



Old Huntington Green: Preserving its Past; Planning its Future

By Robert C. Hughes

As the Great Depression was just beginning, Florence Baker looked around her town and was disgusted by what she saw: littered roadsides, ugly billboards, neglected properties. Perhaps nowhere was the neglect worse than in Huntington's ancient Green on Park Avenue—worse because it was one place that civic pride would dictate that it should be well kept. After all, the few acres of land had been set aside three centuries ago and held in trust for every Huntington resident. But a place that belonged to everyone seemed to have no one willing to take responsibility for maintaining it.

Florence Baker and some wealthy and influential friends made sure that changed. Their efforts went far beyond cleaning up a small park at a busy intersection. They expanded their scope to include the area from the Green to the harbor. They expanded their vision from cleaning up litter and clearing weeds to preserving open space and historic structures. Some 75 years later their vision has been adopted—often unknowingly—by other residents as well as town officials.

Baker served as chairwoman of Huntington's Roadside Committee, an offshoot of the Long Island Chamber of Commerce Roadside Committee. Formed at the outset of the Great Depression, these committees were dedicated to beautification projects that also served to provide jobs for the unemployed. In 1931, the Huntington Roadside Committee worked with the Town Highway Department to remove discarded automobiles from the town's roadsides, clear brush along the town's streets, and remove illegal signs.¹

Baker soon turned her attention to the Town Common, better known today as the Village Green. In 1924, the Green was described as "an unhealthy looking, swampy, mosquito breeding marsh [containing] rotten, broken down trees, masses of rubbish and weeds, and enthroned upon all the hulk of a deceased Ford automobile."² She was joined by residents such as Marshall Field of Lloyd's Neck, Raymond Ingersoll of Duck Island, Henry H. Saylor, the Reverend Dr. Edward Humeston of Old First Church, Russell Sammis and most importantly Henry W. Cannon. Cannon was the president of Chase Manhattan Bank and owned a large tract of land on the east side of Park Avenue across from



Henry W. Cannon



August Hecksher



Marshall Field III

Sabbath Day Path. They called themselves the Committee on the Preservation of Old Huntington. The first order of business was to convince the Town Board to clean up the Green, not only for the sake of civic pride, but also as a way to provide jobs at the depths of the Great Depression.

The Town Common was set aside soon after the Town was first settled in 1653. Over the years adjoining landowners encroached upon the Green. The situation became intolerable by the 1730s. Neighbors demanded that Thomas Wickes, Jr. relinquish parts of the Green that he had occupied. He did so by a 1739 deed that was worded in such a way as to be misinterpreted to the effect



1909 Dedication of the DAR Plaque – Helen Irwin & John Wood



Old Huntington Green: Preserving its Past; Planning its Future (cont.)

that it appears he created the Green and gave it as a gift to his neighbors. In fact, he was being paid off to ensure he returned what was not rightfully his in the first place. This original Green is a rectangular piece of land running along the west side of Park Avenue from the entrance to the Flanagan Community Center (formerly the Village Green School) to a point 329 feet north of Main Street.

Expanding the Village Green

The triangle of land bounded by Main Street, Park Avenue and Sabbath Day Path was at the time mostly privately owned. The Town Common only included a small triangle at the southeast corner of that plot. The remaining six acres had been the Mathew Hoban Farm. Hoban was an Irish immigrant who acquired the land in 1849 from the estate of Thomas C. Hendrickson.³ The conveyance was subject to a six foot wide “footway” from “the highway that leads from Huntington Harbour (sic) past the Episcopal Church to Henry Lewis” (i.e. Park Avenue) and ends at the southeast corner of the Presbyterian Meeting House. Such was the beginning of Sabbath Day Path.⁴

The dwelling on the Hoban Farm—located just north of Main Street—may well have been the town’s original school-house built in 1660. The first Catholic masses in Huntington reportedly were celebrated at this house.

At the beginning of the twentieth century the Hoban Farm was acquired by Richard W. Kenney, who the same day transferred ownership to his friend Edward P. Cringle.⁵ Kenney had been living in the old Hoban House as early as 1901 when his friend Cringle and his family visited him.⁶ Cringle was a deputy tax commissioner in New York City. His son Edward J. Cringle would go on to become a doctor and serve in the army medical corps during World War I. Edward Cringle, the father, died in 1907.⁷ His widow and son continued to split their time between Manhattan and Huntington. In 1914, Sarah Cringle had the property subdivided into 25 building lots. She also tore down the old farmhouse and had “an attractive new home” built.⁸ Mrs. Cringle sold that house to lawyer—later judge—Isaac R. Swezey in 1918.⁹

Dr. Cringle married in 1922. The following year he began to build houses on Sabbath Day Path, including one for his new family.¹⁰ Taking advantage of the go-go real estate market of the Roaring Twenties, the doctor formed Edward J. Cringle, Inc., a real estate company. The directors were the doctor, his wife, and his mother.¹¹ Cringle was involved in real estate transactions throughout town, not just on the old Hoban property. But he soon had financial difficulties. In 1931, the Bank of Huntington foreclosed on a two-acre tract at the north end of the old Hoban



Thomas Wickes Millstone plaque at Park Ave. and Main St.



The Ketcham House. Moved from Fort Solanga to the Sunny Ponds property on Park Ave.

Farm.¹² The following year, Henry Cannon purchased that tract, which was across from his home, from the Bank of Huntington.¹³ Cannon died just a few months later. His widow decided to donate that parcel to the town as a memorial to her late husband. The gift was conditional: it must remain as a park “and never be used as a dumping grounds or for any objectionable purpose.”¹⁴

Thus began a quest to preserve open space in the heart of Huntington village. Fifteen years earlier, August Heckscher donated his namesake park to the children of Huntington. Mrs. Cannon’s donation of what came to be known as the North Meadow was a bridge between the old Town Common and Mr. Heckscher’s park. In 1935, the Town expressed interest in acquiring land along East Main Street. The Main Street frontage had been



Town Arsenal built as a residence in the mid 18th century. Served as the town arsenal before the Revolution; presently a town museum.



Woodhull Corner. The site of Platt's Tavern. Park Ave. and East Main Street



Cannon House. Built 1805

divided into four different lots, one of which contained the house Mrs. Cringle had built in 1914. A fifth lot was located between these lots and the North Meadow. The remaining pieces of the Hoban Farm had been divided into eight small lots on Sabbath Day Path, each with a house.

Following Mrs. Cannon's lead, the members of the Committee on the Preservation of Old Huntington—by now known as Old Huntington Green Association—set out to secure the other plots. They worked in secret for fear that property owners would inflate their asking prices if they knew a group of wealthy residents was interested in buying their land.

In 1938, Clarence Brush, a partner in a local real estate and insurance agency and acting as a straw man, acquired the second lot in from Sabbath Day Path from Frank Patterson. Ten days later he conveyed it to Old Huntington Green Association.¹⁵ Two years later Brush acquired from Alice Gardiner the lot with the house Mrs. Cringle had built. Marshall Field provided the \$4,500 purchase price. Six days later Brush conveyed the house lot to Old Huntington Green.¹⁶ The house was rented to the Reverend Humeston, who had just retired from the pulpit of Old First Church.¹⁷

The back lot was acquired by the Association from William Jenkins in 1941 after the owner failed to pay the property taxes.¹⁸ The final piece was acquired by Mrs. Ingersoll in 1952. She conveyed it to the Association in 1954.¹⁹

These four lots were consolidated and the 1.62-acre parcel was deeded to the Town of Huntington in 1957.²⁰ Although the Association had been incorporated in 1939, its existence remained unpublicized until the 1950s. The first newspaper reference to the group was in 1953 and the gift in 1957 was its first public announcement of its work.²¹ Eight years later, the Association built a memorial fountain with the mill stones from Huntington's first mill. The fountain was designed by Mrs. Baker and dedicated to the memory of Raymond Ingersoll. The fountain sits on the property the Association had deeded to the town in 1957.



Cannon Plaque



Old Huntington Green: Preserving its Past; Planning its Future (cont.)

Now the only property in the triangle not in public hands were the eight houses on Sabbath Day Path and the lot at the corner of Main Street and Sabbath Day Path. The owner of that last lot, Dr. Frank C. Ciafone, announced plans to erect an office building on the property. A year after the gift from Old Huntington Green, the Town Board, at the prodding of the Association, voted to acquire the property from Dr. Ciafone for \$20,500.²²

The Association now turned its attention to the eight houses Dr. Cringle had built on Sabbath Day Path. They were the only interruption on a wide swath of public open space extending from the Town Common through the North Meadow and across to Heckscher Park. The Association decided to buy and demolish these houses and turn the vacant land over to the Town. Their first purchase was of the fifth house from Main Street in 1955.²³ Ten years later, the Association acquired the first and third houses from Main Street.²⁴ A fourth house was acquired in the 1970s.

The Association has transferred ownership of two of its Sabbath day Path houses to the Town of Huntington and they were demolished. The Town also acquired two other houses that have also been demolished. Today, four of the original eight houses remain: the Association owns and rents out two; and two others are privately owned.

The Master Plan

Old Huntington Green, Inc. was concerned with more than just preserving open space in the Village Green area. The group also wanted to preserve historic structures. First it had to determine which early buildings remained in the valley stretching from the Green to the harbor. After exhaustive research, 32 buildings were identified. In 1937, Lester B. Pope, supervisor of the Pratt Institute's Architectural Department and district officer of the Interior Department's Historic American Building Survey on Long



Eastern two houses Sabbath Day Path

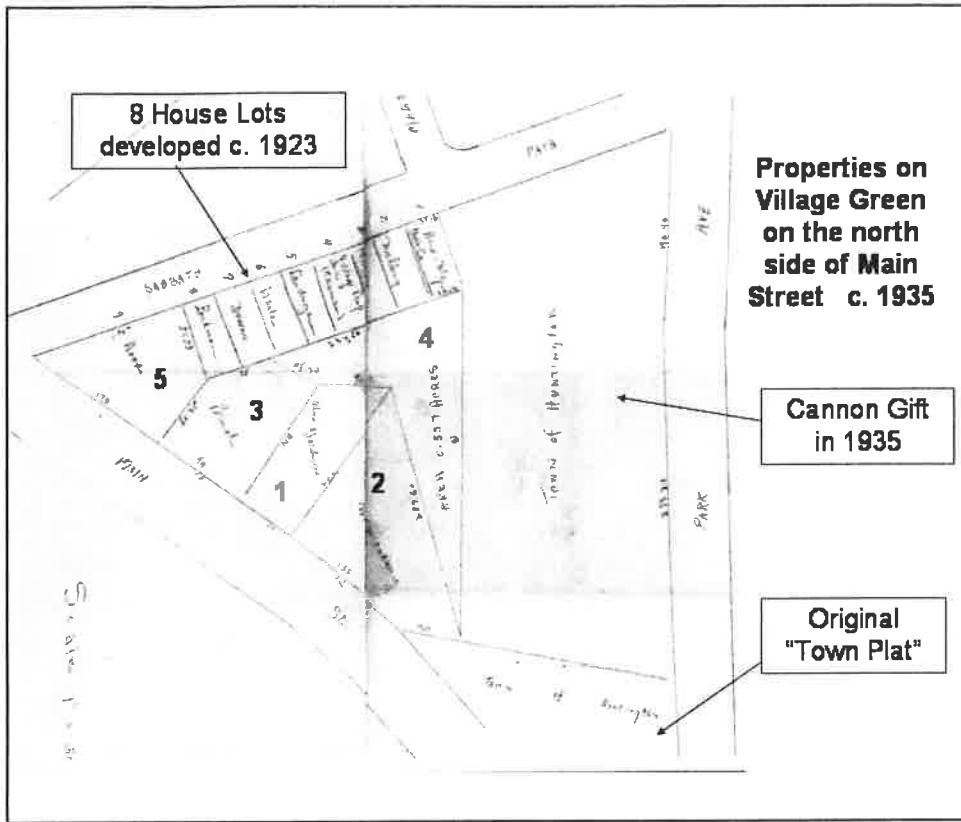


J.A. Woodhull House 1860. Built on the site of Platt's Tavern. No longer standing.

Island, was asked his opinion of the historic value of Huntington's old buildings. He replied that "Old Huntington offers, I believe, one of the most unique historic areas that we have—certainly on Long Island. It presents an old township which with ease could be restored to its original historic layout and atmosphere."²⁵ Today, of those 32 houses, all but six still stand. Of those that remain, all but four are now protected by local landmark designation. The Association's plan called for preserving these historic structures and moving other historic buildings—such as the Historical Society's Conklin House—to the Village Green area for protection from unsympathetic development.

Pratt Institute was retained to prepare a map showing the 32 houses. A photograph album with descriptive captions of each building was assembled. Old Huntington Green, Inc. hired Armistead Fitzhugh Brinkerhoff, president of the American Society of Landscape Architects, to prepare a master plan for the entire valley. The Brinkerhoff plan was unveiled in November 1939. The group was impressed by the scope and beauty of the plan that would be a Long Island version of Colonial Williamsburg, which had been started just 13 years earlier. Then Marshall Field asked how much it would cost to implement. Brinkerhoff estimated the total project as envisioned in the plan would cost one million dollars—equivalent to about \$16.7 million in 2013. After giving it a few days thought, Field said he might be able to take on a project with a budget of \$50,000 to \$75,000.

The grand plan would have to wait.



Subdivision of Old Historic Green



Smith Woodhull House, corner of Jackson and Main St. One of 32 historic houses that still stand today.

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Influence on Other Developments

While the association continued through the war years, it was dormant from 1948 to 1951. When it resumed activity, it found a town undergoing explosive growth. New houses were springing up all over town—even along Park Avenue just south of the Village Green area. The Green itself was protected, of course. But surrounding properties were ripe for redevelopment.

The old gas station at the southeast corner of East Main Street and Park Avenue was to be rebuilt. The Association prevailed upon Mobil Oil to build a “Colonial style” gas station—surely a style for which no historic precedent could be found. Likewise the newly established YMCA planned to build a multi-story flat roofed building right across Main Street from the association’s property. The association again convinced the property owner to construct a “colonial style” building instead (although it has been greatly altered by later

additions).

A gas station proposed for the northeast corner of East Main and Park Avenue was not built. Instead a saltbox house designed by Florence Baker’s husband, architect Norman Baker, was built and was used as a real estate office.

A proposal by the American Legion to build a clubhouse on the North Meadow was defeated as were numerous other proposals for the property. One project the association had a direct hand in was at the northwest corner of Park Avenue and Parkview Terrace. Mrs. Cannon had purchased the old Platt House at that location and had given it to the association. The house was in a poor state and structurally suspect. It was decided that it would cost too much to restore it. Instead, the property was sold to the newly formed North Shore Medical Group, who agreed to build a “colonial style” medical office, which remains today. The money from the sale of this property helped to finance the acquisition of lots on the old Hoban Farm.²⁶

Continuing Legacy

Old Huntington Green has had an ongoing influence of developments in the Village Green area. Concerned residents and government officials have pursued plans that track the association’s Master Plan, even though they may not have been aware of the plans existence. The enduring goals set down by the association are slowly being realized.

Many private homeowners in the Village Green area have restored their homes. The first was the Metcalf family, who purchased the



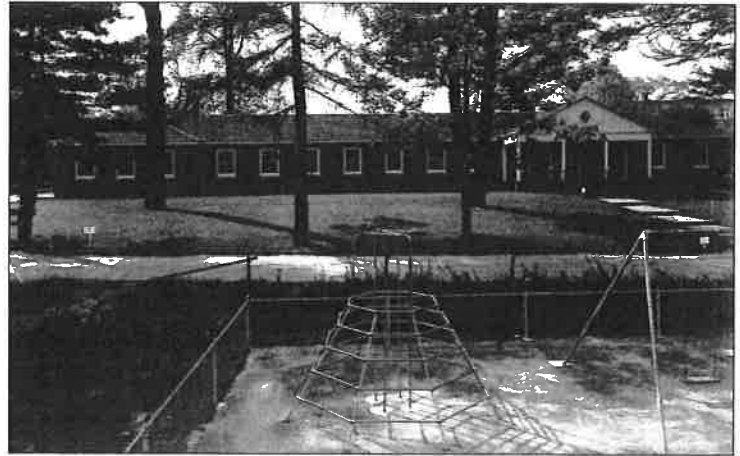
Old Huntington Green: Preserving its Past; Planning its Future (cont.)

Jarvis-Fleet House, part of which is considered to be the oldest house in Huntington, in 1941. They began restoration of the house in the 1940s and that work has been continued by their son, Rex Metcalf, who continues to live in the house. Likewise, other homes along Park Avenue have been restored by their owners.

The Historical Society joined the effort when it purchased the house at 434 Park Avenue in 1967. Originally identified as the Powell-Jarvis House and thought to date from the seventeenth century, later research and examination has confirmed a construction date of 1795 for Dr. Daniel W. Kissam.

In 1980, the Huntington Town Board created the Old Huntington Green Historic District, which gives legal protection to the historic structures along Park Avenue from its intersection with New York Avenue to a point a few doors south of its intersection with Linda Place. A few years later a smaller historic district containing properties from View Acre Road to Sunny Pond Farm was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Association's goals were unknowingly invoked almost 70 years after the group had been founded when another group of concerned residents rallied to prevent the development of eight acres of steeply sloped woodland just off Park Avenue about a half mile south of the Village Green. Explaining the residents' concerns, Scott Johnson, then chairman of the Town's Historic preservation Commission, said, "In the past, there have been those who want to preserve open space and those who want to preserve historical sites, and they've never really come together."²⁷ But, of course, they had seven decades earlier. In November 2001, the group nominated the property for acquisition under Huntington's new Environmental Open Space and



Huntington YMCA. Original colonial style YMCA building. Built in 1954.

Park Fund program. The property was to be the beginning of a Heritage Trail that would snake through the open space left on the ridge above Park Avenue, continue to the Village Green and eventually on to the harbor. A year after the nomination, the Town and County purchased the land. Over the next few years, additional smaller parcels were added.

The biggest obstacle to the completion of the Heritage Trail was the 7.2 acre Park Avenue Dairy site at the corner of Park Avenue and Woodhull Road. The property not only was mostly open fields and woods, it also contained a wealth of historic structures. First settled in the seventeenth century, the land had been used for some 266 years to graze cattle. It also was the site of a tannery; and during the American Revolution Hessian troops camped there. The property includes houses from the seventeenth, eighteenth and twentieth



366 Park Ave. 1885. One of 32 historic houses still standing in the Village Green district.



Early Gas Station at corner of 25A and Park Ave.



Current Incarnation of Gas Station

centuries as well as a 1915 cement dairy barn and tile silo. The property was a dairy until 1958.

But the property had been earmarked for other purposes. In the 1990s, a developer proposed building a 100 bed congregate care facility on the property. It was later acquired by a group looking to build a synagogue. When plans for the synagogue fell through, the owner filed a subdivision plan. Finally late in 2012, the developer agreed to sell five acres to the Town of Huntington. Two of the historic houses are to be sold to private owners.

The third historic house—the 1790 Chichester House—will be moved across Park Avenue to the Sunny Pond Farm property. Here, owner Tom Hogan will unknowingly implement another part of the Old Huntington Green Association’s plan—preservation and repurposing of historic buildings. Mr. Hogan acquired Sunny Pond Farm after an unsuccessful effort to build additional housing on the property. Mr. Hogan has restored the 1881 house on the property and has already moved the eighteenth century Ketcham house from Fort Salonga. The Chichester House will be joined with the Ketcham House and both will be converted into office space. The result will be an office campus comprised of historic houses in an open setting adjoining the Historical Society’s Kissam House property. Nothing better illustrates the Association’s vision for Huntington’s historic core.

In the end, the fate of one property may well determine how enduring the Old Huntington Green’s goals are. The “colonial style” gas station on the southeast corner of East Main Street and Park Avenue has been closed for a number of years. The building has been adopted by a local artist who paints murals of historic scenes. He recently completed a mural commemorating George Washington’s visit to Huntington in 1790 when the president stopped for lunch at Platt’s Tavern, which once stood on this corner. The former gas station and the deli next door are inconsistent with the association’s vision. Over the years plans have been made to rebuild Platt’s Tavern on this site. There would be no time better than now when the gas station is idle.

But who will take the lead to implement this vision?



Sunny Pond Farm House

(Endnotes)

- 1..... The Long-Islander, November 13, 1931
- 2..... The Long-Islander, July 11, 1924
- 3..... Suffolk County Clerk’s Office Deed Liber 51, page 217
- 4..... Huntington Highway Book A 1724-185, page 315 (May 6, 1848 recorded September 18, 1848. According to Romanah Sammi in Hunting-Babylon Town History, the right of way was first established in 1799 (page 51). She also reports that Hoban’s petition to discontinue the path in 1858, because it was “no longer necessary,” was granted.
- 5..... Suffolk County Clerks’ Office Deed Liber 572, page 413 and 414.
- 6..... The Long-Islander, May 31, 1901
- 7..... The Long-Islander, June 28, 1907
- 8..... The Long-Islander, March 20 and 27, 1914
- 9..... The Long-Islander, June 21, 1918
- 10..... The Long-Islander, December 1, 1922; May 11, 1923
- 11..... The Long-Islander, August 7, 1925
- 12..... The Long-Islander, July 17, 1931
- 13..... Suffolk County Clerk’s Office Deed Liber 1665, page 200
- 14..... The Long-Islander, September 7, 1934
- 15..... Suffolk County Clerk’s Office, Deed Liber 4032, Page 326
- 16..... Suffolk County Clerk’s Office, Deed Liber 4032, Page 331
- 17..... The Long-Islander, April 18, 1940
- 18..... Suffolk County Clerk’s Office, Deed Liber 4032, Page 335
- 19..... Suffolk County Clerk’s Office, Deed Liber 4032, Page 338
- 20..... (deed reference)
- 21..... The Long-Islander, May 28, 1953 and March 14, 1957
- 22..... The Long-Islander, October 30, 1958 and November 13, 1958 (Legal Notice).
- 23..... Suffolk County Clerk’s Office, Deed Liber 3936, page 197
- 24..... Suffolk County Clerk’s Office, Deed Liber 5762, page 497; and Deed Liber 5834, page 176
- 25..... Unpublished manuscript history of Old Huntington Green, Inc. on file in the Huntington Town Historian’s office and at the Huntington Historical Society.
- 26..... The Long-Islander, March 12, 1953
- 27..... Newsday, November 3, 2002, “History Trail Nearly Reality”