

## THE WATERFIELD LOT & CENTER TRAIN STATION

By Ellen Knight<sup>1</sup>

During the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, attention became focused on the lot off Waterfield Road next to the commuter rail as a key component in downtown revitalization. A look back at its history reveals several knotty problems, accompanied by controversy and debate, in the development of the town center.

The first controversy around the site concerned its suitability for the depot. When the railroad opened in 1835, what is now the town center had little more than a mill and the mill owner's home. The first building used as a station was a small shoe shop. A year after the town was incorporated (1850), the railroad company built a new station at the same site, next to the center crossing (the junction of Main, Mt. Vernon, and Church streets, as well as Railroad Ave., now known as Shore Road).

As the town grew, the continual stopping of the train, blocking the crossing, became a nuisance. About 1870, townsmen argued its relocation at several town meetings. Some wanted to keep the station nearer the crossing. Some objected to the railroad company's proposed new site, on the south edge of the downtown, due to its proximity to a tannery then located on the other side of the tracks. It was said that nobody would be able to wait on the platform without holding his nose.



Ultimately, it was the railroad company's decision. Railroad directors insisted they selected the site because no land nearer the center was offered them at any but exorbitant prices. They offered two choices—accept the location the company bought or put up with the old station. Opposition had to give in.



When the new station appeared in August 1872, the *Woburn Journal* said the building was “one of the neatest, in design and finish” and called it “an ornament to the town.” It was 800 feet long and included men's and women's waiting rooms to either side of the ticket office.

Building the station also involved creating new roads. Common Street (now Laraway and

Waterfield Roads) was constructed on the easterly and southerly sides of the Common to give access to the station.

During the 1890s, the tannery and other businesses were removed from the other side of the tracks to create Manchester Field, giving the station a considerably more pleasant setting. The construction of the new concrete Waterfield Bridge across the Aberjona in 1915 led to the street being renamed Waterfield.

The wooden center station lasted a good long time, up through the 1950s, though it lost some of its ornamental details. A small signal tower was also at the site and a garage was built on an adjacent lot (now part of the Waterfield lot), but otherwise the depot was always surrounded by open space to accommodate whatever form of transportation brought commuters and freight to the station.



*In 1946, Waterfield Road ended at the train station. On the opposite side of the tracks, Common Street branched off Church Street and turned at the tracks, providing more parking area. Also visible on Waterfield Road is the Waterfield Building (destroyed in a fire) which had a small parking area behind it.*

## **NEW STATION**

The life of that station ended at the same time as one of the longest debates the Town ever experienced—what to do about the grade crossing in the town center. The trains, rolling through the center at the same grade as pedestrians and cars, were dangerous. There were accidents; there were fatalities. There was also fear that fire engines could be held up by trains.

After decades of debate, the railroad tracks were elevated and opened on Oct. 22, 1956. At the same time, two new brick depots went into use, at the center and at Wedgemere.

Though the viaduct solved one problem, it exacerbated another by removing about 42 parking spaces. The 1950s were a time when the Board of Selectmen was struggling with “the population of automobiles which inhabits every nook and cranny in and around our business center.” The Town went looking for solutions, including parking meters and new parking areas.

One of the lots it acquired was a 15,875 square foot parcel lying behind the Waterfield Building (destroyed by fire in 1961), adjacent to the train parking lot. Though the taking was authorized in 1955, it was held up until 1959 due to the need for an access easement from the Boston & Maine.

The proliferation of cars impacted not only the town center but also the railroad. During the 1950s and 1960s, the state was concentrating on new and improved highways, such as I-93 which opened in 1957. More commuters were driving; more goods were being trucked. Not long after building the overpass, the B&M was paring down the number of runs and hinting at discontinuing service.

Commuter rail service was saved with the formation of the MBTA in 1963 which contracted with the railroad to subsidize rail service on various commuter lines, including Winchester where (according to the *History of Winchester*) “half the corporation’s officers lived.”

While the B&M’s future was looking uncertain, in 1961, the railroad sold the Wedgemere and center train stations to a private firm which immediately resold the center station. Concerned about their future and parking issues, the selectmen put articles on the next warrant to take or purchase the stations. The articles were indefinitely postponed. The Town acquired Wedgemere in 1964 but did not purchase the center station until 1982, during a center revitalization effort.

Along with the depot, the Town acquired its 24,000 s.f. parking area, which it integrated with the parcel purchased in 1959 to form a 108-space parking lot, the current Waterfield lot.

When the 1980s 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. That money helped purchase the railroad station and its parking lot. Part was available for a parking garage on the site; however, Town Meeting chose not to appropriate the matching funds.

Since then, there have been discussions about developing the lot. A parking garage was studied in 2003 as part of the Strategic Plan. In 2010, the Planning Board engaged a consultant to look at possible sites for a parking structure, including this lot.

With the depot due to be demolished during the upcoming rehab of the center station by the MBTA, the Planning Board commissioned design concepts for developing the Waterfield Block in

2012. The Board of Selectmen has discussed issuing an RFP to assess interest and get more ideas. During the era of Smart Growth, the Town may find a new future for the lot.

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<sup>1</sup> This article © 2019 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Nov. 30, 2015. This revision supersedes all previous articles.