

President of Board of Directors New London Landmarks

Overview: As president of the BOD, I preside at board meetings and confer with the Executive Director on activities of this non-profit organization

Having lived in or near New London, Connecticut, for about forty years, I got involved in its local preservation organization after retiring in 2011. I am in my first term as president of the board. In addition, I serve as the primary researcher for plaques we place on old buildings when requested by property owners.

New London was founded in 1646 by John Winthrop, Jr. so its history is quite long, by American standards. But in 1781 all the buildings along the port were burned by British troops led by Benedict Arnold, so there are few buildings in town older than that. New London's heyday was the whaling era during the 19th century, when it was the second busiest whaling port in the world, after New Bedford, MA, and we have very impressive building stock from that era—which was a great era for American architecture. When Landmarks gets a plaque request, I repair to the "vault" in City Hall where I trace the building's title in the land records.

This can be fun; it can also be frustrating. In the last several years, I have done over 100 searches; I've been foiled only a couple of times. In the process, I've become quite an expert searcher, and I've learned from the ground up, lot by lot, how New London has developed.

Sadly, much New London property has been lost to urban renewal and to eminent domain. (The eminent domain case made national news, and the Little Pink House owned by a lone hold-out was documented in a book and a movie.) One of our projects, then, has been to document these disappeared neighborhoods, collecting oral histories from those who were displaced. We've also explored the legacy of local whalers of color. So the organization's work goes well beyond the usual conception of preserving historical buildings of note: our mission is to foster appreciation of the town's infrastructure and design and to ensure that it is respected, even when it can't be preserved intact.

Recently, we have ventured further, buying a 19th c. Greek Revival house that was the home of the president of the local chapter of the NAACP. It had become derelict, and we were able to purchase it at auction for very little money. With the help of grants, we will rehabilitate it as affordable housing, thus saving a doomed building and adding to the local housing stock.

My role in this draws on some of my PhD training. My degree in American Studies is interdisciplinary. My academic work was in literature, but as a grad student I also studied American architecture. And it has been a pleasure to put that to work in a constructive way that is beneficial to the city that has been my home for most of my life.

- **Tom Couser**
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