regulation took a step backward in 1917 when the Woburn Court failed to recognize Winchester’s traffic rules in another case, and the sign about passing the tree came down. The tree finally came down in 1928.

By 1917, automobiles were multiplying and creating more and more problems. Fifty accidents, one fatal, were reported that year. A charge of speeding in the center of town landed a Winchester resident into court in April, 1917. Police observed him making a turn from Main Street to Church Street in a Packard roadster. “A Winchester police officer testified that Moynihan was driving at a rate of 23 or 25 miles an hour when he made the turn, and that he maintained the same speed up Church Street to Common Street [now Waterfield Road].” Moynihan declared that he was not exceeding 12 miles an hour at any time, and he was backed up by two witnesses. The judge gave Moynihan the benefit of the doubt and discharged him.

“The main point,” the newspaper stated, “was that the corner of Main and Church streets is obstructed, and that a machine should not be driven faster than eight miles around such a corner.”⁴

These were the early automobile years, only the beginning of many challenging situations.

RAILROAD OVERPASS

By far, the most dangerous intersection in Winchester’s history was where the railroad tracks crossed Main and Church Streets in the town center. One of the longest and most hotly debated questions in town centered on the grade crossing. Since 1835 when the railroad came to town, the crossing was a safety hazard, despite large gates meant to stop foot and vehicular traffic. An estimated 40 people were killed by trains at that crossing.



After the advent of the automobile, stalled traffic exacerbated the problem. In 1950, a public works survey showed that up to 30,000 cars and 87 trains passed through the center daily and that the gates were closed about 2 and 3/4 hours each day. Fears that fire engines could be delayed reaching the west side added to the concerns associated with the grade crossing.



The old railroad gates

Throughout the first half of the 20th century, various plans were proposed which suggested either lowering the streets and running the railroad over them or the opposite solution of lowering the railroad and running an elevated highway over them. That the selectmen were at one time keen on the idea of sinking the tracks and raising the street levels explains the fire station's having been built above street level.

Popular fears were voiced that an overpass would divide the town, spoil its beauty, and result in business loss for the center.

Opposition and indecision over which plan to adopt delayed any real action until the 1950s. Stormily contested through the time construction began, the overpass opened in October 1956.



The project raised the tracks over the streets in the center of town, creating a rotary under the railroad bridge



Two new stations were constructed at Wedgemere and the town center.



The first train passing over the new \$5 million dollar overpass at Winchester is shown just before it broke the ribbon covering the tracks.

PARKING

As long ago as 1935 and 1938, the issue of adequate parking led to parking-time surveys being conducted in the center area. After tabulating numbers of cars parked on various streets and the lengths of time they parked, the supervisor of the 1938 survey concluded, "the system is as near PERFECT as can be and recommends that NO changes should be made: this is also the consensus of opinion of both merchants and drivers on that spot."

That was the last time "perfect" was heard. In 1940, 47 storekeepers and real estate owners, claiming a great and "immediate need for further parking facilities in our shopping area," petitioned that parking be permitted along the east side of the railroad. Town Meeting created a committee to survey and make recommendations on parking facilities.

The committee found that, although parking might be unavailable on the streets, the lots behind the Fire Station and Town Hall were half full, and Shore Road was not being used. After signs were erected calling attention to the lots, subsequent use of the lots relieved the situation in the streets, but Shore Road continued to be unused. "It would seem that people do not care to walk that far," the committee reported. Police learned, by checking registrations of cars parked on the streets, that many were owned by the commercial owners and their employees. Efforts to have them park in the lots were not successful.

As for the petition that parking be permitted adjacent to the railroad tracks, Town Counsel ruled that that land was to be used only for park and playground purposes. That objection was overcome in 1946 when the Town and Metropolitan District Commission exchanged land for the moving of the river, parkway, and Manchester Field and the Town took ownership of the strip along the railroad. It is now the Aberjona Parking Lot.

In 1955, the Planning Board held a public hearing on parking at a time when it was said the construction of the railroad overpass would cost the town 42 permanent parking spaces. One suggestion was to take all the property behind and to the right of the Fire Station, but owners did not want to lose their properties, and it was said revenues would not cover the cost of the takings.

Another idea was to cover the river below the Waterfield Bridge. Although the Planning Board reportedly considered this "the ideal solution to parking around the center," permission would be needed from three state agencies and the construction cost had been estimated at about \$240,000 or about \$1,000 per car space. A parking lot at Rangeley was suggested, as was one at the Skillings estate, now the site of the Jenks Center and Town Hall lot. But, at that time, the Skillings estate was considered to be too far from the center, just like Shore Road.

In the end, the sense was to wait until after the railroad overpass was built. Then, over the next 15 years, new areas for parking were acquired, the Skillings Estate, two lots now combined as the Waterfield lot, and two lots behind the Fire Station.

Though parking areas increased, so did business and vehicles, and as time passed, the impression recurred that there was not enough parking.

In the late 1970s, 1981, and 1988, the era of a downtown revitalization program, more parking studies were done. From the standpoint of Zoning Bylaw parking requirements, the conclusion was that the supply was inadequate. In addition, people continued to complain that they couldn't find places to park (where they wanted to).

It was during this time that engineers and consultants started pointing upwards as a solution. The site of the old Kelley & Hawes stable (now site of the Winchester Place condominium building) coupled with the Wilson lot behind the Fire Station was eyed for a parking garage.

In 1981, the suggested site was the Waterfield lot, suggested again in 2003 when the town manager engaged a consultant to work on the economic development component of the Strategic Plan. A few years later, the Planning Board engaged another consultant to look at possible sites, including the Waterfield and Jenks lots. In the 2010s, redevelopment of the Waterfield lot has continued to include the idea of a parking structure.

PAST SUGGESTIONS

If there are no further vacant lots to acquire and no strong, popular support for building up, what can be done to help the parking situation? Below are some of the suggestions from the past.

Decrease the need. In 1955, one resident said that Filene's was drawing too much out-of-town traffic. If Filene's were replaced with smaller businesses, he suggested, that would largely solve the problem. Today, however, doing less business is not considered a good solution to economic vitality.

Move out the Town buildings. A 1981 study recommended gradual removal of municipal buildings from the commercial core area to the periphery. Where everything would go, how the town would pay for it, and what to do about water issues were questions not addressed.

Promote alternative methods of transportation. However, this leaves the problems of commuter parking.

Get employees to park off-street. In 1940, 1955, and the 1980s, residents and consultants observed that merchants and their employees contributed to the problem themselves by using spaces desirable for customer parking. This was said again in 2009 and beyond.



Angled parking was once tried but is no longer viable. Filene's, which drew many shoppers, was located on the right

Other ideas have been tried. The 1940 committee had success with signs. Meters were tried but were removed in the 1980s. Angled parking on some streets has come and gone. Other ideas have included restriping and redesigning the lots, time limits, resident stickers, permits, and stricter enforcement.

In 1940, the study committee concluded that the supply was adequate with a little more cooperation from everyone. In 2009, the first phase of the study showed that the highest point of utilization on weekdays was barely 56% of the total supply and on weekends 70%, though parking spaces may not be available where people want them to be.

Lately, cooperation (e.g., employee parking) has been suggested as an element to solving problems. It remains to be seen if other measures to manage parking better may emerge and be successful in the near future.

PARKING METERS

In 1983, the town removed parking meters from the downtown as part of a town center economic development effort.

In 2011, a Winchester Town Center Parking Study recommended re-instituting paid parking downtown – as part of a town center economic development effort.

Something the report did not consider is the history of paid parking on the streets of Winchester Center and the problems that arose.

Parking meters were installed in 1955, at a time when construction of the railroad overpass was expected to cost the town 42 permanent parking spaces. They were installed at a cost of \$12,452 with the purpose, Police Chief Derro stated, of regulating parking in congested areas, not bringing in money.

The first machines were penny meters. For one cent anyone could park for 12 minutes. The limit was five pennies for an hour. Parking continued to be free in lots by the train depot, opposite Town Hall, and behind the police station. The meters apparently worked well enough at first, but by 1964 it was noted that revenue was declining. Derro attributed this to negligence and contempt for the law, i.e. ignoring the meters.

In 1965, the Board of Selectmen decided to install 343 new meters. That July the penny meters were removed and replaced with nickel meters. Five cents still bought the same amount of time, one hour, but the minimum was 5 cents instead of one cent. Two hours was the maximum.

The change was reportedly due to complaints that the penny meters did not allow enough time to do the shopping. The nickel meters were supposed to aid people conduct business without customers having to interrupt business to feed the meter.

Did the merchants and shoppers like the new meters? No. The nickel minimum reportedly “created an immediate furor among local businessmen and residents.” One week after their installation, a petition with 73 signatures, mostly those of local business and professional people, asking for a public hearing on the new meters was submitted to the Board of Selectmen. The main complaint was that it used to cost a penny for a quick stop, buy, and go. Now the minimum was an hour.

The selectmen said they would be glad to hold a hearing after a longer trial period and noted that the new meters were more weather- and vandal-resistant and should have fewer maintenance problems because they were manually cranked rather than automatic (i.e. had fewer moving parts).

In October, since the hearing had not happened, 30 merchants visited the selectmen to protest. Lewis Stone from Renton’s Market served as a spokesman. Among other things, he said, “The aim of the board of Selectmen should be to help keep the Winchester business district alive and not dead like Woburn and Stoneham. ... The customers resent the 5-cent parking meters very much.... I’d love to have one of you selectmen sit behind my grocery counter and listen to the complaints, and we’re still getting complaints – every day, over and over again. Parking is our bread and butter in the town businesses.”

Although the selectmen declined then to act, the next spring Town Meeting voted to convert the meters to accept pennies, as well as nickels and dimes, for short-term shoppers. In the discussion, a major question was whether the original purpose of regulating traffic flow and control was to be superseded by a revenue-producing motive. Also discussed were the protection of resident shopper’s choice and convenience in parking and protecting local businesses in competing against large shopping centers by not erecting barriers such as high-cost parking.

That May, at a cost of \$3,000, the machines were converted to accept pennies for 12 minutes, as well as nickels and dimes up to a two-hour maximum. These meters lasted until 1983 when they were removed entirely. The decision did not come out of the blue. In 1976, there was a citizens’ petition on the warrant with a motion to discontinue the use of parking meters for a 12-month trial period. It lost. It reappeared in 1978 with a second article to exempt residents age 62 and older from paying parking meter fees. Both were indefinitely postponed. In 1979, the first article reappeared, to be indefinitely postponed again.

Then in 1981 an economic development program was launched. The Town received state money for physical improvements plus 90% matching funds to develop a parking program for the downtown. Part of the money was used in 1982 to purchase the railroad station and parking lot on Waterfield Road for public parking. Part was available for a parking garage on the site; however, Town Meeting chose not to appropriate the matching funds to complement the state grant.

One thing the Town did do was get rid of the parking meters on the streets. At the same time, ticket-dispensing machines were installed to control parking in the Aberjona and Waterfield lots.

There were several reasons why the meters were taken out. Many were broken, and parts were reportedly hard to get. The meters created difficulty with sidewalk plows, which sometimes knocked into the meters. There could be issues with snow and ice. People could feed the meters all day. This was a major complaint from the merchants who preferred time limits. Meters were said to be a psychological barrier to people wanting to shop. People did not like them.

Whether people will ever be satisfied with downtown parking remains to be seen.



A 1952 traffic jam on Main Street prior to the construction of the railroad overpass and Skillings Road bypass. This congestion was not due to the old railroad gates, since one may be seen to the right in its open position.

SELECTED STUDIES

“Downtown Parking Study for Winchester Center Winchester, Massachusetts,” BSC Engineering, December 1981

“Program for Center Revitalization,” Winchester Economic Development Committee, 1982

“Downtown Parking Study Winchester Center Winchester, Massachusetts,” BSC Engineering, March 1988

“Winchester Town Center Parking Study,” Nelson/Nygaard, 2010

¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of earlier articles by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on July 11, 2003, and June 8, 2010. This article supersedes all previous articles.

² *The Winchester Star*, Sept. 17, 1909.

³ Annual Report 1906.

⁴ *The Winchester Star*, April 20, 1917.