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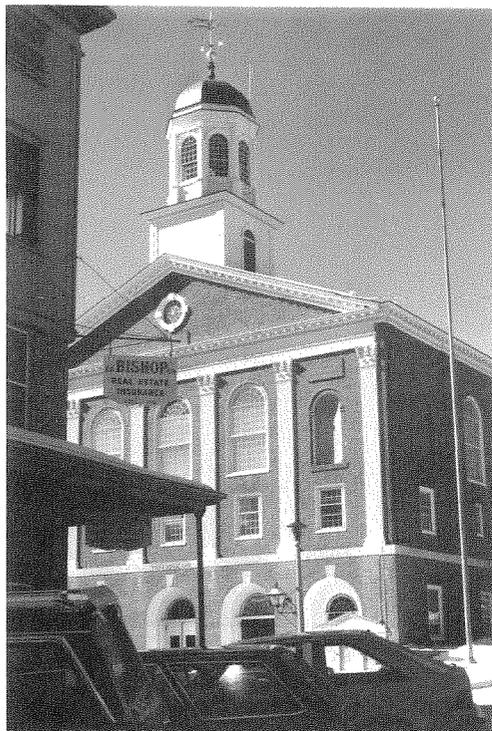
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Peterborough, New Hampshire: *Our Town* Revisited

William Morgan



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1 **Town House**, corner of Grove and Main streets, Little & Russell, architects, 1918

2 **Grove Street**

Photographs by Lilla Bingham

When one crosses the line into Peterborough—coming down Temple Mountain, out of the shadow of Mount Monadnock, or along the Contoocook River valley—a sign proclaims this New Hampshire town of 5,000 people to be “A Good Town to Live In.” Even the first-time visitor senses a feeling of homecoming, a familiarity that comes from knowing that Peterborough was the model for Grovers Corners in Thornton Wilder’s classic drama about small-town American life, *Our Town*.

Peterborough is more than merely another attractive town in the rugged terrain of the Monadnock region, just on the outer fringe of Megalopolis. Although it has contributed little to the population explosion that has made New Hampshire the fastest growing state in the Northeast, Peterborough has become something of a mecca for newcomers from more cosmopolitan places. The attraction is more than scenic landscape, bracing climate, or the absence of state income or sales taxes. Unlike many other isolated northern New England towns, Peterborough can point to an influx of young people and virtually no unemployment. Its robust economic health is based on phenomenal growth in the “soft” industries of publishing and mail-order businesses as well as a reputation as a flourishing center for the arts.

Peterborough has changed, however, since Thornton Wilder depicted it a half-century ago. There is no longer a corner drugstore in the center of town where one can catch up on local gossip over a cup of coffee. Dutch elm disease has removed the town’s leafy canopy, while much of Peterborough’s commercial activity has moved to shopping centers and “industrial parks” on the outskirts of town. Many young professionals who work for the McGraw-Hill-owned *Byte* magazine, patronize the Toadstool Bookstore, or purchase Perrier and brie in the health food emporia are not natives, but immigrants seeking the good life. Yet the perception of Peterborough as the quintessential, unspoiled small town persists.

What accounts for Peterborough’s favored image? It doesn’t have a state college like the regional center of Keene; it doesn’t have interstate highway access to Boston and Route 128 like Concord, the capital; neighboring Hancock is generally acknowledged to be the most beautiful village in New Hampshire. In large part, the answer lies in the fact that cultural reputation does translate into commercial prosperity. This is reinforced by the subtler but more tangible factor of Peterborough’s architectural ambience.

The totem of the arts in Peterborough is the Mac-

Dowell Colony, a cluster of studios in the woods above the town, which since its endowment by the widow of composer Edward MacDowell in 1907, has provided a monastic but congenial haven for poets and painters such as Edwin Arlington Robinson and Milton Avery, composers Aaron Copland (“Appalachian Spring” was written here), Virgil Thompson, and George Gershwin, and writers such as James Baldwin, Willa Cather, and John Updike. While the colony’s impact is more national than local, the anticipation of seeing Alec Waugh or Leonard Bernstein taking a coffee break made Mike Goldman’s Village Drugstore something of a place of pilgrimage for culture mavens.

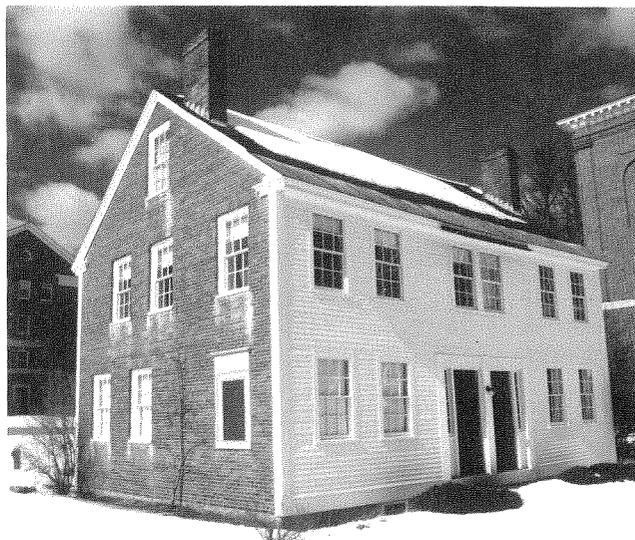
Even if the MacDowell colonists remain sequestered in their rustic cabins, the buildings clustered around the falls of the Contoocook and Nubanusit rivers contribute to the impression that Peterborough is a magical place, where one can partake of the rural life without having to forgo the aesthetic pleasures of New York or Boston.

Although not as rich historically as, say, the colonial capital of Portsmouth, as wealthy and trendy as Hanover, or as picturesque as many nearby villages, Peterborough has an attractive and representative

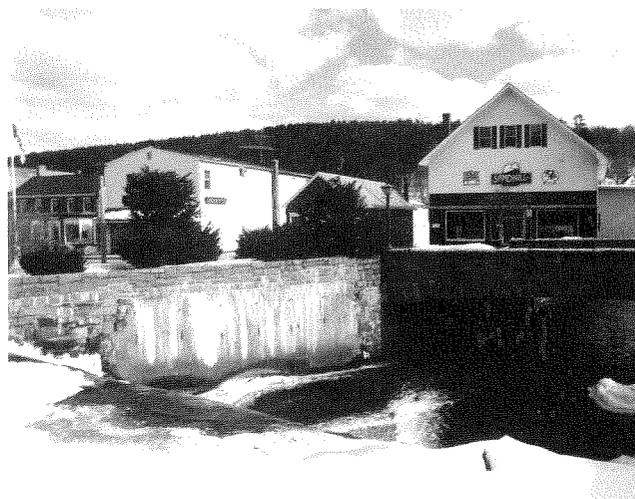
collection of American architecture. The spire of the so-called Bulfinch church is the focal point of a downtown that features commercial blocks in a variety of nineteenth-century styles surrounded by residential streets lined with houses dating back to the Revolutionary period. A few grand cottages in the hills attest to the town’s modest popularity as a turn-of-the-century vacation spot for Proper Bostonians and well-to-do New Yorkers. (Their church, All Saints Episcopal, is a delightful re-creation of a Norman chapel outside of Oxford.)

The remarkable aspect of the majority of these buildings is their total ensemble as townscape rather than their intrinsic design qualities. Like many an appealing English market town, Peterborough is a first-rate collection of second-rate architecture, blessed by a constricted valley site framed by dramatic hills. Its plan is not a boring grid pattern (nor is there the ubiquitous New England common or green) but a haphazard nexus of winding streets whose very wiggleness creates a cohesion and tension that emphasizes its human scale and visual interest.

Ironically, as Peterborough has become an “in” town, much of that delicately balanced fabric has come under assault. The 1833 Peterborough Tavern, a

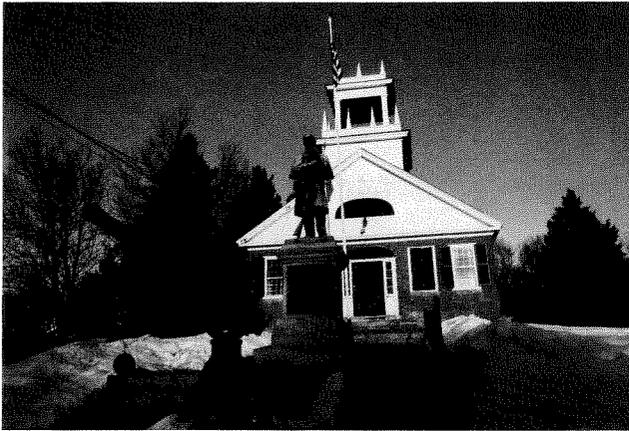


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- 3 Phoenix Mill House,**
Grove Street, c 1858
This was a two-family mill worker's house.
- 4 Grove Street**
Shops as seen from across the Nubanusit River



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5 Peterborough Academy, Grove Street, 1837
Deeded to the town of Peterborough as the Grand Army of the Republic Veterans Hall in 1899

6 Classic example of New England Federal style, c 1820

four-story hostelry that anchored the junction of the town's two main streets, was demolished in 1965 and replaced by a single-story bank of the blandest sort of "suburban colonial" design. Another significant keystone in the townscape was the Gatto House, a marvelous Victorian manse that stood at the eastern terminus of Main Street. This was razed in 1971 by a local developer who used the site for a singularly uninspiring apartment complex. (In a bit of unwelcome publicity, a photograph of a bulldozer slamming into the house graced the cover of a Boston Society of Architects' publication entitled *Our Vanishing Heritage*.) Two years ago, the mansard-roofed building that housed Mike Goldman's drugstore—the last of a group of Second Empire-style structures that defined the north side of Main Street—was torn down for a parking lot.

Following the destruction of the Gatto House, the Peterborough Historical Society hired an architectural historian from Princeton University to survey the town's man-made resources, but little was done with the material he gathered. Incredibly for such a culturally minded community, only a handful of nonthreatened buildings (including the MacDowell Colony, the Unitarian Church, and All Saints) are

listed on the National Register of Historic Places—a paltry performance compared to neighboring Dublin, a town only a quarter the size of Peterborough but with almost 150 structures on the register.

The construction of a shopping center on the edge of town in 1973 proved to be the most destructive to Peterborough's image. Actually, this symbol of "progress" is Peterborough's second such venture, the first being a grim planning disaster that even a Los Angelino would be ashamed to claim. The sad thing is, that with some imaginative solutions (such as reusing existing buildings in the town center and judiciously inserting a parking garage behind them), Peterborough could have revitalized its downtown and avoided the commercial hemorrhage caused by the relocation of many of its businesses.

The Peterborough Shopping Plaza does have a shingle-covered piazza, and its facade is varied by several changes in direction, which break up its mass and slightly relieve its inherent boredom. But, all in all, it hardly constitutes the sort of amenity a town would tout on a picture postcard. Worst of all, it has siphoned off the very street life that makes a downtown successful. True, the post office, the banks, and the municipal offices

are still in the center of town, along with the health food stores, a diner, and the gentrified shops, but how long will it be before Peterborough gets a McDonald's, a Burger King, and the kind of development that has made the edges of nearby Keene and Milford as awful and depressing as Everywhere, U.S.A.?

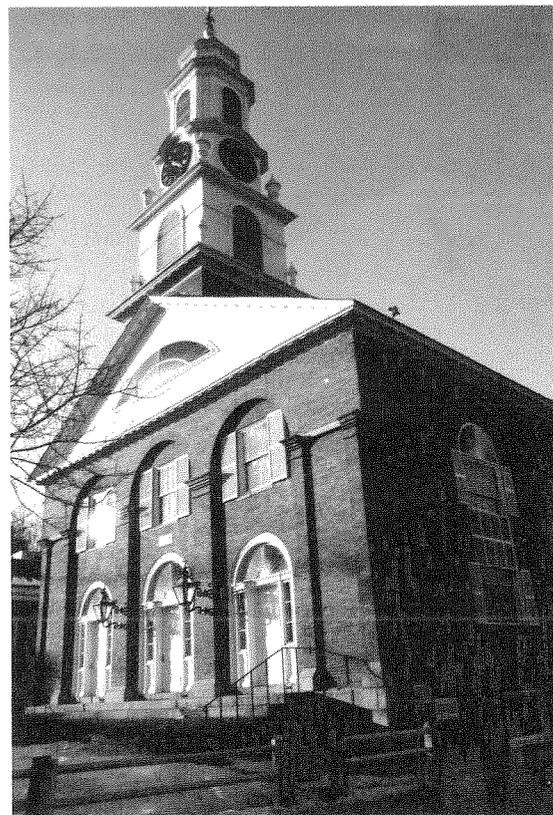
Aside from the MacDowell Colony and the country's first publicly-supported library, Peterborough's claim to fame is publishing (*Byte*, *Microcomputing*, *Robotics Age*, and *Cobblestone*—a history magazine for children—have joined *Yankee* and the Guernsey Cattle Club's journal) and its mail-order businesses, notably Brookstone and Eastern Mountain Sports.

The outfitter of tents, backpacks, and pitons is owned by Warner Communications, while Quaker Oats' Brookstone (500 employees and \$30 million in annual sales) now peddles French mustard, English cosmetics, and Danish telephones along with the hard-to-find tools that comprised its original *raison d'etre*. Peterborough's largest employer, New Hampshire Ball Bearings, has just been acquired by the Japanese conglomerate, Mineba, Ltd., of Tokyo.

Unquestionably, the efforts to entice "clean" industry has reaped benefits, but



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7 Carpenter's Gothic, 1849

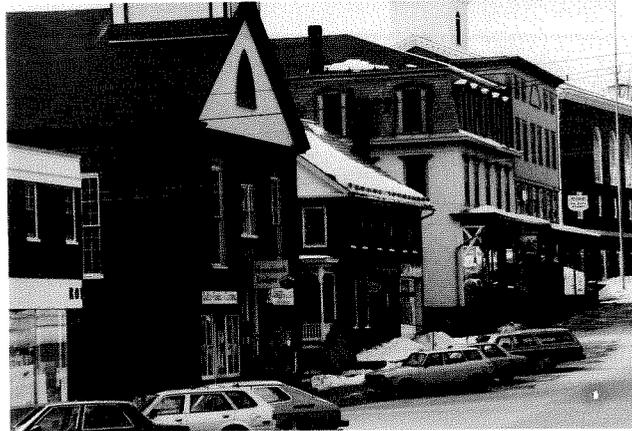
Straight from the pages of Andrew Jackson Downing's popular pattern books

8 Unitarian Church, corner of Main

Street and Summer Street, 1825
The so-called Bulfinch Church



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9 Peterborough Town Library,

1893

Site of the first free library in the United States supported by taxation

10 South Main Street

primarily in economic terms. Nevertheless, Peterborough is still a nice town in which to live. The MacDowell Colony thrives, along with a vital summer theatre, and the town is fortunate in being the headquarters of Monadnock Music, a regional symphony that offers first-rate classical music.

Despite the “Our Town” mystique, Peterborough is a town in search of an identity for the years to come. The yuppies that move here are an enriching factor, yet their continuing immigration imperils the small-town flavor that brings them here in the first place. Without adequate planning (the importance of its patrimony demands imaginative zoning controls and an architectural review board) as well as constant public discussion of what the town wishes to be, Peterborough may become more like a preppy Connecticut suburb and lose its somewhat frumpy New Hampshire character. Change in itself can be healthy, but Peterborough is a town that needs to assess its special resources and take steps to assure their preservation.