

Author and historian James C. Roy kindly contributes the following short history of Newburyport:

In 1635, fifteen years after the *Mayflower* dropped anchor off Plymouth in Massachusetts, about one hundred settlers from England offloaded their worldly goods on the boggy shores of the Parker River, led there in part by their minister, the Rev. Thomas Parker, after whom the river is named. Clearing land along its northern edge, they created a traditional town green and built several crude thatched houses, christening their village the Newbury Plantation. Over the next several decades an agricultural community spread and prospered. Samuel Sewall, a famous colonial-era figure in Bay Colony politics, called the place “New Heaven.”

It did not take long for several of these first settlers to find their way north to the mouth of the Merrimack River, far mightier than the Parker, as it ends a 110-mile run from its source in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. The Merrimack had long been a resource trove for Amerindians, and seasonal European fishermen had followed in their wake. A “root bin” used for the storage of fish is still remarked upon as Watts’ Cellar, and commemorated by a 1930 Tricentennial sign within the proposed Historic District. This site along a vitally important transit point immediately attracted entrepreneurial spirits from the original colonial community. Easy access to the Atlantic made “Waterside” a logical nexus for both the export of raw materials from the interior, as well as entry point for European finished goods and manufactures. A lively mercantile settlement emerged characterized by wharfs, shipyards, counting houses, fish shacks, and attendant service shops, nearly all of wooden construction. As commercial focus was up and down the river, ensuing “urban” development was characterized by an orderly and largely rectangular arrangement of byways and thoroughfares reaching towards an elevated ridge overlooking the Merrimack, marked by today’s High Street.

The port’s advantageous positioning vis-à-vis the Atlantic made it a nub of mercantile activity. Local ships, most built locally, engaged in the fisheries, and trade was initiated to the Maritimes, West Indies and, of course, the British Isles. Local produce of dried fish, rum, and timber products found markets up and down the Atlantic coastline, and the

Newbury area quickly became a “truck garden” for the growing city of Boston to its south, particularly beef, pork and hay, usually delivered by sail. In the course of its first hundred years, several moderately substantial fortunes were made and established in the plantation, the results of which were manifested both politically and architecturally.

In 1764, merchant and business interests centered on the Merrimack succeeded in breaking off from the largely agricultural focus of greater Newbury, establishing the town of Newburyport. By then “Waterside” had developed a viable commercial center around what came to be called Market Square, and several substantial private residences were constructed in a transition zone above the waterfront. On today’s State Street, located in the center of the proposed Historic District, the Tracy Mansion, built in brick in 1774 by the merchant Patrick Tracy, and the 1746 Dalton House, built by Michael Dalton, stand as reminders of this burst of prosperity.

During the Federalist period of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, several magisterial brick mansions were also built on this street as numbers 100 and 105. In adjoining neighborhoods and along today’s High Street, the Federalist-style townhouse was perfected in buildings both large and small, many labored on by shipwrights with their own individual sets of tools, moldings, and “signature” detailing. The ubiquitous “half-house,” best represented by a series of such structures on Fruit Street (the city’s first Local Historic District, 2007) is unparalleled in New England.

Civic, commercial, and mercantile interests in the vibrant downtown of Newburyport participated in all the important events of colonial North America. Both expeditions to capture the French citadel of Louisbourg on Cape Breton Island had significant components provided from here in supplies, shipping, and finance. During the Revolution, the port was equally active. A “Tea Party” took place near Market Square in 1775 during which Newburyporters burned British tea in a bonfire, and the son of Patrick Tracy (Nathaniel) was one of the more aggressive privateers along the Atlantic seaboard. His consortium of vessels captured in excess of 120 English ships, said to value over \$4,000,000. When Benedict Arnold, commander of the ill-fated albeit heroic expedition

sent to capture Quebec City, marched from Boston in July of 1775, he and his officers (including the Kentucky woodsman Daniel Morgan) were entertained in Tracy's State Street mansion. After a special service conducted at the Old South Church on today's Federal Street, some men exhumed the body of George Whitefield, perhaps the most famous evangelical preacher of the eighteenth century, who died in Newburyport, 1770, snipping patches of his funeral clothing as good-luck charms. They embarked on transports provided by Tracy ("dirty coasters and fish boats," according to one soldier) to begin their voyage to the Kennebec River in Maine, jumping-off point for the invasion. At the end of the War for Independence, notable figures visited the town, including the Marquis de Lafayette and Thomas Jefferson. George Washington came in 1789, by coach to Newbury. On the Lower Green he transferred to his charger, and entered Newburyport to great acclaim. He was ceremoniously greeted in an address delivered by John Quincy Adams, the future sixth president of the United States, then a law clerk in the city.

The local economy, though suffering during Jefferson's embargo of 1807, still retained sufficient financial vitality to recover from the devastating fire of 1811 which destroyed much of the downtown. In reconstructing the central commercial market axis, the architecture of the North Row was duplicated in two additional "blocks," both of brick, mostly brought from England as ballast. This harmonious assemblage is perhaps the most pleasing architectural statement of the downtown. When threatened with demolition in the 1970s as part of Federal Urban Renewal programs, the local community organized and spearheaded a tremendously successful rehabilitation project which saved these historic buildings for future generations.

While Newburyport enjoyed some prosperity as the 1800s progressed, most notably during the Clipper Ship era of the 1850s (Daniel McKay had a yard on the waterfront), and during the first stirrings of the "Industrial Revolution" when several mills were constructed, the city went through bad times in the Great Depression and beyond, as did most of the Merrimack Valley. The waterfront in particular underwent an operational and visual transformation, commercial ship-building wharves giving way to a substantial railroad yard and bulk coal storage area. As the local and Grand Banks fisheries declined,

so too did the fleet of local boats. Downtown held on for dear life, and many single-family residential homes were split into rooming houses or apartments, a trend since reversed. It is a remarkable tribute, whether by circumstance, civic pride, luck, or a combination of all three, that by the twenty-first century such an enormous stock of architectural inventory still remains in this city, most of a uniformly high quality. The reflection of Newburyport's age of genuine prosperity, a period over two hundred years in its past, is amazingly well preserved despite the many vicissitudes that intervened over those many years.