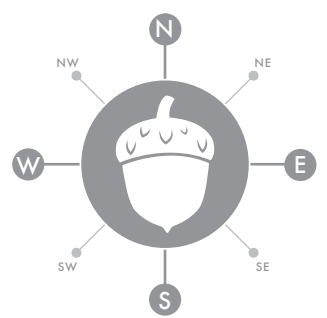
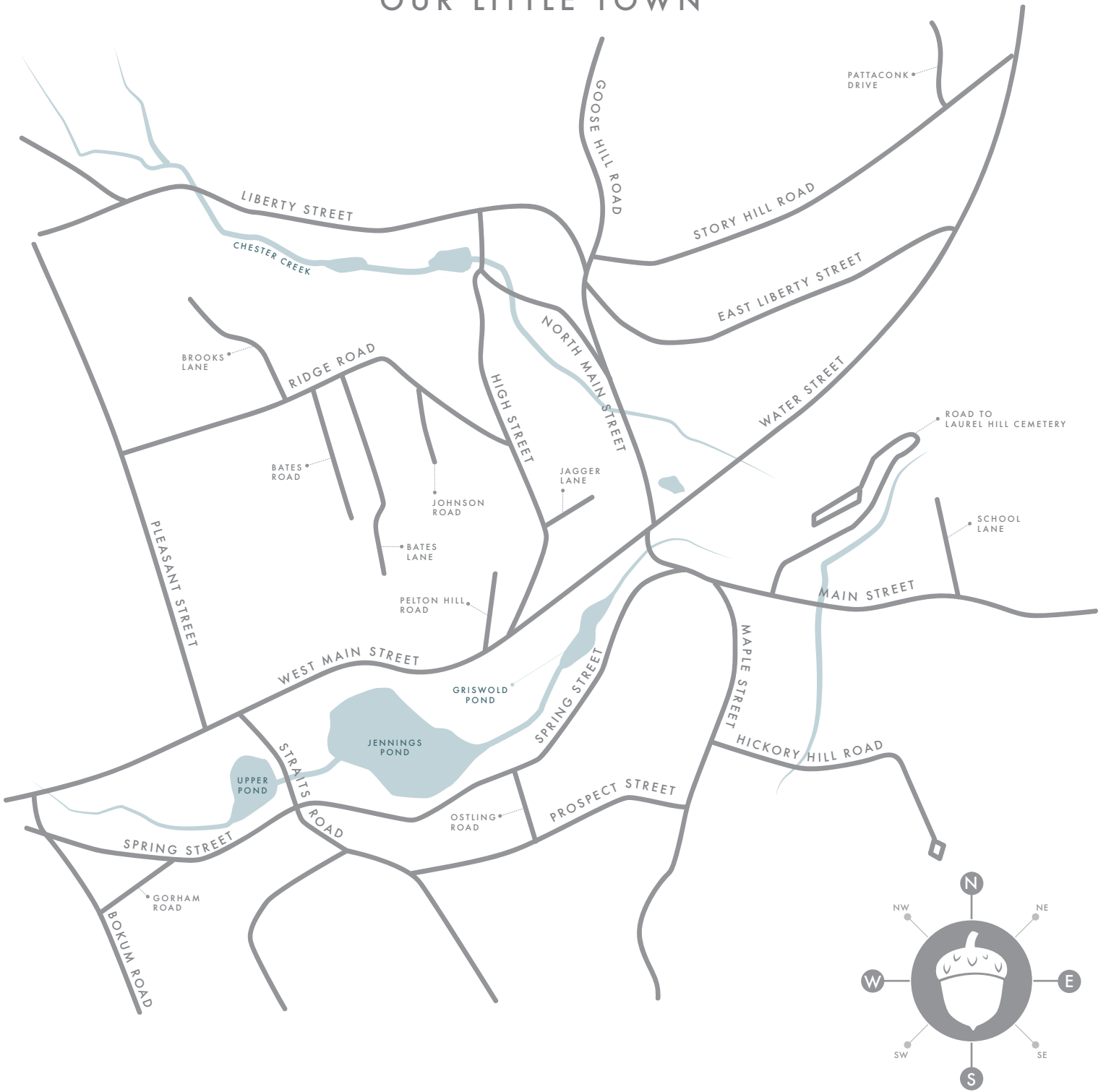




# OUR LITTLE TOWN





## WHY AM I HERE? (THE NOT-SO-PHILOSOPHICAL ANSWER)

Chasing Squirrels is a COVID-born project built to encourage exploration of our surroundings within a hyper-localized setting. Chester has an exquisite landscape, rich in artistic, culinary, architectural and industrial history. This self-guided walking map of the town involves a variety of different loops, starting with a collaboration between Re-Open Chester and The Chester Historical Society.

Hold the phone. Why are we chasing these squirrels, anyway? According to long-time Chesterites, Peter Good and Jan Cummings:

*...Research reveals that gray squirrels (Sciurus Carolinensis) were abundant here long before the birth of our nation. They were a source of sustenance for Native Americans, and old-timers share stories of Squirrel Stew having been a life-sustaining dish during The Depression. Though some residents appreciate squirrel intelligence, resourcefulness, others resent their cunning ability to take what they like from carefully fashioned and filled bird feeders.*

Squirrels became our quirky, yet loveable town mascot during the early 1970s when Peter Good designed the town seal. Chester has been chasing squirrels ever since.

Through self-guided tours using the Chasing Squirrels pdf, participants will not only observe Chester's history but also be invited to contribute to its future. For the "OUT WEST" route, follow the yellow squirrels. Each yellow squirrel indicates a site on the tour.



We know it's nutty but if you'd like to be featured on our social media, feel free to tag us! @ChasingSquirrelsChesterCT

Put on your walking shoes and hop the streets with us! You might even spot a squirrel...

---

Writing and Editing.....Kailey Costa & Cary Hull for Chester Historical Society

Graphics and Layout.....Rebecca Joslow MacGregor for Re-Open Chester

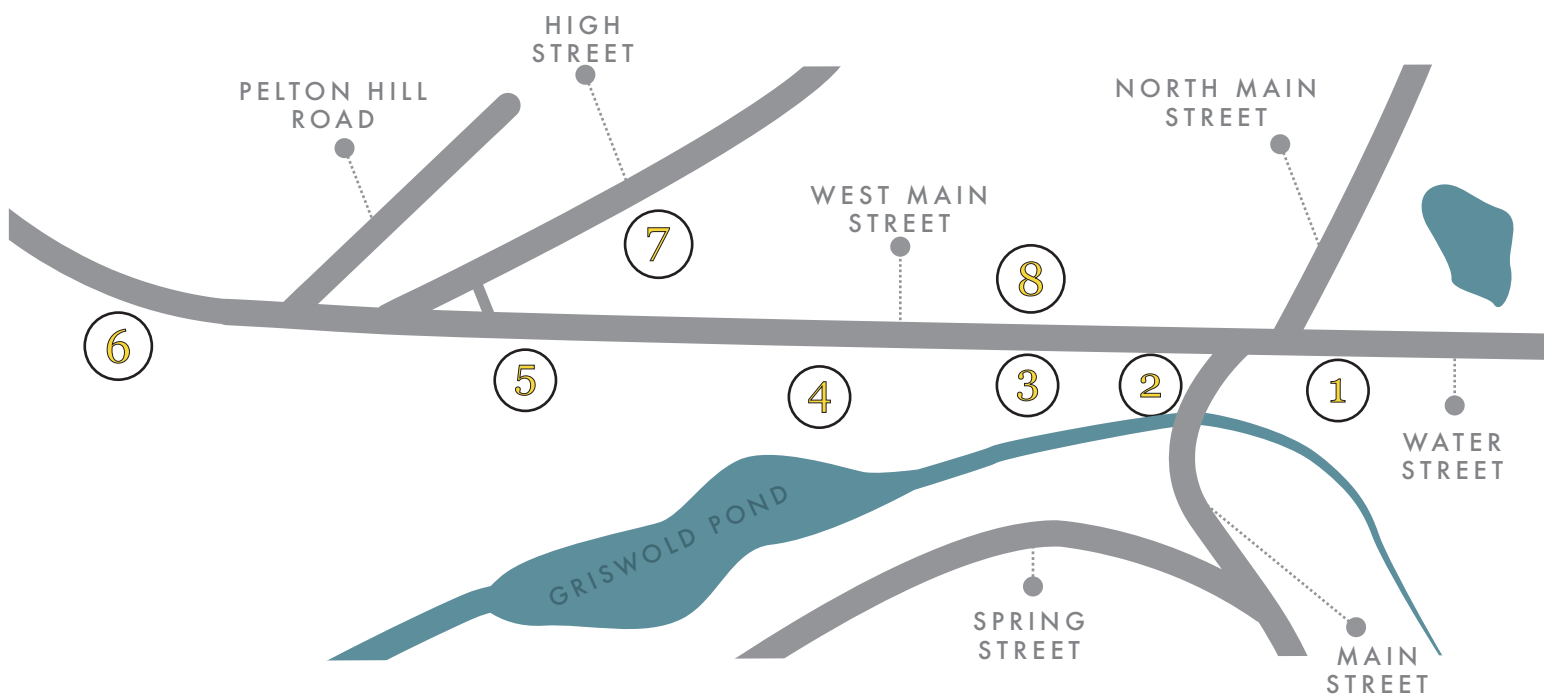


# ROUTE: OUT WEST

(Distance: .25 miles one way)

Chase squirrels and collect nuts! Follow the list below to locate the various sites on the tour:

- 1 4 Water Street  
The Stone Building
- 2 1 West Main Street  
The Flatiron Building
- 3 5 West Main Street
- 4 9 West Main Street  
The Chester Museum at The Mill
- 5 21 West Main Street  
The Chester Public Library
- 6 26 West Main Street  
The United Church of Chester
- 7 6 High Street  
The Chester Union School
- 8 6-8 West Main Street  
Bradley's Hall



This is a close-up view of the map on Page 1, zooming in on the “OUT WEST” route.



Italian masons built the 4 Water Street building in 1909 for Mr. Leet's grain store.

4 Water Street flooding circa 1927

1930s- Harry Parodi and his daughter. Harry owned a garage in the 4 Water Street building.

Generally referred to today as simply "4 Water Street," this has traditionally been known as The Stone Building. It was built by Italian masons in 1909 for J.H. Leet's grain and feed store.

Later it became a service garage, owned by Harry Parodi and then by Johnny Dengler. For an oil change, you'd drive into the garage over a deep pit. The mechanic climbed down into the pit to work from underneath the car.



Upstairs was Leet's Hall, which became the Princess Theater - yes, Chester had a movie theater! Irene Aronson recalled, "When I was about 16, Mr. Leet asked me to play the piano, to accompany the different actions portrayed on the screen. I was given a cue sheet, describing the action to be shown. But when the Deep River theater installed the Vitaphone (talking movies), the Chester theater closed for good."

November 7th, 1927  
Movies were played in Chester at the Princess Theater.

The Chester High School also used the theater space for basketball games. A town resident who played ball there recalled: "It had a row of open lightbulbs right down the center and steam pipes on both sides. We had to be careful not to back into the pipes and get a bad burn, but we tried to back the opposition into them! If the other team was ahead, we learned to shoot right into the lights. Whamo, out go the lights. Out comes the ladder. You've got to climb up, replace the bulb, and sweep up the floor until we could start in again."



Girls' basketball team of 1934 - one of many teams that played their games at 4 Water Street.



The address is Water Street for a good reason! Here are two photos from floods during the 1980s.



In 1948 the building was home to the Ladds-Nessler manufacturing company, which made cosmetics and novelties. Oliver Perry, father of Tom Perry, bought the building in 1972 and opened One of a Kind Antiques there. Their business made national news when they donated a walnut writing table, which had been owned by President Lincoln, to the White House in 1976.

Big changes happened in 1979, when Gregory Cook purchased the building and restored it, while adding a two-story wing for offices as well as restaurants. The Wheatmarket deli has been here since the early 1980s.





This photo was taken before 1913. See the empty lot where West Main and Main Streets connect.



Pierce's Brookside Drug Store in 1914, where ice cream and soda could be enjoyed outside, overlooking the brook.

At the junction of West Main and Main Streets stands this almost triangular building. Originally a tin and sheet manufacturing shop stood here, but during one of the springtime "freshets" in the mid 1850s the building was washed off its foundation. It was then taken apart and moved to Bokum Road where it was rebuilt into a dwelling.

In 1913 the "Flatiron Building" was erected in the empty lot here. The main floor was set up to be a store, the basement for stock, and the second floor for a dwelling. The first occupant was Elmer Pierce, a druggist, who stayed for only a few years - but what a delightful place "Pierce's Brookside Drug Store" was! Ice cream and soda were enjoyed at tables overlooking the brook.

Beginning in 1917 the building became a clothing store. The most renowned owner was Jacob Feinstein, beginning in 1920, who raised his family on the second floor and had his clothing business - simply known as "Feinsteins" - on the main floor. One longtime resident recalls, "You could find anything in the store. Dresses, shoes, sheets, knitting wool, patterns, material, and I mean anything. My mother used to buy dresses. My father work clothes." Another remembers, "Folks got 'everyday' clothes - socks, underwear, gloves, etc. - at Feinsteins. Our clothes for gym class were purchased there and he sold sneakers. They were at the far end of the store on the streetside wall. Chester was still a factory town in the 1950s and I recall Feinsteins reflecting that. The image that comes to mind at the mention of Jake Feinstein is his glasses up on his forehead. He was elderly by the 1950s and a respected businessman."



In the mid 1970s, Child Design, a wooden toy store, co-owned by Chester resident Randy Allinson, was here.

A later owner was Chester resident Randy Allinson who opened a wooden toy store, Child Design, which was followed by Richard Scofield's Period Lighting Fixtures store and shop (later renamed Richard Scofield Historic Lighting Company).

The building is now owned by sculptor Helene Johnson.



Richard D. Scofield of Scofield Historic Lighting is shown above in his workshop creating hand-crafted lighting. His work was inspired by 17th to 19th century European designs brought to America. There are many Scofield Lighting fixtures in Chester's town center as well as in the historic homes of Chester.

This building was once part of the Charles Griswold factory next door. The Griswold estate still owned the building when it became St. Luke's Episcopal Mission in 1897.

After several years, however, the congregation outgrew the space, so they moved out. They moved back in 1919 and undertook major renovations. They finished off the basement, creating a hall for socials and suppers, a kitchen and an entry. The street-level floor was turned into a church sanctuary, with a foot-pedal organ, but without pews. The mission closed in 1930 because of a dwindling congregation.



In 1938 the Italian-American Mutual Society met for a banquet in the basement level of 5 West Main Street.



The building at 5 West Main Street about 1980. It has changed little on the exterior over the years.

The building was later owned by Doris Christensen (when she married she became Doris Fjeldman and later Doris D'Orio). She converted the main floor into a dwelling and used the lower floor as her dance school.

People who grew up in Chester are eager to share their memories of the dance school. "The studio was definitely a big part of growing up for Chester kids in the fifties and sixties." "I have very fond memories of taking ballet (and later, tap) with Mrs. D'Orio. I started classes at age 4 and I remember going down the stairs to get to the studio and waiting in the lobby area for the older girls to finish up their class."

"In fifth and sixth grade we walked down the hill after school for ballroom dance. The boys lined up on one side of the room and the girls on the other. The boys were supposed to walk directly across the room and ask whoever they were across from to dance. You were never allowed to refuse!"

"We were so excited to dance with the boys...foxtrot, waltz, cha-cha and 'Mexican hat dance' (everyone's fave)."

"Whenever I remember Mrs. Fjeldman, I visualize the five or six small circles of beautiful red hair she styled at the top of her hairline that always reminded me of a tiara. I was so intrigued with her hairdo. How did she keep that halo of rings looking like she just stepped out of the hair salon? She always wore black fishnet stockings and a black leotard and she had a bunch of jumper-type dresses that she wore after class. I adored her!"

Years later, in 1983, the building became the business office of the National Theatre of the Deaf, which also owned the building next door (now the Chester Museum). Since 2001, it has been a residence on the lower level and shops on the street level.





This property, sited on the south branch of the Pattaconk Brook near the center of Chester, was used for manufacturing for almost 100 years, beginning around 1825. First, ship anchors were manufactured in a forge here. Next, the property was used by a manufacturer of carriage springs.

Charles Griswold bought the property in the 1850s to make augers and bits in “Griswold’s Shop.” He is credited with building the present two-story structure in the late 1860s, and for building the rubble-masonry wing dam on the Pattaconk Brook.



“Griswold’s Shop” after 1870

“Griswold’s Shop” and later, the Chester Manufacturing Company produced auger bits, wood screws, corkscrews, reamers and other light hardware before closing in 1919.

The Russell Jennings Manufacturing Company bought the property and used it only a few years before renting it to the Solar Masonic Lodge 131.



Masonic Hall probably after the Masons started their renovations.

Finally, in 1959, the Masons bought the building and began renovations. At that time, the building’s lower level had a dirt floor, so the Masons poured a cement floor and added a kitchen and bathrooms. The Masons removed the old factory equipment such as pulleys and belts. An interior stairway was installed as well as chestnut wainscoting upstairs. The windows were covered with siding on the exterior to add privacy for meetings and to prevent heat loss.

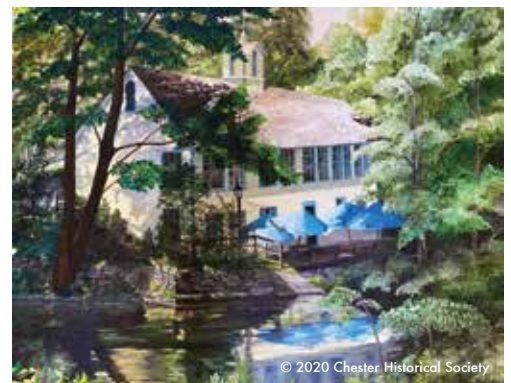
The Masons used the building for their meetings as well as their annual Chicken Barbecue, where they fed more than 100 local folks each year. The Chester Grange also held their monthly meetings in the Masonic Hall.



In 1984, when owned by National Theatre of the Deaf



NTD performance poster



A painting of the NTD building. They added the deck, with tables and umbrellas.

The National Theatre of the Deaf (NTD) bought the building, as well as the nearby 5 West Main Street house, in 1983. They renovated the exterior of the factory building, exposing all the windows, and added the deck overlooking the Pattaconk Brook. They used the building for rehearsal space, small performances and sign language classes. The theater company moved to Hartford in 2000.

Purchased in 2001 by the Chester Historical Society, the building officially opened as the Chester Museum at The Mill in 2010. During that time, architectural historian Bruce Clouette noted the building’s post-and-beam construction with its heavy timbers secured by wooden pegs or treenails and the wind braces at each of the posts. He said, “I want to emphasize that small-scale factories like this have become very rare, especially ones that are in a highly original state (as this one is). I believe it to be a building of great local significance and am delighted that the historical society is preserving it.” The Chester Museum at The Mill is generally open on summer and fall weekends and by appointment.



Front exterior, 1907



Side exterior, 1913



S Mills Ely, donor of The Chester Public Library

Chester's first library was established in 1789 in a private home on West Main Street, just west of the current Rte. 9. Next, in the early 1800s, Chester had a library association with members who paid dues. In 1875 a new Chester Library Association was formed and members could pay a fee and take out one book a week. The library moved around from one room to another in the Center, but by 1905 there were 3100+ books and more space was needed. Along came a generous donor.

S. Mills Ely had grown up at 14 Liberty Street, but he had left town as a young man to go into business in Binghamton, New York. Now he wanted to give the town of Chester a library as a memorial to his parents, Richard and Mary Caroline Ely. This memorial - Chester's present library - was formally dedicated and opened with public ceremonies on Aug. 6, 1907. (S. Mills Ely died two years later, at age 72.)

At that time, the "Hartford Courant" called the new Chester Library "one of the handsomest [buildings] in the state. It is built of native granite and trimmed with Indiana limestone, and built upon architectural lines that show strength, simplicity and beauty. It is rectangular in shape, having a slate roof with tile coping and an artistic portico. The building has three rooms and a toilet on the ground floor. On the left of the entrance is a stack room in which are cases of quartered oak for 4,000 volumes. There is a reference room, 12 by 12 feet, and a reading room 15 by 20 feet."

The building has been described as Carnegie Library style, having a "stone structure with front entry flanked by two columns, topped with a portico."



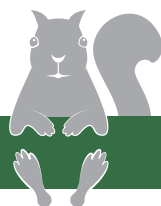
Library 1961 view across 1st floor

The library exterior is essentially unchanged from the day it was built.

In 1961, to add more space, the basement was renovated to add shelves and furniture and an outside doorway.



Open House, September 24, 1967

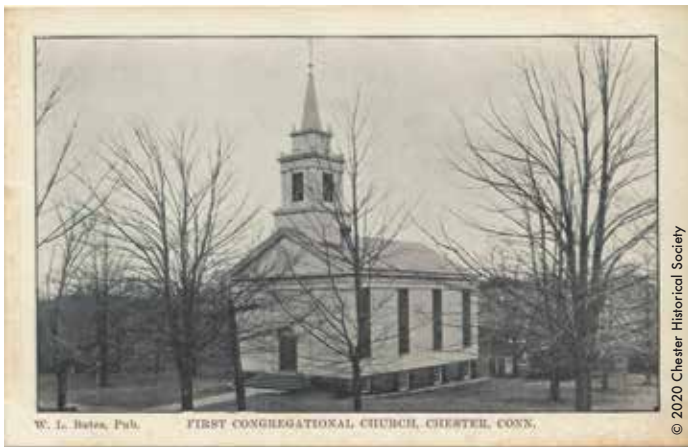






To really understand the history of the United Church, you need to start with this picture. Next to the Chester Library stood the Congregational Meeting House, which was the town's Third Congregational Meeting House, built in 1846, at which time the Second Meeting House became the Town Hall.

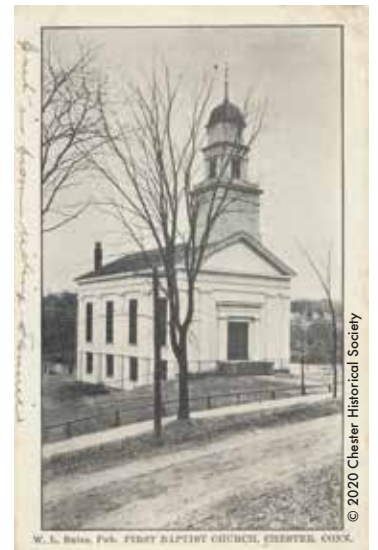
← "Church Hill," sometime after the library was built in 1907. From left to right, Library, Congregational Meeting House, then Baptist Meeting House.



Third Congregational Meeting House, probably around 1906

Next to that building was the town's Second Baptist Church, dating 1879-1880. (The first Baptist Church had been built in 1822, at the corner of West Main and Pleasant Streets.)

So here on Church Hill stood these two buildings, side by side. They were nearly identical in size and of a similar style. There was some rivalry between the two



Second Baptist Meeting House, 1906

congregations, but it was mostly friendly. Generally, however, when one church had an improvement, the neighboring church followed suit.

Both churches flourished and grew - until they didn't. The size of their congregations started decreasing. Beginning in 1933, both congregations started talking about uniting. This finally happened on April 16, 1941, when they combined to form the United Church of Chester as one congregation. They still owned two buildings, however, neither one large enough for the united congregation. Worship services were held in the Congregational building, while Sunday School was in both. A decision was finally made to combine both buildings by moving the Congregational building across the rear of the Baptist building. The narthex and sanctuary were created from the main floor of the old Baptist building. The chancel, with altar, organ and choir pews, came from the Congregational building. By March 1949 the United Church of Chester was truly "United."



← This 1914 image, taken from the other end of Church Hill, shows first the Baptist parsonage, Baptist Meeting House, then the Congregational Meeting House.



The low brick building housing the Chester Hose Company now occupies the location of the former Chester Union School. Locate this destination opposite the Chester Public Library by the painted squirrel at the base of the stone steps used by students for 55 years.

By 1800 Chester supported four one-room schoolhouses around the town. But the town kept growing and those schoolhouses weren't large enough. In the 1890s, graded education became popular, private kindergarten was offered for a short time upstairs in the Stone Store, and to get a high school education, children had to go to the Deep River High School. (Only one of the four district schoolhouses offered classes for the upper grades.)

By fall 1905, The Chester Union School was built on this property. There were about 250 pupils. This wooden building had six rooms, with one for all the high school-aged students.



School about 1910, Fargo postcard



Before long, more space was needed. Two small buildings, which the students called the "Chicken Coops," were set up on the back of the property for the younger grades. One of these became affectionately dubbed "The Globe Theatre." But the school population continued to grow, so by 1924 a six-room brick addition was built for grades 7 through 12.



School playground 1923 postcard



The Chester Union School before 1924 brick addition. Note Chicken Coops on left back.





## 6 High Street | The Chester Union School continued...

A 1928 graduate recalled, "High school was one big room. Freshmen, then the sophomores, juniors and seniors. And at the front of the room was a raised platform and that's where the principal sat."



School after 1924 addition



School and library after 1924

In a few more decades, more – and improved – space was needed. The Class of 1951 was the last to graduate from Chester High School; the Valley Regional school (for Chester, Deep River and Essex) opened that fall for grades 7 through 12. A regional junior high school was built in 1970.

As for the elementary school grades (K-6), the old Union School continued to be used until 1960 when a new elementary school was built on Ridge Road. The old school stood empty until it was torn down in 1965 and the property became home to The Chester Hose Company.

The only remnants of the school today are a stone wall along the edge of the property and the original stone sign from the front of the Union School. The sign had been forgotten for years in a town building, until it was found in 1980 by Bob Blair. Bob and the Chester High School Alumni Association were instrumental in having the sign placed on the property.



School wall 2003 photo with Helen Raffuse and Shirley Miceli

Helen Raffuse, a 1937 Chester High School graduate, spearheaded the restoration of the stone wall and steps in the early 2000s. "That wall was so much a part of our school days," Helen said. "It was sort of a meeting place for everyone."

Although the school has been long gone, the Chester High School Alumni Association continues to gather for an annual reunion every September.





Bradley's Hall 1877

In 1876 Daniel Bradley built this two-story building, using the upper portion for a hall and the lower for his family's living quarters.

Bradley's Hall became the center of much of Chester's social life from then until about 1895. Newspapers of the time reported a multitude of happenings there, such as: "A Leap Year party will be given at Bradley's Hall." And "The Juvenile Prohibition Club was organized at Bradley's Hall. A prohibition banner will be raised next week." The Literary Club met regularly at Bradley's Hall over the years. In 1876 there was a meeting of the county's Temperance Society there, and in 1891 a lecturer visited to speak on the "Marriage Question."

Here's what was reported on one busy week in October 1878. "The voters of this town are to be enlightened as to the mysteries of greenbackism Friday evening at Bradley's Hall, by a missionary from Middletown....Our young men have a group that meets in Bradley's Hall, and the members intend giving a hop every two weeks and social gatherings the alternate weeks. 'Strictly temperate' is the motto."

After Daniel's death in 1918, three years after his wife's death, the building was remodeled into two apartments. It was renovated in 1946 but continued to be used as two apartments. In spring 2020, it was renovated again and is still in use as two apartments.



Bradley's Hall 1984

