Manchester's Village Green

John Gilbert's Founding Vision

John Gilbert, the founder of the Village of Manchester, was born in 1764, and grew up with the presence of a central public square as integral to his life, both through the vision of his parents and the influence of his family. He was instrumental in the development of Manchester, and his vision for the village Green is evident in the layout and design of the area, which he named after his birthplace in England. Gilbert's vision for the Village Green included a central, open space surrounded by town hall, church, and commercial buildings, with a central fountain and other elements to create a focal point for the community. This vision was realized with the construction of the Village Green in 1832, which remains a beloved and iconic part of the Manchester landscape to this day.

Earliest Homes in Manchester

John Gilbert sold some of the original lots into the area around 1832-1835 to prominent business associates and the church leaders, helping to establish a central village green. This area has seen some of the oldest residents in the Village of Manchester. Here are some examples below.

Parsonage: Among these is the James Harvey Farmhouse and Stephen Fordham Farmhouse located on the north side of Main Street (east of the village green at 120 Main St.). The Harveys settled here in 1795, with a later addition built in the 19th century. This property was a parsonage for the church for many years, and housed the organist until the 1960s.

Fordham Farmhouse: This farmhouse was built in 1798 by Stephen Fordham, a prominent merchant in Manchester. The current structure dates from the 1830s, with additions and remodeling in the late 19th century. The house is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Churches

John Gilbert’s vision of churches centered on the Village Green has generally been fulfilled. Four churches at one time conducted services here, with two remaining.

The Presbyterian/Methodist Church – 1835

The Presbyterian/Methodist Church structure (Figure 6), located on the east side of the village green at 121 Main St., represents the second generation of a church structure at this location. The original structure was built in 1835, and for several decades not only served as a religious center for the public, but also functioned as a meeting place for political, cultural, and educational programs. (In A. P. Arnold's, the nationally famous promontory, 50 lectures were held here in 1845 before the railroads came and brought tourists to Manchester. In 1852, an author has two photographs and in 1855 a view map (Figure 10) shows in accurate detail the original building in ala that has a very long history of public meetings and events. In the mid-19th century, it was primarily used to house the library. Around the turn of the century, the Manchester congregation around 1858 bought the Sylvan Avenue Church, a Revolutionary-style building with a typical five-bay Greek revival gable, along with a two-story bell tower with a steep shingled hip roof.

The First Baptist Church – 1837

The First Baptist Church on the Village Green was organized on February 16, 1837, with thirty charter members. They erected a church building on the west side of the village green in 1837 at 175 Main St., meeting the church's needs for over a century. In 1942, the church was sold to First Baptist Church and School in Meriden, CT, and the property was sold to the Manchester Congregational Church and was used as a meeting place for the Manchester Congregational Church and the Evangelical Church, and it was finally sold in 1970 and replaced by a house.

St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church – 1911

St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church is located at 324 Main St. Built in 1882 by the German Catholic congregation in the historic district of Manchester, it remained the spiritual center of the community. The German church in Manchester was established in 1852. However, it was not until 1882 that the church was built, dedicated to St. Mary. By 1882, the church building had been used for various business enterprises, including a blacksmith shop and a store.

Emanuel United Church of Christ – 1882

The Emanuel United Church of Christ building at 324 N Main St. was designed by N. S. Smith in 1882. The German Catholic congregation in the historic district of Manchester, which had been active in the village for many years, was out of favor in some areas of the town. The new church building was completed in 1882, and it was dedicated to St. Mary. By 1882, the church building had been used for various business enterprises, including a blacksmith shop and a store.

Wurster Park

In January 1931, the Manchester Village Council named the village green “Wurster Park,” in honor of Lawrence T. Wurster, a young resident and active member of the Manchester Congregational Church. Wurster was an active member of the church and a major supporter of youth sports programs. He led the development of a new church and the MHS academic team, serving as a key figure in the growth of the business community in Manchester.

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