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SOLE SURVIVOR

The historic Windsor Locks train station is in jeopardy, but it shouldn't be. It is a landmark that is worth preserving. By Wilson H. Faude

It stands alone, a survivor of the redevelopment tsunami that swept through Windsor Locks in the 1970s, clearing everything in its wake. In the name of progress, every old or blighted building along the canal side of once people-friendly Main Street was razed, leaving behind a desolate four-lane speed zone. There were no plans for the area, merely the feeling that the bulldozer was the answer to decay. The only human-scaled sentinel that remains is the Windsor Locks train station.

Windsor Locks has always been the town between towns. Originally part of Windsor, it was separately incorporated in 1854. George Washington described it in 1789 as the "level, barren, and uncultivated plain" that lay between Windsor and Suffield. John Barber in his 1836 history of Connecticut recorded that the town of Windsor was established in 1633 when a William Holmes erected a house at the mouth of the Farmington River.

In 1767, 22-year-old Seth Dexter established his clothier business in Windsor Locks, and his descendants managed the company that grew into the Dexter Corp., an industry leader in fibers, pharmaceuticals and biotechnology. It was once the

oldest company listed on the New York Stock Exchange. Gov. Ella Grasso had the bridge over the Connecticut River named the Dexter Coffin Bridge in honor of the sixth generation of the family to lead the corporation. The Dexter Corp. was the heart of the town until it was broken up and sold in the fall of 2000. Now, even its corporate headquarters is up for sale.

In 1829 a canal was built to bypass the falls in the Connecticut River, which gave the town its name: the locks in the canal at Windsor. Barber also noted that planks for ships were manufactured in the "village of 20 houses at the Windsor Locks, where the Canal commences which runs by Enfield falls." In 1844 the railroad replaced the canal as the principle means of transportation, and the town benefited from its location between Hartford and Springfield and continued to grow.

The station is a cozy little building, erected in 1875. Its main construction is of brick and it has distinctive carved or pierced wooden end boards within its gables. Measuring 82 feet by 25 feet, it has a central waiting room with service rooms for ticketing and baggage at each end. The main entrance is on Main Street, with a step down on the east to the tracks. The roof with its curved fish-scale slates, the cream colored wood trim and the brownstone and brick edifice represent the bustling days of the town's early history when the train was the main way to travel.

Grasso, who was from Windsor Locks, took the train from the station to attend Chaffee School in Windsor. On Jan. 8, 1975, she also boarded a train at the station to ride to her inauguration as governor. It was a station that saw soldiers off to the Spanish American War, World War I and II and the Korean War, and welcomed some of them home.

The train station is a classic Victorian rural train station. It is not as massive as Union Station in Hartford, but it resembles stations built in nearly every mid-size town across America. Few such stations survive, which is why the Windsor Locks Station was placed on the National Register of Historic Places



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The station's distinctive wood end boards harken to an earlier time when train travel was popular.

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in 1975. The Redevelopment Agency that erased all of Main Street was hoping to eliminate the station in 1974. Its representatives began negotiations with Penn Central Railroad for title to the property. Michael Kopeski, executive director of the Redevelopment Agency was quoted in the *Journal Inquirer* in 1974 express-

ing his agency's purpose: "The whole objective of the agency's downtown renewal project is 'to eliminate blight,'" Kopeski explained. "And the station is a blighted building."

Townpeople watched as the agency eliminated all signs of life from Main Street, block by block. As the agency's

work neared the train station, residents started questioning what was happening to their town. People banded together and with the help of the Historical Society of Windsor Locks began circulating "Save our Station" petitions. In 1974, as the station neared its 99th birthday, a sign was posted on it: "Help Save Me. Next Year I'll Be 100."

The good news is that today, the station, although boarded up and unused is still standing. The Historical Society and the Windsor Locks Preservation Association have diligently worked to preserve it. They have met with Amtrak representatives, and they have contacted

and met with local, state and national politicians on the station's behalf. They have received favorable press in the local media, drawing attention to the station and its plight. They have received funds from citizens, sold notecards (\$5 for a pack of 5) and a print for \$20. Leadership support has come from the Connecticut

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Trust for Historic Preservation through the Connecticut Humanities Council and C&S Wholesale Grocery, acting as a good corporate citizen. The Lawrence Associates of Manchester donated a full feasibility study for the station that says "with proper attention and sufficient funding, [the station] can be restored into a useable facility. The construction costs and expenses related to bringing the building up to code would be around \$600,000, which is quite reasonable for a structure of this size and potential."

The bad news is that a quarter of a century has passed since the movement to save the station began. Amtrak, which inherited the deed from its predecessor companies, has no use for the building and has no plans for its future. It also has no desire or plan and apparently no means by which to transfer the deed or lease the building to the stalwart citizens who want to save it and put it back into public use. Amtrak seems content to simply wait for the building to collapse. Amtrak has enough troubles of its own, and somehow a way should be found to save the station.

It is hoped that a year from now I will pen a column that declares that Amtrak has transferred the title to the station to the Windsor Locks Preservation Association and then share the group's plans for the building. This is the same kind of grass-roots effort that saved Washington's Mount Vernon, the Mark Twain House and even the Old State House. Cicero once wrote that "buildings and sites frequented by great men of the past often are more inspiring and evocative than their deeds or written annals."

The Windsor Locks Train Station has served the greats and near greats. It has sent soldiers to war and welcomed them home. It sent a native daughter to her first inaugural. The station is a quintessential American treasure, one that touched so many lives every day, week after week for nearly a century. It should be preserved. 

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Take a trip to Windsor Locks and see this historic landmark for yourself. It is easy to find the train station; it is the only building on the canal side of Main Street. Then, contact Barbara Schley, president of the Save the Station Committee at (860) 798-5376, or by e-mail at bsly58@aol.com. Buy cards, send donations, offer to write politicians, get involved.

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