

## The Sheldon – Charter Oak Neighborhood

## **SHELDON/CHARTER OAK NEIGHBORHOOD HISTORY**

Sheldon/Charter Oak is Hartford's oldest neighborhood (occupying 335 acres on the eastern edge of Hartford, adjacent to the downtown business district and the Connecticut River). The Charter Oak neighborhood takes its name from the enormous oak tree which, until 1856, stood close to the spot where Charter Oak Place and Charter Oak Avenue intersect. The tree came down in a windstorm on August 21, 1856.

In 1623 Dutch traders established a trading post at the mouth of the Park River in the area which became known as Dutch Point. By 1636 Thomas Hooker and a group of colonists arrived from Massachusetts and began setting out fields and house lots. The English colonists from Massachusetts settled in two areas of what is now called Hartford, creating two plantations: north of the Park River (the northern plantation) and south of the Park River. Some of the first governors of colonial Connecticut lived in the Charter Oak neighborhood, or the southern plantation. Edward Hopkins, Thomas Welles, John Webster, and George Wyllys, (after which Wyllys Street was named), all made their homes in this neighborhood between 1640 and 1657.

Later residents included Thomas Seymour, governor from 1850-53, and Gideon Welles, who served as U.S. Secretary of the Navy under Abraham Lincoln. This neighborhood was home to many prominent Hartford citizens during the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Probably, the most internationally known resident of the neighborhood was our very own Samuel Colt and his wife Elizabeth Hart Jarvis Colt.

The area is also full of rich architectural history. Of the twenty-nine historic landmark buildings in Hartford, twenty-one are located in the Sheldon/Charter Oak neighborhood. The neighborhood is home to:

- The Butler-McCook Homestead (Headquarters of the Antiquarian and Landmarks Society Inc., constructed in 1741 and one of the oldest and best kept 18<sup>th</sup> century homes open to the public);
- The Charter Oak Monument (marking Connecticut's independence from British rule);
- The old Colt Armory (built in 1854 by Samuel Colt);
- St. Peter's Church (built by the Irish in 1859, later taken over by Polish immigrants, and which today serves a largely Puerto Rican community);
- Old Temple Beth Israel (Connecticut's oldest synagogue; built in 1876 by German-Jewish immigrants, it is a monument to the freedom of expression granted to all religions in Connecticut in 1843);
- The Capewell Manufacturing Company (currently unoccupied; the first horseshoe nail manufacturing company, opened in 1890, destroyed by fire and rebuilt in the early 1900s);
- The Polish National Home (completed by the Polish community in 1930).

## **SHELDON/CHARTER OAK NEIGHBORHOOD**

The Coalition to Strengthen the Sheldon/Charter Oak neighborhood (CSS/CON, pronounced 'sis-kon') is one of 15 in the City of Hartford designated as a neighborhood revitalization zone.

## CHARTER OAK TREE – THE LEGEND

King Charles II of England had granted Connecticut settlers a Royal Charter in 1662, which was based on Thomas Hooker's Fundamental Orders (1639), giving the colony extensive powers of self-government. After Charles' death, King James II appointed Sir Edmund Andros governor of New England in 1687, and ordered Andros to retrieve the charter. Andros met with Connecticut's leaders in Hartford on October 13, 1687. After a lengthy meeting, Connecticut's governor, Robert Treat, refused Andros' demands for the charter. Another leader, Andrew Leets, knocked out the candle in the meeting room after finishing an emotional speech. The charter disappeared in the confusion. Legend says that one of the colonists passed the charter out the window to Joseph Wadsworth, who ferried it across the Park River and hid it in a hollow section of the giant white oak tree. Two years later the colonial government under the charter was restored to Connecticut after William II had taken the throne. Many of the principles set forth in the charter were later embodied in the U.S. Constitution.

## TOUR

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*From the Library, walk south on Prospect Street.*

### Amos Bull House - 1788



This house has been moved twice in its life, first from one location on Main St to another Main St. location in 1940, and then relocated to this location in 1971. The gambrel-roofed red brick townhouse is unusual for Hartford in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Amos Bull, the first owner, was an interesting man: married 5 times, a teacher, and a merchant. In fact, Amos Bull, supplied all the hardware for the Old State House when it was built. In addition, he taught briefly at Washington College (now Trinity), and it is said that he was known for his fireside chats with his students that became known as "Bull sessions".

After Bull, the home housed the Apollo restaurant and served as an office for an auto dealership. Most recently, it has been the offices of the CT Historical Commission, but is soon to be vacated by them.

### Charter Oak Cultural Center – Temple Beth Israel built in 1876, by George Keller



Beth Israel was the first Jewish congregation in Hartford (1843), and the first congregation in the state to build a synagogue. Its twin domed towers and round-arched fenestration are Romanesque Revival in style, while the building materials of brownstone, red brick, and limestone trim, originally with variegated slate roof, express the Victorian love of polychromy.

The interior was elaborately stenciled in a colorful mix of buff, blue, and chocolate in 1898, at a time the width of the structure was increased. The Beth Israel congregation occupied the building until 1935. It now serves as a non-sectarian community cultural center and has undergone extensive renovation and restoration.

*Cross Charter Oak Avenue. Proceed onto Charter Oak Place.*



**Charter Oak Memorial – erected in 1907 – artist, Charles Adams Platt**

The often-overlooked granite monument, erected by the Connecticut Society of Colonial Wars, commemorates one of Connecticut’s most cherished legends: The Charter Oak Tree. The monument commemorating this iconic legend is disappointingly conventional, particularly in view of the otherwise innovative and graceful work usually associated with Platt and the significance of the “Tree” to the State’s history. The monument is a simple cylindrical shaft supporting a sphere, a very commonplace design for monuments of the time.

**Charter Oak Memorial Park**

Believe it or not, the small wedge of land adjacent to the Charter Oak Monument is a **city park**. This slice of land was given to the city by the Connecticut Society of Colonial Wars. This park is formed by the intersection of Charter Oak Avenue and Charter Oak Place. In 1919, the Society of Colonial Wars planted this wedge of land and erected a wrought iron fence around the site. The Society turned this monument and parcel of land over to the City of Hartford as a park.

Today, this “park” is sparsely planted, unattractive, and a catchall for unsightly debris. In short, it is a shameful reminder of our glorious past and the significance of this historic tree. Several years ago, the NRZ developed a concept plan to enhance this park that includes: relocating the monument to the center of the hillside to enhance its prominence; adding up-lighting to the monument; and constructing a “switch-back” pathway that traverses the hill and circles the monument. Also considered is reconstructing the upper east level of the park with built-in seating, a platform with a history wall outlining the Tree’s and the Charter’s history, and replanting the remainder of the park with native perennials that will enhance the Victorian architecture of the adjacent streets.

The vision is to capture and restore the historic significance of the Charter Oak Tree. We envision this park to be one of many tourist stops throughout our City. Small educational festivals might be held with a costumed Captain Wadsworth delivering the precious Charter to its hiding spot. Likewise, small vignettes could be staged for groups of school children, depicting the local Saukiog Indians holding tribal council at the tree. The upper level seating and platformed area might be used for local venues, announcements, and speeches.

## **Charter Oak Place**

After demolition of the 200-year old Wyllys mansion and the fall of the Charter Oak tree in 1856, Charter Oak Place was laid out as a street in 1857. By 1875, this street was fully lined with imposing houses occupied by professionals, merchants and local manufacturing's middle management. Many of these homes still remain, however some were lost to neglect in the 1960s and 1970s.

All of these homes went through major changes during the period between 1920 and 1980 – many being converted to rooming houses to accommodate the growing population of industrial Hartford. During the 1970s, the city had possession of most of the then derelict buildings on the street and plans were set in motion to demolish them to make way for an expansion of downtown. In the late 1970s, a handful of preservation-minded individuals petitioned the city and won ownership, and the last major renovation and restoration of these homes took hold.

Architecturally, the street consists of styles ranging from Italianate Victorians, Italian Villas, Queen Anne, Stick Style, and Second Empires.

### **40-38 and 36-34 Charter Oak Place, The Pease House and Fenn/Eaton House- 1862-1863**



As you climb the small hill at the beginning of the street, notice the almost identical buildings on the left. While they appear to be 3-story buildings, they are actually 5 stories due to the steep slope of the land. These were originally built as Double Houses and are rumored to be the first duplexes built as such in the country. Both of these houses epitomize the Italianate house, with their very simple square box shape, brick construction with brownstone foundations, sills and lintels, tall windows on the lower floors and large rectangular cupolas.

### **33 Charter Oak Place – The Shipman House - 1860**



Built in 1860, the house was a single family dwelling built for Judge Nathaniel Shipman (a U.S. District Court Judge) and his family. This house epitomizes the Italian Villa style Victorian, with deep overhangs, a lovely side veranda, tall windows, brownstone lintels and sills and ornately bracketed cornices. The Shipman family sold the home in 1912, as the neighborhood began to change complexion and homes were converted to multi-family homes and rooming houses. The flight of prominent families (including the Shipman's) at the time, was to the much tonier Asylum and Farmington Avenues.

**27 Charter Oak Place – The Kingsbury House, also called the Gatling House - 1860**



Originally built in 1860 for the Kingsbury family, the house was later home to Dr. Richard Gatling, inventor of the Gatling gun and then the home of A.C. Williams, President of Capewell Manufacturing. The front portion of the home is typical of the Italianate style homes of the area. However, a later rear addition was added in the Moorish style of architecture with a rounded second floor room (on south side) and horseshoe shaped windows and an elaborate mosaic tile interior. Unfortunately, just as restoration of this home began in 1980, the rear portion of the home burned. Thankfully, much of it was rebuilt, but not the fabulous tile mosaic interior.

**15 Charter Oak Place - Robinson-Smith House - 1864**



This handsome double house was home to two prosperous flour merchants, Charles Robinson and James Smith, business partners of Charles Northam. The symmetrical plan and large massing combine several popular revival styles. The large square cupola with bracketed overhanging roof eaves recalls the Italianate style popular on many of the area homes. The mansard roofline is an early Hartford appearance of a feature from the French-inspired Second Empire style.

**12 Charter Oak Place – Colonel Charles H. Northam – 1875**



Colonel Charles Northam was a merchant, banker and West Indies trader, as well as a philanthropist, having donated the Northam Memorial Chapel at Cedar Hill Cemetery and Northam Hall at Trinity College.

This rambling Queen Anne was built for Colonel Charles Northam a mere six years before he died. The house epitomizes the Queen Anne style, with two-over-two windows, three-sided bay windows, corbeled chimneys, and the square steep roofed tower on the front of the house. An exuberant variety of forms, textures, materials and colors is characteristic of this style. The complex massing is enriched by the addition of towers, projecting pavilions, porches and encircling verandahs. The house is painted with eye-catching accents and is commonly called “The Painted Lady”.

***Cross over Wyllys Street, but walk WEST to the corner of Wyllys and Wethersfield Avenue.***

**2 Wethersfield Ave – the Mary Borden Munsill House – 1893**



Built for Mrs. Munsill, daughter of Gail Borden of the Borden Milk Company, this home and carriage house combine characteristics of both the Queen Anne and the Richardsonian Romanesque styles. The building sports an asymmetrical layout, corner tower and the irregular roofline of a Queen Anne. Heavy rough-cut stone arches supported by short marble columns are characteristic of Richardsonian architecture. The interior of this home is also quite spectacular, with beautiful wood paneled walls, marble sinks, tiled entry floors and fantastic stained glass windows.

**14 Wethersfield Ave – Gail Borden Munsill House – 1895**



Built for Mrs. Munsill's son, this house also features towers and steep gables, but provides a style more akin to the Colonial Revival style favored in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The house was built by William Allen and is constructed of yellow brick, a new building material of the day. Although these two homes were built only two years apart, their styles place them in distinctively different architectural periods.

***Continue South on Wethersfield Avenue to the south side of Stonington Street (the next corner).***

**80 Wethersfield Ave – Armsmear (Samuel Colt House) - 1856**



Designed by Octavius Jordan, this Italian Villa, features architecture inspired by Renaissance Italy, with its irregular plan, towers, deeply over-hanging bracketed cornices and rounded and pedimented windows. While it looks as though the building faces Wethersfield Ave, the front of the home originally faced east, toward the Colt factory. The east-side of the home once was adorned with fantastic glass conservatories that looked out on incredible gardens, lakes and statuary in what is now Colt Park.

***Turn Left onto Stonington Street and proceed to the next building on the right.***

## 25 Stonington Street – Hartford Botanical Garden & CT Creative Store



The Hartford Botanical Garden (HBG) is a project to develop, plant, and manage a botanical garden and conservatory in Colt Park. The project will utilize about 18 acres of the westernmost parameters of Colt Park and include a series of indoor and outdoor garden spaces and restored historic buildings. Project is currently in the master planning stages. Architect Tai Soo Kim, is working on the master plan and design concepts.

Recently, the Hartford Botanical Garden Project joined with the City and State to reopen the Department of Agriculture's CT Creative Store at 25 Stonington Street, Hartford. The store sells CT - made products -- honey, jam, and sauces, wool, hand-crafted bowls, dolls, and much, much more. Store Hours are Tuesday – Saturday, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. **Please go in and take a look.**

The Botanical Garden will be developed on the land directly behind the current store and will include the Colt estate's cook's house, icehouse and barn just to the east of the store.

*When you leave the CT Creative Store, walk east (down the hill) on Stonington St to the 3rd street (Norwich Street) – Walk north on Norwich Street*

## Wyllys, Lisbon, Norwich Streets – Hope VI Development (Former Dutch Point)



You are now in the new Hope VI development. While owned by the Hartford Housing Authority (HHA), this development, as you see it today, is the creation of a variety of partners: the neighborhood (CSS/CON), The Community Builders (developer), the city, and HHA.

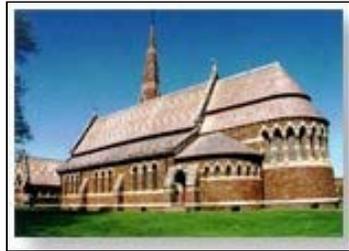
In March 2003, the federal government awarded a \$20 million HOPE VI Revitalization Grant to help fund the development of the \$73 million planned project, a mix of rental and home ownership.

Phase I of this development, now complete, consists of 73 rental units, including some rehabilitated properties, new city streets, and colorful new in-fill buildings in a traditional urban style neighborhood setting. The new buildings blend gables, porches, and windows in an architectural style reminiscent of the neighborhood's historic building designs. The complete project will consist of 3 phases, with phase 2 currently underway.

CSS/CON has worked with the former tenants of Dutch Point from the earliest days of planning this project. Carol Coburn, Executive Director of CSS/CON, drove residents around the city early on, to get a sense of what they liked or didn't like about different types of houses. Residents were in agreement that their preferred style was that of the George Keller designed Columbia Street houses. Many of the features of those homes have been incorporated into these buildings.

*Walk east on the new street that is mid-block down Norwich St. – next destination: Church of the Good Shepherd*

**155 Wyllys Street - Church of the Good Shepherd and Caldwell Hart Colt Memorial Parish House – 1867 and 1895**



Elizabeth Colt in memory of Samuel Colt and Caldwell Colt commissioned both the church and parish house buildings. Edward Tuckerman Potter (architect of the Mark Twain house) designed them and both are extremely unique in their detail and design. The church is the only church in America with revolver parts carved into the brownstone surrounding the south doors. The parish house is elaborately designed to convey the passions of Caldwell: sailing and the sea. A close inspection of the exterior of this building will reveal numerous unexpected surprises.

**Note:** This location is also very important to American “Base Ball” history. The lawn of the Church of the Good Shepherd was the first base ball field in Hartford and one of the first in the nation.

**OTHER PROJECTS UNDERWAY**

**Colt Gateway**

The Colt Gateway project is moving along, with several buildings already complete: the CREC school and office extension at 34 Sequassen Street, the “saw-tooth” building (south of armory), and the south armory building (residential). Homes for America, along with the neighborhood and area politicians, have been working with the National Parks Service to receive National Landmark status, and potentially have the Colt properties and surrounding land become a National Park. The neighborhood group fully supports the plans for this development.

**Sport & Medical Science Academy**

A Hartford magnet school is under construction, just south of the Colt Armory and Dillon Stadium.

*Head back toward the Library on Charter Oak Avenue*

**75-85 Charter Oak Avenue – Atlantic Screw Works – 1902, 1910**



The Atlantic Screw Works started business in 1879 in the Colt Armory, making machines to manufacture screws. In 1910, the two-story building on Charter Oak Avenue was built. This portion of the building has a great terra cotta parapet extolling the company’s name. In 1910, the factory expanded, building the new three-story addition to the east. This portion, designed by Davis & Brooks, is typical of industrial buildings of the time. In 1981, the buildings were rehabbed and became part of the Hartford Square project.

### **60 Charter Oak Avenue – Polish National Home – 1930**



The Polish National Home, built in 1930, by Henry Ludorf, is a quintessential example of Art Deco architecture. The building features low-relief sculptured panels, portal windows, large bronze doors, and fabulous Deco light fixtures. This building, coupled with St. Cyril's Church, were the center of a vibrant Polish community in this neighborhood from the 1920s through the 1950s. Today, the Polish community is still extremely strong and continues to utilize the building, although most commute in from the suburbs. If you haven't had lunch, this is a wonderful place for a kielbasa sandwich or some pierogis.

### **60 Popieluszko Court – Capewell Horse Nail Factory and Administration Building – 1903**



The manufacturing building was erected in 1903 after a fire destroyed their previous headquarter. The new (1903) construction included all the latest advances in fireproof materials, including heavy concrete floors and steel structural members. The factory building includes a Romanesque Revival style square tower with brick corbeling and a high pyramidal roof. The Administration building is Hartford's finest example of Dutch architecture with fantastically articulated brick and brownstone details. The Jacobean front gable is detailed with elaborately patterned brickwork not found elsewhere in Hartford. There are plans by the current owner to convert the factory building to homeownership units, although assembling a workable financing package has been difficult. The neighborhood strongly supports this plan and hopes that it can be accomplished before the building is lost. The Administration Building suffered a distressing fire 6 years ago, but the owner was able to save the building – today it serves as the headquarter for Miano Construction, owners of the property.