

Washington, Connecticut
Historic District Commission

Guidelines

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**HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSION
WASHINGTON, CONNECTICUT
SITE AND NEW CONSTRUCTION GUIDELINES FOR HISTORIC DISTRICTS**

GENERAL REMARKS

Each of the three historic districts in Washington has been specially designated as such because it possesses a collection of structures, landscapes and landscape features which is strong in historic feeling and association. Each of the districts is unique and evokes a strong sense of connection with the local past. None, however, is a pristine historic area. These places are the products of the different times, periods and tastes of almost 250 years; the changes that have occurred in these places are, for the most part, pleasing.

It is the WHDC's charge to ensure the preservation of those aspects and features of the historic districts that contribute to their particular historic identity, character and feeling, by reviewing and evaluating applications for new structures and additions to historic district properties for their appropriateness in relation to those aspects and features of the respective district. As described in the following section, certain aspects and features are peculiar to each district; therefore, construction proposals based on generically historical themes or features may be considered inappropriate. The guidelines that follow are offered to help property owners in their responsibility to maintain the historic character of their district, and to prepare them for what the WHDC will be looking for when reviewing applications for changes in the districts. These guidelines will also help to expedite the application and review process and ensure a consistency of evaluation between applications.

The criterion of "compatibility" will depend less on style *per se* than how a new structure relates to the existing structures and spaces around it, and to the character of the district as a whole. For a new structure to be compatible, its design must respect the existing character-defining features or relationships of that district.

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WASHINGTON'S THREE HISTORIC DISTRICTS: HERITAGE AND SIGNIFICANCE TODAY

RATIONALE

Each of the districts looks a certain way owing to the particular role it played in the community during approximately the last century. This historic role is the first distinguishing characteristic which gives each district its identity. *This identity underlies and informs each district's visual qualities.* This is the reason for maintaining visual integrity, and why appropriateness is not simply a matter of personal taste.

The Green: A Cohesive Townscape

The Green was the original, mid-18th century center of Washington, or Judea Parish. A meeting house stood here, within an open space for public gathering or animal grazing. This roughly square plot of land, now the open space of the Green, became surrounded by houses, shops, and stores. As industrial and commercial activity developed more intensively in the river valleys of New Preston and the "Hollow", later called the "Depot" during the mid 19th century, the Green became the mainly institutional and residential area that it remains today.

The Green's hilltop location gives this district a dramatic setting, and sets it off from the rest of town. The roughly square plan of the Green, centered on the large Congregational meeting house, defines this tightly settled townscape of simple, handsome houses of similar scale, shape and character, aligned and all facing the church. This visually commanding structure stands central and at the same time isolated by the space around it. All the surrounding structures are focused on this building, and mirror its strong architectural patterns. Likewise, there is a clear difference in scale between the residential and institutional structures in the immediate vicinity of the Green. The largely Colonial Revival aspect of the district's late 19th and early 20th century buildings which are off the Green, as in the Gunn Library and the Washington Club Hall, and the campus of the Gunnery School, reinforces this distinction and provides for visual order throughout the district. *These clearly defined formal relationships and architectural patterns are character-defining aspects that give the center of the Green district a powerful historical and visual coherence.*

A third character-defining quality of the immediate vicinity of the Green is the existing balance of structures and spaces. The most critical aspect of this relationship is the way many of the buildings here inhabit their sites: for the most part the older structures are fairly discrete blocks in form, occupying their original foundation "footprint". They do not, generally, have substantial ell and other secondary forms which spill out onto the land or massively occupy publicly visible parts of the site.

By contrast, the southern section of the Green Historic District (Kirby, Rossiter, and Ferry Bridge Roads) represents a much later phase of settlement in Washington, and so has different character-defining aspects and features from the Green area. While more loosely settled, this area, too, has a strong, well-defined visual and historical identity.

In general, this section is characterized by its remarkable collection of large Shingle Style and Colonial Revival residences designed by the architect Ehrick Rossiter between 1884 and 1910. Most of these houses occupy spacious, sloping sites on hilly terrain. The roads are narrow, winding lanes often bordered by old stone walls, ledge outcrops, and trees. Houses of this part of the district tend to be set back from the road; in their siting, scale in relation to site, materials, and detail, they blend pleasingly and informally into the landscape. The grounds surrounding the older houses are, on the whole, casually screened from the road and naturalistically landscaped. The entire effect of structures and landscape is a delicate balance of elegance, rusticity, the classic and the picturesque. All of these features and qualities define the identity of this southern section of the Green District.

Calhoun-Ives Street: An Historic Landscape

This rolling, south-facing hillside is a rural area of relatively intact 19th century farmsteads regularly interspersed with open lands and woods. The natural lay of the largely open land, the shifting near and distant views of unspoiled fields and wooded hillsides, and the way the roads and structures inhabit it make this an extraordinary place. The route taken by the narrow Calhoun Street, which climbs, drops, and curves with the natural contours of the land, allows the traveler to experience a dynamic, but gradual unfolding of this lyrical landscape and its buildings.

In contrast to the architecturally dense and structured character of the Green, here the landscape is the primary element in the district's identity. Each farm within it reads as a discrete cluster. The houses and barns are crucial to our understanding of how this place was inhabited, and in their understated vernacular architecture contribute critically to the definition of its character. From a physical standpoint, however, these buildings are secondary elements in the district's identity, subordinate to the landscape. *Since this is a district designated for its history as an agricultural landscape it is appropriate to maintain these relationships between the built, natural, and cultivated environments.*

Sunny Ridge: An Early Crossroads

This district is the triangular junction of three early routes through the east side of Washington. Being a crossroads located along one of the early New Haven to Albany routes, two of its five contributing homesteads (out of seven total) were inns during the late-18th and 19th centuries. Two others are early 19th century farmsteads with associated fields. Much of the interior of the triangle is and has been in open farmland visible from the roads. Like Calhoun Street and Ives Roads, Sunny Ridge Road is one of the few narrow, winding country lanes left in Washington, and is remarkable because of its historic scale and character. As an historic agricultural landscape,

the compatibility of the siting and scale of any proposed subdivisions and new construction here will be a major consideration in determining their appropriateness. Of course, the shape, massing, patterns and materials of new construction will also be important in this rural district of simple vernacular building clusters. As in Calhoun Ives, *since this is a district designated for its history as an agricultural landscape it is appropriate to maintain this balance of the built, and natural and cultivated areas.*

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GUIDELINES

I. SUBDIVISION, SITE PLANNING AND LOT LAYOUT DESIGN GUIDELINES

A. CALHOUN IVES AND SUNNY RIDGE HISTORIC DISTRICTS

1. *General Remarks:* Because of their access to views, their generally good drainage characteristics, and their marketability as attractive residential building sites, the fields of the Calhoun Ives and Sunny Ridge Districts are particularly vulnerable to development. As a recurring, extensive feature with high visibility throughout these two districts, with an historic functional relationship to the districts' structures, the fields are the historic context of and the "connective tissue" between the often widely-spaced farmsteads. Most importantly, their significance in establishing the districts as historic agricultural landscapes requires that **every effort must be made to plan the siting of any new construction in this district with as much sensitivity to preserving open space as possible.**

Recommendations:

a. Building Sites: In general, **be aware of the prominence of your building site, and consider how the new construction will effect the view of existing open land from the public way(s).** Every effort should be made to avoid locating new construction in the middle of fields or on hill and ridgetops, or where it would be silhouetted against sky.

b. Lot Layouts. In designing subdivisions and locating boundaries in open areas, **lay out lots and designate building envelopes so new construction can be located more inconspicuously with regard to open land.** For example, confine a useable building site on an open lot to an edge, such as a wooded area or a road. Designating building "envelopes" is encouraged to confine new construction to one portion of a lot, leaving as much as possible of the remaining land open and uninterrupted by development. Preserving undeveloped stretches of contiguous backlands is a way of maintaining the integrity and continuity of the historic agricultural landscape.

c. Natural site features. **Preserve existing natural and/or historic landscape features,** such as stone walls, cellar holes, root cellars, old trees, and ledge outcrops.

d. Clearing. Buyers of lots in wooded areas in the district should be prepared to **leave as much woods as possible** to help maintain the existing clear contrast between woods and open space. Manicured forest cleared of underbrush tends to look suburban and is not appropriate to the Calhoun Ives and Sunny Ridge rural agricultural landscapes.

e. Landscaping. Consider using and maintaining large areas of land in ways that are consistent with the district's rural and agricultural context. For example, avoid extensively recontouring existing land. Try to maintain existing woods and fields rather than converting them to lawn or park-like landscapes.

B. THE GREEN HISTORIC DISTRICT

Recommendations:

a. Building Sites. Consider the existing relationship of the neighborhood's structures to the space around them, and the relative density of the surrounding settlement.

b. Lot Layouts. Lay out new building lots and designate envelopes so that new construction can be located more inconspicuously with regard to existing settlement.

c. Natural Site Features. (see I c): Preserve existing natural and/or historic landscape features, such as stone walls, old trees, and ledge outcrops.

d. Clearing. Non-manicured wooded areas between existing lots and as buffers between houses and the road are a feature of the southern section, and should be preserved. Some grounds are maintained as private parkland, and in places this is appropriate, but in general the clearing of brush and trees would disrupt the feeling of privacy and informality peculiar to this part of the district.

e. Landscaping. Avoid extensively re-contouring land and installing formal landscaping in front yards.

C. ROADS & DRIVEWAYS (ALL DISTRICTS)

General Remarks: Because of the open, rural character of the land in Calhoun Ives and Sunny Ridge, the presence of merely a few paved subdivision roads and driveways on these areas would have a suburbanizing effect on the districts. Existing driveways in the Green District are also narrow, and in scale with the generally narrow aspect of the roads in the district. Therefore, **every effort should be made to route roads and driveways as inconspicuously as possible.** Designate shared driveways wherever possible to reduce the incidence of side-by-side driveways.

Recommendations:

a. Route, contours: As with new building construction, **route new roads and driveways in the woods or close to existing edges** (woods, existing tree lines, stone walls). In general, try to route

new roads or driveways to follow the natural contours of the land, unless this would disrupt the landscape more than an alternative route. Avoid extensive cutting, filling and re-grading of contours.

b. Surface material: Excepting on the Green proper, avoid paving driveways. **Use gravel or loose stone of an inconspicuous color**; these materials are more compatible with the district's rural character. If driveways must be paved, avoid paved curbing.

c. Width: **Keep driveways as narrow as possible** (12 feet width or less is recommended).

d. Driveway markers: Avoid landscaping and landscape structures which draw attention to roads and driveways, including lines of shrubbery, formal gateways, lamp posts, relocated boulders, etc.

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II. ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN GUIDELINES

General Remarks: Reproduction and Present-Day Design

Each of the historic districts is a record of several periods of architecture, including, potentially, present and future periods. Each contributing structure is significant both in its own right and as a contributor to that historical record. Introducing reproductions or moving historic buildings from elsewhere into the districts could distort and even falsify that record. Therefore, reproductions, including "authentic" and historical "stock" designs, will generally be discouraged. By the same token, the WHDC recognizes the need to work with applicants who prefer historical Connecticut styles and their desire to fit into a district's historic setting. These aims can only be achieved by creating a design which is not an imitation, reflects the present-day origins of the design, is traditional in character, and is compatible with respect to the existing architectural scale, massing, siting, and features of the district. The WHDC also recognizes the need to work with applicants who wish to use present-day designs. The challenge here is to find a design of quality which is distinctly present-day, but which honors the basic character of the district's structures with respect to scale, massing, and siting.

Recommendations:

a. Overall Character: **Consider the impact your proposed new construction will have on the character of the district, even if the scale, shape, and materials are compatible.**

Design that harmonizes with its surroundings, rather than competing with them, will be viewed more favorably by the WHDC.

b. Scale: **Maintain the existing scale and size relative to existing houses in the district. A structure that appears to dominate its site will not be considered appropriate. Likewise, an**

addition which competes in scale and size with the existing structure being added to may not be considered appropriate.

c. Shape, Massing: Note that there is usually a predictable hierarchy of forms in the overall composition of the existing houses, consisting of primary and secondary blocks. In this, the primary blocks of the existing houses tend to be rectangular, two rooms deep with 1-1/2 to 2-1/2 stories, and gable-roofed. The secondary blocks, such as wings, ells and additions, tend to be proportionally smaller elements in the whole design, have gable or shed roofs, and project at right angles from the main block. **Try to maintain these kinds of relationships in new construction.** With larger buildings on open land, try to mass forms so they gradually lead the eye back down to the ground.

d. Patterns, fenestration: Note relationships of solids to voids (proportions of wall to openings, such as doors, windows, inset porches etc.) in the district's existing houses and outbuildings. These tend to be fairly consistent. Try to maintain a similar relationship in new construction, which is appropriate to the building type, noting that utilitarian structures have different solid/void ratios than do residential structures. Windows in District houses are typically double-hung, integral wood muntin type. Avoid using large single pane windows on visible elevations.

e. 1. Trim and decorative detail: Trim and detail should be in traditional proportion and scale to the new building. Avoid using trim and architectural detail which makes false or empty historical or functional references, such as shutters which would not fit properly over the windows when closed, widows-walks, barn-related features on residential structures, etc.

2. Exterior window shutters: In Washington's 19th century buildings which post-date 1840, hung, functioning, wooden shutters are usually appropriate, however the HDC recognizes the costs of maintaining them and therefore will not discourage the removal of deteriorating shutters from such structures, except where the HDC determines that the shutters contribute significantly to the design of the building.

3. The use of such shutters on pre-1840 buildings is entirely at the discretion of the owner. Exterior shutters were not generally used until the 1840s, however, they may have been added then or sometime later, and therefore be considered appropriate today as an evolutionary and traditional aspect of the structure's design.

4. The HDC strongly discourages the use of shutters made of synthetic materials except in cases where shutters play an essential role in the design of the building, and the owner would be (overly) financially burdened by the purchase and/or maintenance of wooden shutters. In these cases the new shutters should be of a size which would fit properly over the windows if closed, and they should be hung, rather than screwed, into the wall of the building.

f. Materials: Note existing uses of mainly 5" wood shingle or 4" smooth wood clapboard siding on residential structures, and vertical wood siding on barns and outbuildings. **Try to use materials appropriate to their building types.**

Note: Low Maintenance Siding: Despite the industry's attempt to manufacture aluminum, vinyl, and other synthetic sidings so that they appear to duplicate the proportions and texture of the same in wood, brick or stone, the hard, machine-edged and glossy character of these materials is almost always apparent and visually jarring, especially in an historical context. These materials have also been found to create moisture problems in their buildings, and in the case of fire, additional safety and pollution hazards. Their application should be avoided. However, some property owners may still decide to use synthetic siding. In this case, it should be used as sensitively as possible, and as a siding only, avoiding its use to replace or create architectural detail.

NEW ACCESSORY STRUCTURES AND LANDSCAPING

- a. **New walls, fences, gates:** New stone walls should be laid of native, uncut fieldstone. Avoid building sharp-cornered, smooth-faced, or heavily mortared walls. Formal stone gateways at driveway or other property entrances will generally be considered inappropriate. **Try to select new fencing that is simple in character and the design of which is related to its function.** Unpainted split-rail fencing is generally recommended in the Calhoun-Ives and Sunny Ridge Districts. Whatever their design, new fencing and gates should be in scale and character with existing surrounding structures and other such structures in the district, and in scale with their function. In general, walls and fences should not be used for the purpose of completely obscuring a view within an historic district.
- b. **New recreational structures:** **Try to site structures such as swimming pools, tennis courts, and gazebos as inconspicuously as possible.**
- c. **New landscape and miscellaneous structures:** **Avoid adding new structures that have no contemporary relevance, such as mounting blocks, hitching posts, carriage and gate houses, etc.**