

WHEN AND WHERE IN WELLESLEY?

A landmark long gone and forgotten

By Joshua Dorin

In "The Death and Life of Great American Cities," the seminal 1961 criticism of mid-20th century urban renewal policies — a novel that helped give birth to the historic preservation movement, most notably through the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 — its author, Jane Jacobs, discusses the role that landmark buildings and structures play within a community.

Specifically, Jacobs argues that landmarks serve two vital purposes beyond simply helping to provide orientation for residents and visitors. First, landmarks "emphasize (and also dignify) the diversity of cities...by calling attention to the fact that they are different from their neighbors, and important because they are different." In other words, if a city or town were only comprised of buildings identical to those in other communities, how would it be able to physically stand out from the ordinary and mundane? Don't residents want to live somewhere that truly is special in the most basic form: its appearance?

The second, perhaps less superficial reason landmarks are vital is that, "in certain instances landmarks can make important to our eyes city areas which are important in functional fact but need to have that fact visually acknowledged and dignified." Simply put, the buildings and places that are critically valuable to the life of the community deserve — strike that, necessitate — appearances that attract a proportional amount of positive attention.

Clearly, Wellesley's business and civic leaders a half-century ago never read this book. In 1962, the

landmark stone railroad depot in Wellesley Square was torn down and replaced with the brick post office that currently occupies this site at the northern end of Grove Street.

The problem here wasn't what rose in the depot's place. For a building constructed in the early 1960s, the post office is amazingly classical in its appearance and fits really well within the rest of Wellesley Square. In fact, many residents don't even realize that this building wasn't a railroad station earlier in its life. Rather, the unfortunate part was what the town lost in the stone depot. This structure didn't just play a critical role in the development of Wellesley. Indeed, one can easily argue it was relevant to the development of the entire metro Boston area.

Constructed in 1889, the depot was part of an ambitious (and expensive) station improvement plan adopted by the Boston & Albany Railroad Company that resulted in the construction of 32 stations in Massachusetts and New York between 1881 and 1894 along its mainline and commuter branch (now the Green Line "D" Branch of the MBTA).

Seems a bit unnecessary and over the top, right? They're just train stations, after all. Well...no. Sure, for some decades after the railroad was laid out in the 1830s, depots were little more than shelter for waiting passengers or a place for locals to congregate. But starting in the last quarter of the 19th Century, society began to view the role they played within suburban communities a bit differently.

Urban planning pioneer Charles Mulford Robinson explained this new perspective in a 1904 essay on the beautification of suburban

railroad stations: "To the commuter using a suburban railway, the erection of pretty stations and the beautifying of their grounds is a matter of great concern. It means the extension of the home atmosphere quite to the railroad track. When he steps off the train he is at home, — as far as the soothing calm of a lovely scene can make him, — without having still a quarter mile of dreary trudging before there comes heart's ease."

Note this new mindset was not unlike that which led to the transformation of the small rural village of West Needham into the modern, affluent suburb of Wellesley. As the relationship between Boston and Wellesley strengthened — with the city representing "work" and the town representing "home" — there developed a movement among town leaders to do everything in their power to beautify their community, just as they would beautify their individual residences.

The B&A Railroad couldn't have chosen two better individuals to lead the design component of their station beautification plan: H.H. Richardson, world-renowned architect best known for Trinity Church in Copley Square, and Frederick Law Olmsted, landscape architect of New York City's Central Park. (Richardson would only design 12 stations before his death in 1886. His successor firm of Shepley, Ruten, and Coolidge, however, would carry the project to completion, imitating his designs for the construction of the other 20 depots.)

In Wellesley, a total of four stone stations were constructed: Wellesley Hills (1885-86), Lower Falls (1887), Wellesley Square (1889), and Wellesley Farms (1893-94). Of these, the largest and most impressive



Wellesley Square Railroad Depot. COURTESY PHOTO / WELLESLEY COLLEGE LEGENDA (1903)

was the depot in Wellesley Square — perhaps a surprising move considering this village center was still early in its evolution into a formal business district. However, with Wellesley College only a stone's throw away, as well as the station's close proximity to the estate of railroad financier H.H. Hunnewell (who happened to be friends with several directors of the B&A), perhaps the station's construction makes sense.

For 73 years, this depot served as the gateway to Wellesley Square. Residents even called it a landmark. Maybe not as prominent or significant as Town Hall — how could it? — but the station certainly made the heart of the town distinctive from, say, Natick Center, which was passed over by the B&A station improvement planners.

Moreover, the stone depot provided a visual reminder of the importance of the railroad to the development of Wellesley. After all, had the iron horse not first come through this area, and instead traveled through Weston, it is certainly true that our town would have taken on a totally different character and maybe never even separated from Needham.

So given the station's provenance and importance within the town's history, why in the world was it torn down? That chapter of the story begins in 1959 when the B&A (then owned by the New York Central Railroad) filed a petition with the Commonwealth's Department of Public Utilities to eliminate all intrastate commuter service and close the three remaining stops in Wellesley due to declining passenger service and increasing expenses. Although the Town of Wellesley — with help from Newton, Worcester, and Springfield — successfully fought the state's acceptance of this petition, it didn't stop the B&A from selling off many of its stations.

The town actually had an opportunity to purchase the station in 1962, but Town Meeting declined the offer (by 11 votes). In swooped the United States Postal Service, which had already negotiated a deal with a local developer that would call for the demolition of the stone depot and subsequent construction of the brick building that currently occupies the site. For decades, the post office had been located in the Norman Block on the south side of Washington Street in

extremely cramped quarters with little parking. This new location would give its workers and customers the space that was needed.

Unfortunately, what happened in Wellesley Square wasn't all that unusual. Of the 32 stations designed by Richardson or Shepley, Ruten and Coolidge on the Boston & Albany Railroad, 20 have been torn down, a handful for expanded parking lots, five more for the Mass Pike extension in the early 1960s.

But that doesn't lessen the sting of Wellesley Square's loss. The fact is, we didn't just lose a historically important architectural gem. We lost a station altogether. Today, the Wellesley Square MBTA (commuter rail) stop consists of nothing more than a platform abutting several parking lots in the shadow of the Crest Road bridge. Talk about a double whammy.

So hopefully, it goes without saying: let's show love to all our landmarks and never forget about their important connections to the town. We wouldn't want to make this same mistake again.

—An archive of Joshua Dorin's past *Townsmen* articles can be found at wellesleyhistory.wordpress.com.

WELLESLEY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Winter Wednesdays launches on Jan. 6

The Wellesley Historical Society is partnering with the Wellesley Community Center for a second season of Winter Wednesdays beginning from 1 to 3 p.m. on Jan. 6 at 219 Washington St.

Winter Wednesdays made possible in part by

a grant from the Wellesley Hills Junior Women's Club, is a weekly children's program series, with each program based on a different historical topic. Most of the programs relate to Wellesley's history and will feature the collections of the Wellesley Historical Society.

The first program will present Revolutionary War reenactor Tom Dietzel. He will explain what life was like for soldiers fighting in America's War of Independence. Kids will be able to get an up-close look at the various kinds of clothing, equipment and food that a soldier would have used

while on the road or at camp. The program will also teach kids about some local soldiers who fought in the war.

Winter Wednesdays are free and suitable for ages 5-10. For a full schedule or for information: 781-235-6690; wellesley-historical.org.

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