

**OVERVIEW**

York Village, with its quaint New England character and abundance of historical destinations, holds a special charm that is closely tied to both its Maine coastal heritage and its community. The Village Center is rich with landmark architecture and important civic destinations such as the Town Hall, First Parish Church, Public Library, and the Museums of Old York. All centered upon the revered Civil War monument located in the heart of the village community.

Yet, conditions in the village and its underlying problems have been a concern, and its improvement a priority, since the beginning of the 20th century. Now, almost 70 years after the proposed 1946 Improvement Plan, its fundamental assessment of the Village as “...once convenient, charming if not beautiful, and safe. Today it is inconvenient, ugly and to a degree dangerous...” remains as appropriate now as it was then.

The following topics are addressed in this chapter:

- (1) Concise History of York Village Through the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries**
- (2) Improvement Becomes a Priority in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**
- (3) Revitalization Becomes a Priority in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**
- (4) Village Study Committee Lays the Foundation for a Master Plan**
- (5) Advancing the Master Plan with a Multi-disciplinary Team**

**(1) CONCISE HISTORY OF YORK VILLAGE THROUGH THE 17<sup>TH</sup>, 18<sup>TH</sup>, AND 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES**

Thanks to Joel Lefever, Director of Museums of Old York we have this concise history of York Village. In the 1630’s, York Village was originally settled by men with close ties to Sir Ferdinando Gorges, the English proprietary founder of Maine. Gorges granted tracts of land in divisions of several thousand acres at a time, and Edward Godfrey was one of those who received such an allotment. Godfrey, who served as an Agent for Gorges, is believed to have built the first homestead in York on Point Bolleyne [Steedman Woods] on the bank of what was later called Meetinghouse Creek / Barrels Mill Pond.

By 1633, Godfrey had two neighbors near Point Bolleyne, but the heaviest early concentration of settlement was near the harbor, also called "Lower Town" – the location for incoming supplies from England, and also the location of the first Anglican Church and burying ground (near the present site of St. George's Episcopal Church). Another concentration of settlement was upriver in the vicinity of Gorges' Manor of Point Christian.

In the 1640’s and 1650’s, perhaps owing to Godfrey's willingness to grant portions of his division of land to others, the nucleus of what then was known as the city of Gorgeana shifted northwest, nearer to what is now York Village. York was the center of government for the Province of Maine, with courts being held in the meetinghouse, and accused or convicted criminals held in a nearby gaol [jail]. Godfrey set aside parish glebe land (the rents of which supported the minister's salary), and a meetinghouse, a parsonage, and the gaol were built along Lindsay Road.

What became York Street connected the center of the village to several farmsteads at the western portion of Godfrey's holdings (sometimes called the Upper Village). Around 1643, families from Scituate, Massachusetts were granted plots of land between what is now Raydon Road and the First Parish Church. These families built houses and barns on the north side of York Street, but in addition they owned lower land across York Street that provided access to a creek and marshes used for haying. No houses were built on the south side of York Street until the 1890's, and the Preble Farm (now called the Davis Property) is the last remaining undivided and undeveloped long and narrow farmstead, existing on both sides of York Street, with its origins in the 17th century.

Changes in the location of York's meetinghouse or Parish Church indicated the shifting center of York Village. The first meetinghouse or "Oratory" was constructed in Lower Town (now York Harbor) in 1636. A second meetinghouse, completed in 1667, was built on parish glebe land near the creek later called Meetinghouse Creek. The third and fourth meetinghouses, completed in 1712 and 1747, were sited on the north side of York Street near the location of the present First Parish Church. Those meetinghouses were situated parallel and closer to York Street.

With the shifting of the meetinghouse to York Street, other buildings followed suit. The gaol, first built in 1653, was reconstructed around 1719 at the intersection of York Street and Lindsay Road. A gaoler's residence and courthouse also were built near the gaol, and later the buildings were connected under the gambrel roof seen today. Shops of skilled craftspeople were clustered at the base of Gaol Hill, and at least two of the small shop structures later were incorporated into 175 York Street (Emerson-Wilcox House). A town hall was constructed in the 1730's near its present location. It was reconstructed in 1811, and further remodeled in the Victorian Italianate style in the 1873.

In 1794, Judge David Sewall built Coventry Hall (34 Long Sands Road), the most significant Federal Style house in the York area. It, and other structures dating slightly later, such as the 1833 Methodist Church, was in keeping with York's earlier character. Mid to late 19th century buildings in York (such as the "Ice House" on Long Sands Road), with their intricate outlines and bright colors, were products of their own times and several were either demolished or remodeled into a more tasteful "Colonial" mode starting in the late 19th century.

In 1882, as part of a movement to beautify York, the First Parish Church was lifted from its foundation, turned perpendicular to York Street, set back twenty feet from the street, and remodeled with a new steeple. Several other houses were moved back on their lots as well. Examples are 31 Long Sands Road (Emerson Homestead) and 112 York Street (Joseph Banks House). Houses still on their original foundations closer to roadways are 175 York Street (Emerson-Wilcox House), and 20 Lindsay Road (Nicholas Sewall House).



View from the intersection of York St. and Long Sands Rd, the heart of the village and future site of the Monument. Note dirt streets with electric lines and trolley tracks. The building at the far left was originally a bank, and is currently the headquarters of the Old York Historical Society.



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## **(2) IMPROVEMENT BECOMES A PRIORITY IN THE 20<sup>TH</sup> C**

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, York's business district, along with the "monument square" at the intersection of York Street and Long Sands Road, began to "modernize" and achieved much of the character we recognize today. Power lines and paved asphalt roads for automobiles impacted the historical nature of York Village. In some cases, older residences were demolished (such as at the site of the Bank of America), or significant new structures were built where little had existed before (York Hospital, fire station).

In mid-century, even further changes to "autoize" the village caused some older residences to be demolished (such as at the site of the Bank of America). A series of initiatives were created to address problems, but most were not implemented. In 1946 the Comey Improvement Plan described York Village as *"once convenient, charming if not beautiful, and safe. Today it is inconvenient, ugly and to a degree dangerous..."*

Thanks to York resident David Chase we include the following notes on past York Village improvement efforts which are a byproduct of research conducted in the Library & Archives of the Museums of Old York. In the course of reading the records of the Old York Historical & Improvement Society (OYH&IS) (1900-1983), David was struck by the Society's attention to York Village throughout the 20th century. The OYH&IS meeting minutes document three long-term village improvement projects and three targeted design initiatives that prefigure, to a degree, the work of the 21st-century Village Study Committee. The outline below is informative, but by no means definitive in terms of what all was going on to improve the village by the Society or by other organizations, including most importantly the Town. It shows how the conditions of the village have been a concern and its improvement a priority for over a century.

### ***1900 and Beyond - Historic Properties***

The Old York Historical & Improvement Society's first project, opened on the 4th of July, 1900, was the Old Gaol Museum. An enduring success, it remains the heart of a cluster of six historic village properties now part of the Museums of Old York, successor to the OYH&IS and two other organizations. The Gaol established York Village as a tourist destination, and along with other MOY properties it continues to provide educational perspectives and opportunities to the citizens of York, as well as visitors from away.

### 1902-1974 Landscaping

Prior to 1902, York Street was without shade trees, the old cemetery was overgrown and the “village green”—the area surrounding Town Hall and the First Parish Church—was a sometimes muddy, always unkempt knoll. In 1902 the Improvement Society took it all in hand. A landscape plan for the village green was created, so too for the Civil War monument in the square, trees and flowering shrubs were planted around Town Hall and the church, as well as along York Street and in the cemetery.



View of the intersection of York St. and Long Sands Rd, with the Monument at the heart of the village. Note dirt streets with a buggy in background, and grass and trees around the Monument.



In the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, York's business district, along with the "monument square" at the intersection of York Street and Long Sands Road began to “modernize” and achieve much of its character we recognize today. Power lines and paved asphalt roads for automobiles impacted the historical nature of York Village.



View today in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Conditions have continued to evolve with the times, yet the underlying problems, and the concerns they caused, persisted. Now, almost 70 years after the 1946 Improvement Plan, its assessment of the Village as “..... *inconvenient, ugly and to a degree dangerous...*” remains as appropriate as it was then.

### **1946 Development Plan for York Village**

In August 1946, Arthur C. Comey, a nationally prominent city and town planner, created a plan for improvements to the village sponsored by the Old York Garden Club. His report begins: *“York Village center was once convenient, charming if not beautiful, and safe. Today it is inconvenient, ugly and to a degree dangerous.”* Comey went on: *“And yet, even today the solution is quite simple, it need not be achieved at once by a single burst of activity, but may be brought about over a series of years, accomplishing those improvements most easily brought about and those remedying the most glaring defects first.”* The Comey plan involved traffic and parking improvements and what was thought to be the harmonious redesign of existing buildings to give them a “colonial” appearance.

### **1964-67 Village Square Project**

Late in 1964 the directors of the Improvement Society began to discuss a variety of possible improvements that could be promoted in the village. Their first step was to review the Comey report. Their new thrust concentrated on “colonial” signage, façade renovations and burying utility lines throughout the village. The Society engaged James Garvin, architect and architectural historian then working at Strawberry Banke, to sketch plans for harmonious signs and buildings, and also entered into discussion with the New England Telephone Company and Central Maine Power.

### **1972-97 Window Box Project**

As part of the effort to beautify the village, window boxes were placed on most commercial and institutional buildings and planted each spring. Initially this work was conducted jointly by the Village Improvement Committee of the OYH&IS, Piscataqua Garden Club and the Old York Garden Club. During the holiday season, the group created and placed dozens of wreaths on village buildings.

### **1974-77 York Village Townscape Project**

On September 3, 1974 Improvement Society directors discussed a Chamber of Commerce letter seeking participation of the Society in a village townscape project: *“Although originally sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce, [the project] is envisioned as a broad-based community Bicentennial effort.”* At about the same time, the Society was in discussion with the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s Main Street Program office concerning a possible storefronts improvement initiative in York Village. By February 1975, the planning firm Vision, Inc. had 100 York participants working on the townscape project.

### **1973 York National Register Historic District and Character Defining Patterns**

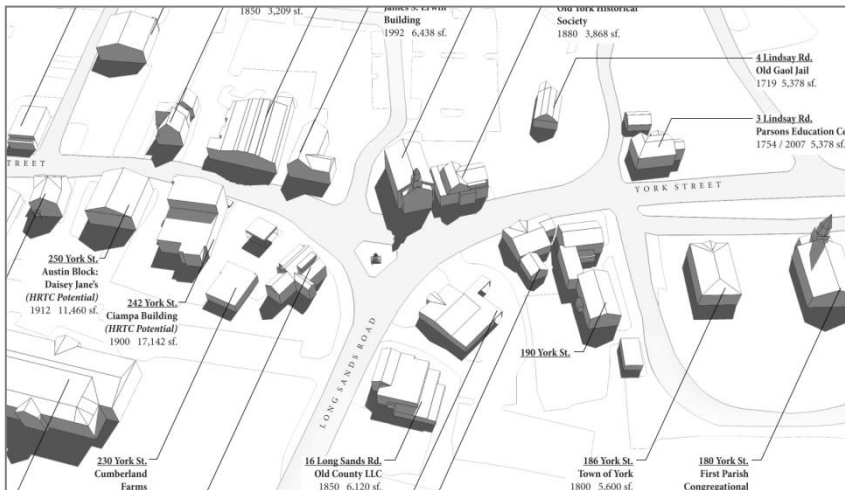
The York Historic District was accepted into the National Register of Historic Places in 1973. The nomination described *“The Town of York, especially York Village and York Harbor, remain in essentially the same condition as they did in the 18th and 19th centuries. The 17th century appearance of York has, of course, been changed. Architecturally, York is a surviving late 17th and 18th century town. Its buildings are not great mansions, but are the homes of the pioneers of this country. These homes and also the public buildings are in a remarkable state of preservation because of the work of local people who realize their proud history and the contributions of their ancestors to the history of this country”.*

### Character Defining Patterns

Some of the underlying patterns that helped define the village's character are:

- **Main Street** - Buildings organized around a common commercial spine, such as York Street business area
- **Town Common** - Streets and buildings organized around a central public space, such as Monument Square
- **Downtown** - A concentration of commercial buildings surrounded by residential neighborhoods, such as the Village Center and neighborhoods
- **Density** - Buildings clustered near buildings, leaving little inbuilt area and few open sites, such as the Village Center
- **Scale** – Buildings typically 2 or 3 stories set the “village scale”
- **Street Edges** - Buildings fronting and close to the street, such as Ciampa and Berger buildings

These patterns mutually benefit each other, and in doing so create a web of overall character which forms York Village's distinct sense of place.



### (3) REVITALIZATION A PRIORITY IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

Conditions evolved with the times into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, yet underlying problems, and the concerns they caused, persisted. Almost 70 years after the 1946 Improvement Plan, its assessment of the Village as “.....inconvenient, ugly and to a degree dangerous...” remains as appropriate now as it was then.

The recognition of persistent underlying problems prompted a renewed interest in the Village center. Unlike earlier 20<sup>th</sup> century initiatives focused primarily on physical improvements, 21<sup>st</sup> century revitalization is a comprehensive approach, including Pedestrians & Streetscapes, Roadways & Traffic, Curbside & off-Street Parking, Utilities, Trails & Open Space, Village & Architectural Character, Budget & Funding, Economic Development and Community Participation.

#### 2011 Revitalizing York Village with the Maine Downtown Center

To address a more comprehensive approach, the Museums of Old York hosted the first in a series of community meetings on the topic "Revitalizing York Village." The Maine Downtown Center came to present to those assembled. These sessions (with break-out groups) were held in April, May, June and July 2011.

#### 2011 Village Study Committee Appointed to Begin the Village Master Plan

To advance and formalize the town's commitment to revitalization, in May of 2011, the York Board of Selectmen appointed the York Village Study Committee (YVSC) to look into ways in which York Village might be revitalized.

#### **(4) COMMITTEE LAYS FOUNDATION FOR MASTER PLAN**

The York Village Study Committee (YVSC) is an exceptionally dedicated and hardworking volunteer group. Starting in 2011, they did a great deal of “heavy lifting” to lay the Master Plan’s foundation. The YVSC accomplished many milestones, a few of which are described below:

##### ***Meetings to Understand the Community***

Early on the YVSC met with business owners, residents and other interested parties to get their feedback on how York might achieve these objectives.

##### ***Mission***

Over the summer of 2011 the VSC worked on a mission statement which resulted in the following:

##### ***Mission of the Village Study Committee***

*The mission of the Village Study Committee is to establish a framework that will promote the vitality and beauty of York Village as a dynamic, safe, and sustainable town center reflecting the history of the community.*

*Put the “village” back in York Village”*

##### ***Community Participation & Outreach***

During a strategic planning exercise the VSC created three sub-committees who began work in October 2011. These groups addressed: 1) Focal Points, 2) Traffic and Pedestrian Issues, and 3) Land Use. The idea to define project boundaries using three concentric geometric rings was presented to the BOS in our first report in January 2012. In January, March, and May 2012, the VSC held public sessions to which we invited participants (through one-on-one meetings) and where we asked people to reflect on their experiences and their ideas for improving with the village.



## **YORK VILLAGE REVITALIZATION**

Logo of the York Village Study Committee

##### ***Master Plan Focus Area***

Early on in the planning process, the committee conceptualized York Village in geographic terms, focusing on walking radii from the Civil War monument at the center of the primary York Village intersection. The area of concern for this particular stage of improvements is a portion of York Street and a portion of Long Sands Road, falling between the radii of a 2 and a 5 minute walk (or 1/8 and 1/4 of a mile) from the monument. An engineering survey of existing conditions in the area is currently being conducted. Inset maps show the study radii and the survey area, respectively.

##### ***Recommendations & Design Objectives***

The YVSC developed 25 detailed recommendations related to public process, key properties, parking, sidewalks, traffic, streetscape, planning and zoning. Three possible options for the monument intersection at the heart of York Village were developed. The three options build upon each other in both size of green space and the features added. Please see the following pages for complete recommendations.

## **(5) ADVANCING THE MASTER PLAN WITH A MULTI-DISCIPLINARY TEAM**

Advancing and executing the committee's visioning work then required multiple disciplines working as a team. These disciplines include architecture and landscape architecture, urban design and planning, civil and traffic engineering and funding. To create this multi-disciplinary team, the YVSC issued a Request for Qualifications seeking a consulting team to collaborate with, in order to build on the progress made over their first three years and to see this town project through to completion.

In August 2014 the Select Board unanimously approved the allocation of \$143,303 from the MaineDOT Municipal Partnership Initiative so that a Village Master Plan could be advanced through the services of a consulting firm, The Downtown Revitalization Collaborative. Founded on the four cornerstones of Revitalization – Economics, Streets, Buildings and Community Participation, the Team purposefully integrates the allied disciplines of Planning, Design, Engineering, Funding, Financing and Implementation to provide comprehensive services.

- Phase 1 (August 2014 through April 2015) includes the Master Plan with technical investigation, Design and Outreach.
- Phase 2 is anticipated to include Schematic Design
- Phase 3 is anticipated to include Advanced Design and Construction Documents