

13.0 CULTURAL RESOURCES



MIDDLETOWN PLAN OF DEVELOPMENT

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13.1 Introduction

Middletown offers a vibrant mix of arts and cultural resources. Its galleries and museums, theater, dance and musical groups serve the local and regional communities and have led to regional and national recognition for the city: Middletown was recently ranked by Connecticut Magazine as the third best town for leisure and culture (within the 20,000 – 50,000 population range) and was the first Connecticut city to be named one of the “100 Best Small Arts Towns in America.”¹

The Mayor’s office and the City’s Commission on the Arts are both involved with promoting and expanding Middletown’s art and cultural resources, as are numerous community-based groups including the Greater Middletown Preservation Trust, NEAR Inc./The Buttonwood Tree, Wesleyan Potters, the Art Guild of Middletown, and the Greater Middletown Concert Association. The goals of this chapter are:

- *Establish the North End as a vibrant, healthy, and successful Arts District.*
- *Continue to strengthen links between the city, community groups, and Wesleyan University with regard to arts programming.*
- *Encourage cultural resources that are river related and help to re integrate the riverfront with the city.*

13.2 Community and Cultural Events

The city organizes several events each year including a Memorial Day Parade, July Fourth festival, and band concerts during the summer on the South Green. The Downtown Business District promotes the downtown with Easter on Main in April and Cruise Night on Main in June.

Community-based organizations also organize annual events: the Summer’s End Music Festival, the Middlesex County Historical Society, located in Middletown, organizes an 1870s-style baseball game and antique car show and the Middlesex Chamber of Commerce plans “Holiday on Main Street” in Middletown each year. Non-profit community groups including the Junior Women’s Club sponsor annual crafts fairs. St. Sebastian’s Roman Catholic Church holds a carnival every year in honor of St. Sebastian.

13.3 Museums and Galleries

Middletown is home to several museums that house permanent collections as well as numerous galleries that offer rotating exhibits.

The Middlesex County Historical Society, located in the General Mansfield House at 151 Main Street, houses County historical records and memorabilia as well as decorative art and Civil War artifacts. The House and collection are open to the public.

Wesleyan University has several collections that are open to the Middletown community. The Center for the Arts (CFA) sponsors year-round events with visiting performers and artists. Located within the CFA are the Davison Arts Center, which exhibits prints and photos from its own collection, and the Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery, which is dedicated to temporary

¹ As designated in The 100 Best Small Art Towns in America: Discover Creative Communities, Fresh Air and Affordable Living, by John Villani (1994).

exhibitions of contemporary art. The Mansfield Freeman Center for East Asian Studies and the Olin Library also have collections and galleries that are accessible to the greater Middletown community.

Wesleyan Potters is a non-profit cooperative guild offering classes in pottery making as well as other crafts. Wesleyan Potters maintain a gallery and gift shop to display their products and hold an annual show and sale to support their classes and workshops.

The Submarine Library Museum, located at 440 Washington Street, houses a collection of World War I and World War II submarine memorabilia. The Middletown Sports Hall of Fame & Museum is located at 58 Bernie O'Rourke Drive, next to the Bernie O'Rourke athletic field.



Kidcity Children's Museum

The Kidcity Children's Museum, located at 119 Washington Street, is a hands-on children's museum and educational playground.

Middlesex Community Technical College has two exhibit halls, The Niche and the Pegasus Gallery, both located at Training Hill Road.

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Middletown's Russell Library, located at 123 Broad Street, has on-going art exhibits and numerous galleries. Many local coffee shops, bookstores, and restaurants also try to assist the arts community by rotating local artwork and offering performance venues.

Future programs initiated by the city's Arts Office hope to include a larger and more permanent outdoor sculpture exhibit, designed as a "sculpture trail" through downtown.

13.4 Performing Arts

Middletown has an active performing arts community, including community-based instrumental, choral and dance groups and non-profit theater. In addition, the Greater Middletown Concert

Association works to bring outside performing arts groups to Middletown. The scheduled performers have included internationally renowned orchestras and the Connecticut Ballet.

Singing groups include the Greater Middletown Chorale; the Middletown Children's Chorus; the Middletuners, which is the city's senior chorus; the Vocal Chords; and the Sweet Adelines, a women's barbershop group. The Connecticut Gilbert and Sullivan Society also meets in Middletown. These groups perform throughout the community over the course of the year.

Community-based instrumental groups include the Middlesex Woodwind Ensemble and the Middletown Symphonic Band. Wesleyan's orchestra and its Center for Ethnomusicology hold several concerts and performances each year. Russell House, the World Music Hall and the Crowell Concert Hall all sponsor or serve as venues for musical, theater and dance performances.

The Buttonwood Tree is located at 605 Main Street in the North End neighborhood. Established nine years ago, the non-profit arts organization offers musical performances, literary and poetry readings, theater, storytelling and other visual arts events.



Oddfellows Playhouse Youth Theater

The Oddfellows Playhouse Youth Theater, now in its 25th season, is a non-profit youth theater and performing arts program. Over 2,500 young people from around central Connecticut come to Oddfellows each year to attend classes and workshops, participate in mini-productions, shows and special events.

For current cinema, the Destinta Theater, a 12-screen movie theater, is located in Metro Square. The opening of the theater in June of 1999, along with several recently opened restaurants on adjacent blocks, has helped turn the Square and the intersection of Main and Dingwall (formerly College) Streets into a dining and entertainment destination point that draws customers from Middletown and the surrounding communities.

In addition to these ongoing offerings, the city and Wesleyan University are currently collaborating on a performing arts project, entitled the St. Sebastian project, in honor of the city's

350th anniversary. According to Wesleyan's Center for the Arts, the project will celebrate Middletown's history and Italian heritage with a focus on the stories of residents with roots in the Sicilian town of Melilli (nearly 50% of Middletown's population is of Italian origin and 90% of these residents are from Melilli). Wesleyan students will document the stories of these residents while Middletown high school students will interview residents of all backgrounds. The project will culminate in 2001 with the production of an original play about the Melilli/Middletown migration, written by the chair and artistic director of Wesleyan's theater department, using materials collected by the students.

13.5 Historic Preservation

The Greater Middletown Historic Preservation Trust is involved with preserving the historical context of Middletown. In addition to preparing historical walking tours of neighborhoods, it has been involved with the designation of historic sites and districts in Middletown.

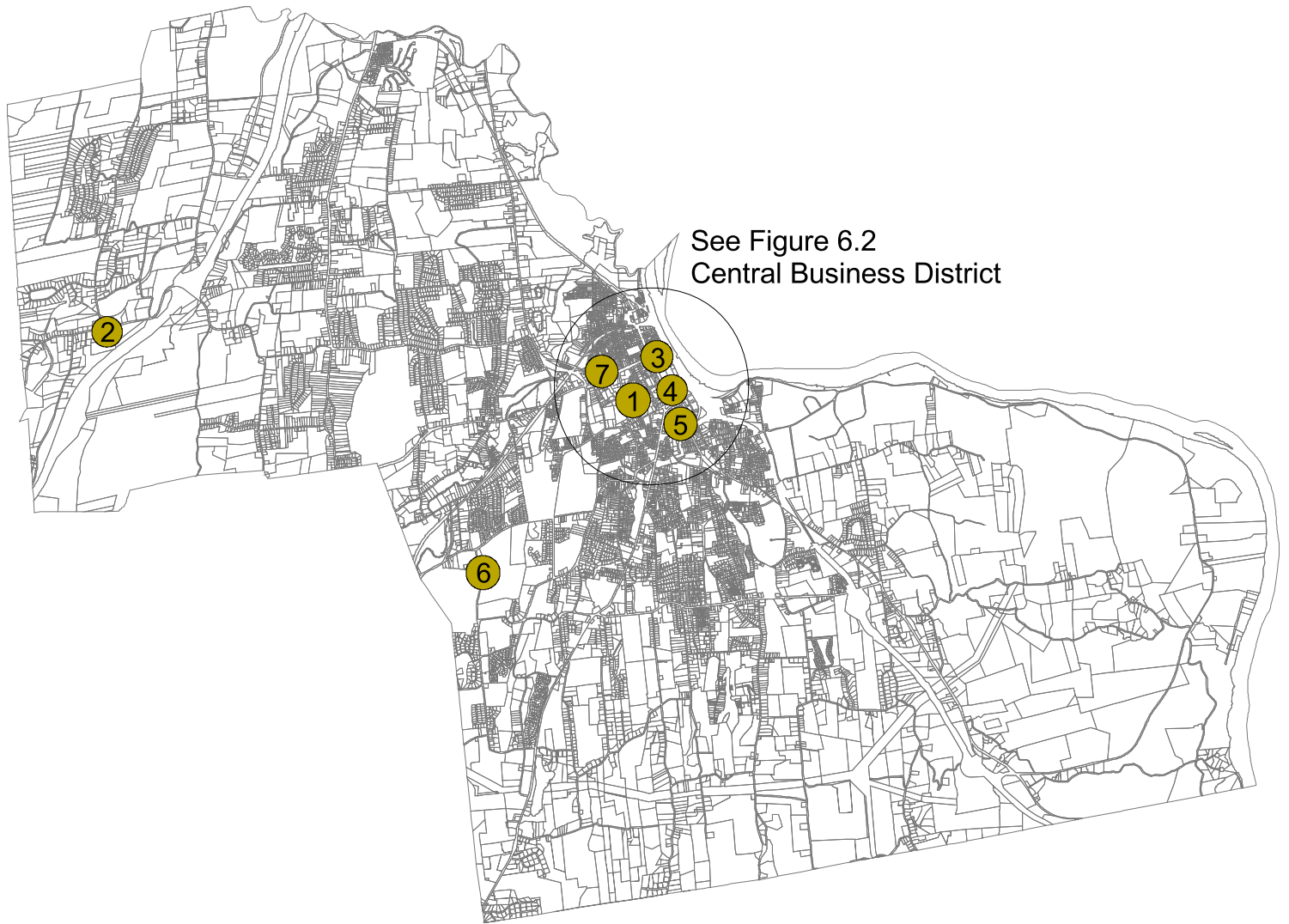
Middletown's architectural heritage speaks to its historical role as a maritime, commercial and industrial center. The city has seven National Historic Register Districts, five of which are located in the downtown and 21 properties are listed as well on the National Register. The Samuel L Wadsworth-Russell House on High Street, designed by Ithiel Town, was recently designated a National Historic Landmark. Its façade was designed to resemble an ancient Greek temple and is considered to be the best example of the Corinthian Greek Revival Style in the Northeast.

The historic districts include:

1. Broad Street Historic District: roughly bounded by High, Washington, Broad and Church Streets
2. Highland Historic District: at Atkins Street and Country Club Road
3. Main Street Historic District: roughly Main Street between College and Hartford Avenue
4. Metro South Historic District: Main and College Street
5. South Green Historic District: in the Union Park area, on South Main, Crescent, Pleasant and Church Streets
6. Wadsworth Estate Historic District: 15-89 Laurel Grove Road, Wadsworth Falls State Park and 421 Wadsworth Street
7. Washington Street Historic District: roughly formed by Washington and Main Streets, Washington Terrace and Vine Street

In addition to these sites and properties on the National Register, Middletown has numerous locally recognized landmarks and sites. Two of the many historic homes include the General Mansfield House and the Benjamin Douglas House. The General Mansfield House was built in 1810 and is recognized for its classic Federal-style architecture. It is currently owned by the Middlesex County Historical Society and is open to the public. The Benjamin Douglas House, at 11 South Main Street, was built between 1811 and 1813 and served as a stop on the Underground Railroad.

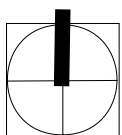
Middletown also has several historic cemeteries, including Riverside, Washington Street, and Mortimer Cemeteries. Riverside Cemetery, on Hartford Avenue, was laid out in 1650. In front of the cemetery is the Settlement Boulder, which marks the spot where Middletown's first settlers worshipped. The Washington Street Cemetery, first established in 1739, has graves of



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Figure 13.1 Historic Districts

- ① Broad Street
- ② Highland Historic
- ③ Main Street
- ④ Metro South
- ⑤ South Green
- ⑥ Wadsworth Estate
- ⑦ Washington Street



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BFJ BFJ Buckhurst Fish & Jacquemart, Inc.

local African Americans, including that of Fanny Bemon, the mother of Amos Bemon, a prominent African American civil rights leader of the nineteenth century. Mortimer Cemetery, located on Liberty Street, was laid out in 1778.

13.6 Summary

Creating a community rich in cultural and artistic resources is a priority for the city and its residents. Middletown residents, businesses and city government are actively involved with promoting and expanding the diverse offerings of galleries, museums, performances and community events. In addition, new city efforts to create an arts and entertainment district in the downtown and to revitalize the North End through a focus on the arts will help secure Middletown's place as a destination in the region for arts and culture.

Middletown's **major cultural assets** include the following:

- A centrally-located arts and cultural area
- The active participation of the community in developing and expanding programs and events
- An active and growing arts community
- The accessibility of Wesleyan University's extensive collections and performances to the Middletown community
- The city's history and historic sites
- A range of resources for children, including Oddfellows Playhouse and the Kidcity Museum

As Middletown continues to expand its arts and cultural activities, the following **issues and opportunities** should be considered:

- The need for expanded performance space

Large performances, such as those by visiting orchestras and dance ensembles, are currently held in the high school auditorium. A professionally-equipped auditorium space will aid in attracting high-level performers and will enhance Middletown's reputation as an arts and culture destination in the region. Expanded space will also avoid any potential programming conflicts with the high school and could allow an extended performance season.

- The importance of accommodating the diversity of tastes and preferences within the Middletown community.
- = Middletown has a diverse population in terms of age range, income and taste. The city should continue to take this diversity into account when planning art exhibits and performances so that the city can provide viable entertainment options for its residents and the residents in the region.

- Promote outdoor public art (such as the sculpture garden at Harbor Park) within the downtown area.

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The promotion of outdoor public art will complement the on-going downtown revitalization efforts by attracting shoppers and pedestrians to the area, in turn spurring retail activity. Outdoor art exhibits also contribute to a more unified feeling in the downtown area.