

# NEW LONDON COURTHOUSE — 1784 - 1984



# New London Courthouse Bicentennial Committee

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The New London Courthouse Bicentennial Committee is grateful to the following organizations for their generous contributions for the publication of this history and their support of the bicentennial celebration:

The Day Publishing Company  
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The 17th Century New London Harbor

New London, Connecticut  
16 September, 1984

**H**ad you stood two centuries ago at the top of the rise where Huntington Street forms the crossbar of a “T” over the stem which is Captain’s Walk leading down to the harbor, you, too, would have agreed this was “the fittest place” in New London for one of the most enduring public buildings in America.

By September 16, 1784, local artisans had already raised the framework on a granite foundation for the New London Courthouse. It is one of the oldest public buildings in the United States used continuously as a courthouse.



The need for a courthouse and government center was undisputed. There was increasing respect for a system to hear and decide impartially conflicts among people involving issues based on common law and a growing number of statutes.

The ideal of justice had been brought from England by the colonists and had been particularly strong in Connecticut, where county courts were established in 1666. The ideal flourished when democratic government came of age in the New World following the Revolutionary War.

Originally, this was to be the seat of the New London City and County Courts, tribunals reflecting local control of the judicial system. The structure was to serve, as well, as a city and county government center, a forum for political affairs, and even, as we shall see, as a place for social events.

**T**he effort to build the courthouse sprang perhaps from the pride New London felt at being designated, along with New Haven, as the first two cities in Connecticut. The legislature's vote, January 8, 1784, was hard evidence of New London's importance, of its ability to run its own local affairs.

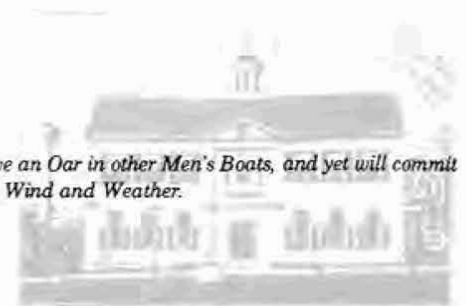
Less than three months later, on April 6, the city's Common Council resolved that "the fittest place . . . for use and ornament, and that will best accommodate the city

and the public" as the courthouse site was the plateau just west of the heavily-populated waterfront area. It overlooked a busy harbor alive with people and providing a dazzling spectacle of sails bleached white in the West Indies trade.



NEW LONDON IN 1813.

*Some men love to have an Oar in other Men's Boats, and yet will commit their own Ships to the Wind and Weather.*



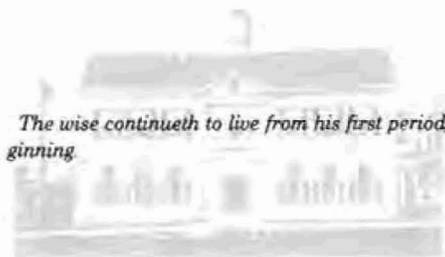


The decision made, no time was lost. Joshua Coit was a bright young lawyer with political ambitions. His father was Joseph Coit, a Norwich businessman who had started out in New London, and it was Joseph Coit who owned land on the plateau. Joshua carried the Common Council resolution to Norwich and Joseph simply turned over the paper and penned these words: "I am willing to give as much land adjoining the spot within mentioned, for the purpose within mentioned, as my son Joshua shall judge necessary." Joshua left the final decision on the exact plot to that which "the honorable judge of the county court will laye out."

The deed was filed April 28, 1784. It was explicit, down to the stipulation granting the "privilege of erecting a Necessary House in the Rear of the proposed Court House."



Joshua Coit



*The wise continueth to live from his first period; the fool is always beginning.*

The good burghers of New London didn't need telephones to get things moving quickly.

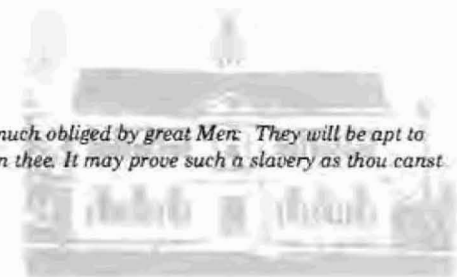
Richard Law was the prime mover. A lawyer and the son of a Colonial governor, he had been a member of the Committees of Correspondence, that loosely-knit coalition of civic leaders from throughout the colonies who got things done at the local level in support of the revolutionary effort, and served as a member of the Continental Congress and as a judge. His name was to be signed to the Declaration of Independence, but he was too ill of the smallpox to join the 1776 Philadelphia ceremony. He was a county judge and New London's first city mayor in 1784. Hence, the courthouse was a high priority for him, ranking with his efforts to establish and stabilize the still-struggling federal government.

On May 20, three weeks after Joseph Coit conveyed the land to the county, Richard Law had to ride to Hartford on state business. Before he left, he wrote to Edward

Hallam, the merchant, to tell Hallam the one-room schoolhouse on the site had been removed. That meant the land was ready for the granite foundation, which was to be started at once to be "ready for erecting the frame thereon, which is expected to be down in about four weeks from this time. . . ."



*Beware of being too much obliged by great Men: They will be apt to impose Hardships upon thee. It may prove such a slavery as thou canst not easily get out of.*



Courthouses had always occupied an important role in the life of New London. The first stood at the earliest town square, at what is now Hempstead Street and Bulkeley Place, in the 17th Century. It had a jail, stocks and a gallows, to warn of the degrees of consequence for violating the common law. As the port's commerce grew, the town's center shifted to the waterfront and a courthouse was erected there, near the Parade.

Now, as the climactic end of the Revolutionary War approached at Yorktown, Benedict Arnold appeared. Arnold had been an officer in George Washington's army. Bitterly disappointed because he felt he had not been properly rewarded for earlier valor, Arnold switched to the British side. When the British attacked Groton Heights and slaughtered the militia gathered there from farms around, Arnold simultaneously led a force into New London.

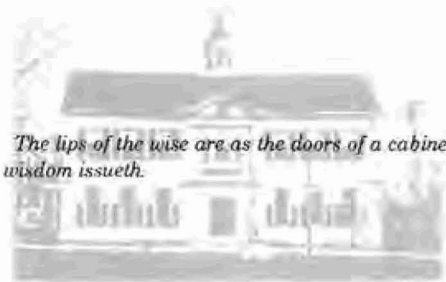
New London was a real prize. Throughout the war, Connecticut, called the Provisions State because of the vast quantities of high-grade materials sent to supply Washington's troops, relied on New London as the major port through which these supplies were shipped up and down the coast. Moreover, it was the homeport of privateers, the small sailing vessels which bedeviled British supply and naval vessels.

Arnold was a native of Norwich familiar with New London and its people. His men put the torch to New London, concentrating the inferno on the port areas. Wharfs, warehouses, homes and small businesses were reduced to embers—as was the town's courthouse. That was September 6, 1781.

The court and other public business went on in taverns and coffee houses. When the war was over, some wanted the courthouse rebuilt near the Parade. Others, like Law, the Coits, Hallam and their friends, felt it should be given a new eminence, on the hill. In that day, it would stand in splendid isolation. But it would be a symbol of the supremacy of law.



Benedict Arnold



*The lips of the wise are as the doors of a cabinet, no sooner opened but wisdom issueth.*

Let's for a moment go back to what New London must have been like in the early 1780's.

The war was over. Independence had been won. The price of victory, however, had left the people physically exhausted, financially drained and in mourning for men who had given their lives for liberty. And the commercial hub of the community lay in ruins.

But they had spirit. New Londoners realized the importance of their role in the Revolution; most important, they knew why their town was so vital. They were shrewd, too. Beyond the harbor in peacetime were even greater markets and sources of raw materials. They rebuilt with will, vigor and skill.

At the same time, there was a growing understanding of what the common man meant to this new free world. It generated a rather subtle political revolution. Farmers, mechanics, merchants, sailors and clerks began to speak out, fueling fires of political controversy which illuminated ideas for self-government and social advancement.

Mayor Law gathered around him on the first Common Council not just the men of consequence who formerly ran things but people who were making it on their own, people like the ropemaker, James Tilley, the printer, Timothy Green, and the merchants Edward Hallam and Thomas Shaw.



*Sure if one truth may slip my harmless pen, times would be better had we better men.*





All classes began shouldering the responsibilities of local government. When the city was chartered in 1784, it was governed by a mayor, four alderman (comprising the old guard leadership), and a common council of 20 elected largely from among the new freemen.

Rebuilding and the subtle political revolution gave rise to a feisty attitude that sometimes got out of hand. Everybody knew that certain restraints, based on public laws fairly administered, had to be applied. Thus the speed with which New London provided for its own courthouse once it became a city.

**W**e know the courthouse wasn't built in a hurry, for it was to be a full two years before it was first officially used.

There was no ceremony when the cornerstone was set, nor any when the first court session was convened February 6, 1786. People were too busy for ostentatious exercises and they didn't have money for parties.

The courthouse wasn't even completed until 1814. Between 1786 and 1814, its first floor was uncompleted, enclosed by rough boards pending the time when there was money enough to do the job right.



More than anyone else, a master carpenter from Lebanon named Isaac Fitch is credited with establishing its enduring design. Isaac Fitch not only was a master carpenter and joiner, but he was one of the early exponents of prefabricating structures and then moving them elsewhere for final assembly. He had built a house in East Haddam, then shipped it for a client to the island of Grenada.

Fitch sought the courthouse job. Then he went to Colchester to get a letter of reference from Jonathan Deming, a prominent man for whom he had worked. Next he went home to Lebanon where Governor Jonathan Trumbull, whose word probably carried more weight than any man in Connecticut at the time, provided this letter: "I joyn fully in the above recommendation of Mr. Isaac Fitch by Capt. Deming—Mr.

Fitch is the best architect within the compass of my Acquaintance—his natural genius for the business is very extraordinary—Works by rule, is industrious, and oversees and directs workmen beyond any man among us—And may be depended upon. I am, with Esteem and Regard—Sir your Obed' Hble Servant, Jonth Trumbull." Strong recommendations, indeed.



Courthouse Square Takes Shape



The New London courthouse is basically Colonial. Much like other public buildings of its time, it is capped by a cupola in the center of its ridgepole. It bears a striking likeness to pictures of Connecticut's very first State House, built in 1719. The gambrel roof is a modified Dutch Colonial style.

But it is also influenced by Georgian architecture. Look above the entrance and you'll find a Palladian window. Fluted pilasters grace either side of the doors and the corners of the second floor. Quoins fashioned from solid blocks of wood, a reminder of the stone quoins used in Georgian buildings, are set at the corners and at the sides of the doors. Keystones, again of wood, decorate the areas above the entrance and the first floor windows and are repeated in the arches of the Palladian window and in the cupola.

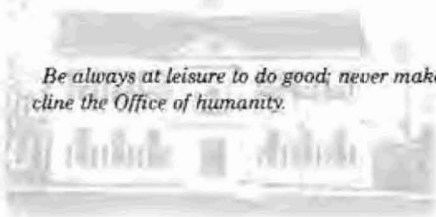
The roominess of the original building is disguised today by later interior renovations to provide adequate rooms for a system of justice grown increasingly sophisticated over the years.

Like other Colonial structures, it could be moved even without 20th Century tools and technology.

The original site put the courthouse in the way of the roads that were to come. The dusty pathway leading up the hill became State Street and eventually Captain's Walk. Huntington Street in 1784 ran only as far south as the courthouse. To open up new land as the city grew, Huntington Street was extended to the present location of Washington and Tilley Streets. Broad Street had been surveyed, but not improved, before the courthouse was built.



*Be always at leisure to do good; never make business an excuse to decline the Office of humanity.*

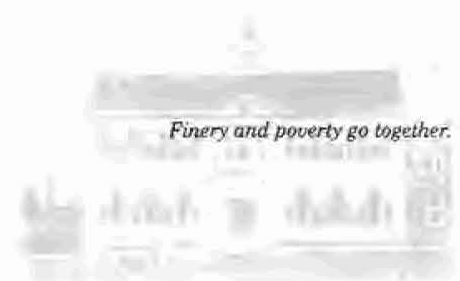


By 1839, the wisdom of creating a network of streets without going around the courthouse prompted Thomas W. Williams, who had organized the whaling industry in New London and had built a fine house just east of the courthouse, to deed to the county a plot of land just behind the courthouse. That permitted the structure to be moved to its present site and created a kind of Courthouse Square where three major roads came together.

While the New London Courthouse originally was intended for the more prosaic functions of government, through the years it has known jubilation, sorrow, patriotic fervor, religious celebration and political oratory of the first magnitude. It also knew the voices of children because of a determined and audacious lady named Matilda Wright.

Matilda Wright ran what was called a "Dame's School" down on Main Street. There she taught girls reading, stitching and other basic subjects. She and other New London women noticed a growing number of children on the streets who knew nothing of the Bible. These boys and girls were the children of the poor. They were rascally, clad in little more than rags, often dirty and, well, redolent for want of a bath. The new churches were clean, they catered to whole families who attended services, they had no Sabbath Schools and they weren't about to take in urchins.

Dame Wright appealed to city and court officials. They didn't say yes, they didn't say no. So she moved her Sabbath School to the courthouse and the authorities simply looked the other way. Waifs were gathered from the streets on the Sabbath, taught Bible lessons, simple prayers and hymns.



*Finery and poverty go together.*

The Methodist Church set its roots in Connecticut with a service at the New London courthouse September 2, 1789. It flourished so remarkably that in 1791 Methodism's famed Bishop Asbury came to the courthouse to preach.

Here the Universalist Society, now the Unitarian Universalist Church, organized in New London one evening in 1835. "Evil-minded persons or mischievous boys" removed the wooden steps while the congregation was inside. Fortunately, the act was discovered and the steps replaced before the service was over.

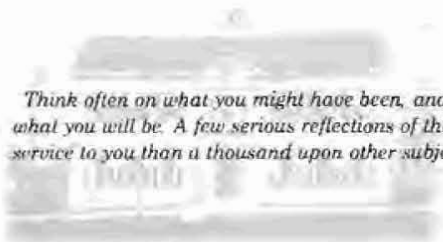
This was the civic center where New London paid its respects to General Lafayette on one of his post-Revolution visits to the United States. Here they thrilled to the voice of Daniel Webster as he defended the Constitution. And in 1860, Horace Greeley, publisher of The New York Tribune best remembered for his advice, "Go West, Young Man, Go West!", spoke in behalf of Abe Lincoln's Republican ticket. "To the Courthouse Tonight!" newspapers and posters would proclaim, and people flocked to the courthouse square.

**I**n the waning days of the 18th Century, New London had no hospital. The summer of 1798 was a scorcher, two months without any significant rain, the air laying like the hand of death on the city.

But the oppressive heat was nothing compared with what was to befall the community toward the end of August. People fell ill with a disease they had never before known. The evidence suggests it was yellow fever.

It hit downtown like a scythe. Between the Parade and Golden Street, only two persons of the regular inhabitants over the age of 12 escaped the infection. The toll, according to an account by Charles Holt of the New London Bee, was more than 90 dead and 350 stricken.

One local doctor was felled by the fever, but survived. Two others, one from Lyme, the other from Westerly, tended the ill in this makeshift hospital, assisted by a lay worker.



*Think often on what you might have been, and what you have been, and what you will be. A few serious reflections of this nature will be of more service to you than a thousand upon other subjects.*



One feature of the early courthouse was a balcony which ran around three sides of the courtroom. That made it the ideal setting for a social event unmatched before or since in the city.

During the War of 1812, life in the city was made miserable by a British blockade which sealed off the harbor so that no cargo could move in or out. The British never attacked, but they did capture Commodore Decatur, commander of American sea forces, and an aide. When the war ended in 1815, the commodore and his aide were freed and reported they had been well treated by their captors.

With the war over, jubilation and a sense of euphoria reigned. New Londoners, eager to get commerce moving again and to personify the city's motto, *Mare Liberum*—freedom of the seas—welcomed the British ashore. On a February night in 1815, they hosted a gala ball at the courthouse. The high point came when Commodore Decatur formally welcomed British Admiral Hotham.



Stephen Decatur

*Riches are given to make life pass comfortably; but life is not given only to amass them.*



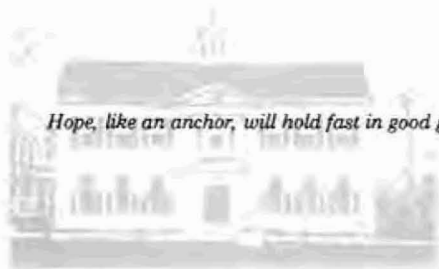
When the Civil War erupted in 1861, an emotion of a different sort held sway at the courthouse where speaker after speaker pledged support for the Union cause. That patriotic gathering "eclipsed any previous meeting there. Democrats and Republicans stood shoulder to shoulder and told . . . of the great dangers that were besetting their common republic . . . . Stirred to the quick . . . (young men) eagerly announced their intention to enlist."

Trial and judgment at the courthouse were not confined to the polemics and writs of lawyers and judges. County fairs were held there until 1825. Rustics from miles around exhibited their potatoes "to find the biggest one that didn't have a hollow heart." Wool was scrutinized for quality. The place was filled with the aroma of fresh apples. Livestock was tethered down the hill on a lot near what is now the site of the Mohican Hotel.

If New London used its courthouse for a variety of events, its importance stemmed from the fact that it was a center of justice. Imagine, then, the hue and cry that arose when, in 1843, they found that Stonington was conspiring with Norwich to move the courts from New London and center them all in Norwich. New London retaliated by introducing a bill in the state General Assembly to create a new county with New London as its seat and Norwich cast adrift. Wisely, the legislature quietly buried the bill. Calm was restored and court sessions were continued in both cities for the convenience of citizens at both ends of the county.



Dressed in Bunting and Staying Where It Is



*Hope, like an anchor, will hold fast in good ground.*

Sixty-three years later, another controversy erupted. The courthouse was too small for the expanding court system. What's more, it was dowdy from lack of attention. There was growing support to tear it down and start anew with a combination courthouse and municipal building.

"Shall New London Raze Its Own Faneuil Hall?" thundered *The Day* in its September 13, 1906 edition. A subordinate headline demanded: "Will the City Allow the Courthouse, Its Ancient Hall of Freedom, to Be Demolished? A Burning Question."

An aroused citizenry quickly spiked the plan. Instead, the county added the present main courtroom on the rear and provided space for a law library and lockup in the basement. The entire structure was spruced up.

Said Judge Abel Tanner, a veteran lawyer and president of the New London County Bar Association who was the principal speaker when the enlarged building was rededicated September 16, 1910: "Every appointment is perfect . . . Everything is immaculate, with the white walls and ceilings and the quartered oak trimmings."

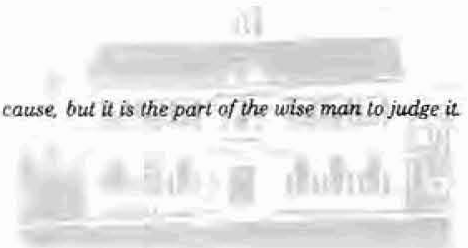
Yet, even as recently as the late 1960's, New London's courthouse was threatened as a judicial center. Again, public opinion and determined action within the political system turned the tide and the location of courts in both New London and Norwich to serve public necessity and convenience was preserved.

*The Sorrowful Client.*

*My cause determin'd least I never see,  
Till both my life and purse exhausted be;  
From my own lawyer terrify'd I run,  
Him and my wrangling foe alike I shun.*

*New England Almanack, and Gentleman's and Lady's Diary. New London, Conn., 1784.*

*Fools may plead a cause, but it is the part of the wise man to judge it.*



Six generations of New Londoners have cherished this venerable and well-used building, where great lawyers and judges have examined the law, heard witnesses and tested new ideas and where tens of thousands of citizens have assembled as juries to weigh the fate of people brought into the dock on charges ranging from thievery to capital murder.

This is the same quiet and dignified building where Patrick Henry, the defender of the common man, argued cases. Here, Judge Thomas E. Troland, last of that breed of lawyers who developed their professional skills by “reading the law” under the tutelage of veteran trial barristers, held forth. In his honor, his successor, Administrative Judge Angelo G. Santaniello, created a mini-courtroom. A warmer, scaled-down version of the more formal and austere regular courtrooms, the mini-courtroom is used for civil matters, especially those sensitive cases involving marital relations.



*Be on your guard, for the gates of death are open night and day.*

Today, all of our courts except Probate District benches, are in a state-wide system. A new and enlarged addition is under construction adjacent to the 1784 courthouse. Happily, the fine old building will continue to be used for court business. The tradition will be carried forward intact.

In this treasure from the past, our people have prayed, have been succored in illness, have heard great orators no matter how unpopular the cause. Here we have volunteered for war and celebrated peace, have deliberated and resolved myriad city issues, and, in city, county and state court sessions, we have been upheld, admonished and sometimes condemned by learned men and women strong in character and conviction.

That this venerable building still stands in useful dignity testifies to the esteem in which it has been held by those who have fought to preserve it through the years.

It is, above all, a living symbol of man's strivings for equality and justice under law.

#### *The Plaintiff & Defendant*

*Two parties had a difference, and the cause  
Did come to be decided by the laws;  
The bribing plaintiff did the Judge present  
With a new coach: t'other with the same intent  
Gave him two horses; each with a like design  
To make the Judge to his own side incline.  
The cause being try'd, the plaintiff's o'erthrown:  
O coach! said he thou art the wrong way gone!  
The Judge reply'd, It cannot but be so,  
For where the horses draw, your coach must go.*

New England Almanack and Gentleman's and Lady's Diary, New London, Conn., 1784.

*Endeavor to recover in your old age, what you have lost in your youth.*





## **Where to find out more about The Courthouse & The Old City**

### **PRIMARY SOURCES:**

Acts and Laws of the State of Connecticut, in America. Printed by Timothy Green, 1784.\*

New England Almanack, and Gentleman's and Lady's Diary, 1784. Published by Edmund Freebetter and T. Green.\*

Joseph Coit and Thomas W. Williams deeds to courthouse land, Land Records, City Clerk's Office, City of New London.\*

### **NEW LONDON PUBLIC LIBRARY—RESERVED MATERIALS**

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Connecticut, Albert Van Dusen, State Historian, 1961. Conservative Political Revolution.\*

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Miscellaneous file of clippings, pictures, scrapbooks, etc.\*

### **New London County Historical Society, Shaw Mansion**

Has vast amount of memorabilia from early New London \*

### **Newspaper Accounts**

Historical Sketch of New London's Famous and Venerable Courthouse, Richard B. Wall in The Day, September 23, 1909. \* See index at New London Public Library for other Wall articles.

New London's Ancient Courthouse is Once More Ready, speech by Abel P. Tanner, in The Day, September 16, 1910. \*

NL Courthouse has moving past, David Schoolcraft, Norwich Bulletin. \*

Norwich Citizens Stole Model of Local Courthouse in 1865, Barnard L. Colby, The Day, November 24, 1934. \*

Courthouse deserves a stateliness, Lucille M. Showalter, The Day, July 4, 1982.

### **Architecture and Construction**

Connecticut Art and Architecture, William L. Warren, Revolution Bicentennial Commission of Connecticut, 1976. \*

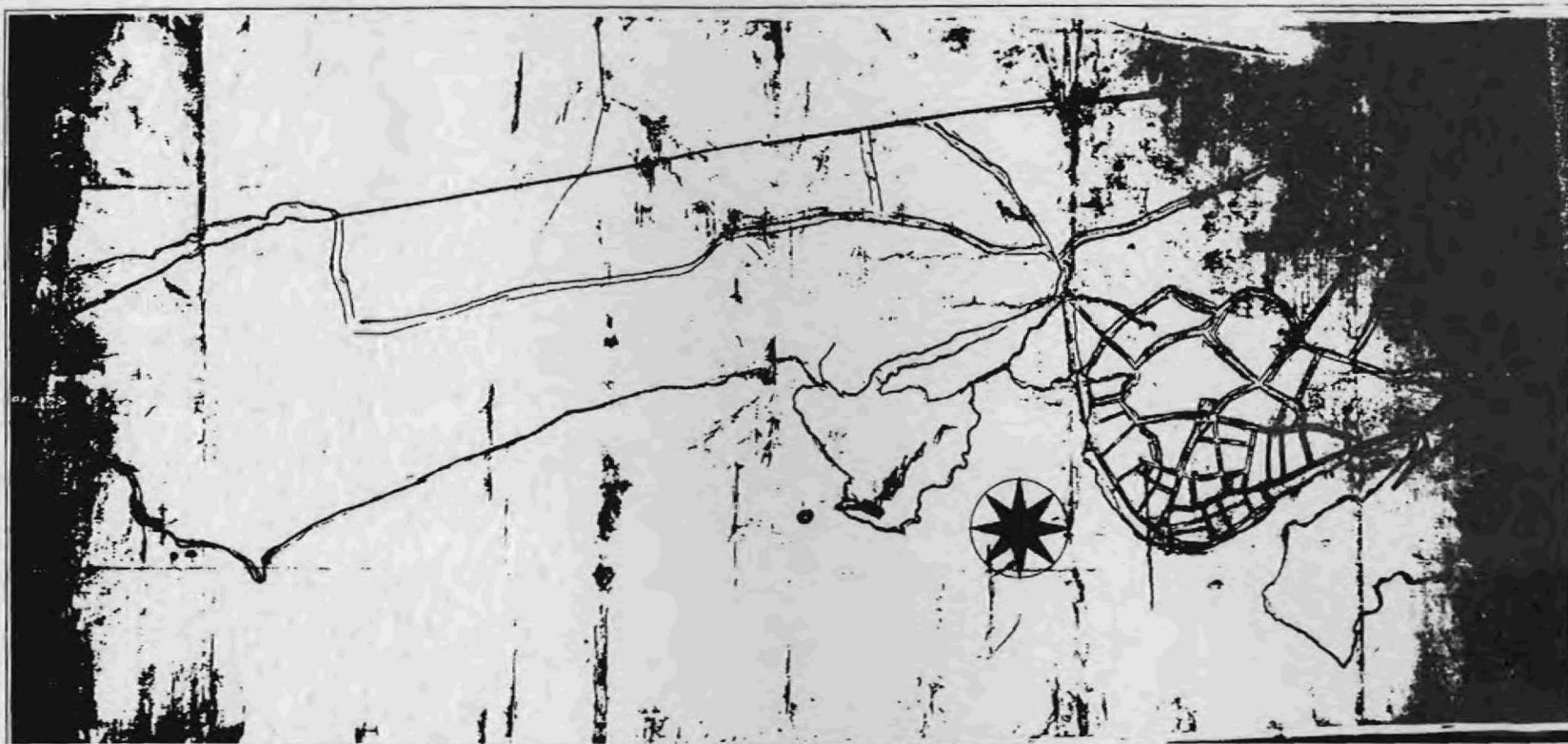
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Isaac Fitch of Lebanon, Master Joiner, 1734-1791, William L. Warren, Antiquarian and Landmark Society, Inc. of Connecticut, 1975. \*

Identifying American Architecture, 1619-1645, John J.G. Blumenson, American Association of State and Local History, Nashville, Tenn, 1977-1978. \*

New London Landmarks-Union Railroad Station Trust Inc.

\* Source of material for this narrative.



Map of the City of New London by Moses Warren, 1807. This faded, crumbling and torn drawing shows the plan of New London as it was almost a century and a quarter ago.