

52 Colburn Park Historic District

Lebanon, New Hampshire



The Colburn Park Historic District is in the center of downtown Lebanon and consists of 23 structures of significance and Colburn Park, a large green in the center of town. The formation of Colburn Park in the late 18th century and its continued preservation owe much to community planning achieved by a balance of public and private decisions.

Although the early streetscape and the park itself continually evolved to accommodate changing community needs, today's streetscape surrounding the park is a combination of residential, civic and commercial structures exhibiting a variety of architectural styles including Italianate, Classic Revival, New Federal and Queen Anne. The park is surrounded by Park Street and six side streets, which feed into it.

In 1792 after Robert Colburn, a local farmer, sold his wheat field to the town--with the stipulation that a meetinghouse be constructed there--population began to grow in what is now Lebanon Center. Located in the north triangle of Colburn Park, the meetinghouse had a strong influence on the design of the downtown buildings surrounding it. In 1804 the convergence of the two highways, Fourth New Hampshire Turnpike and the Croydon Turnpike, which linked Lebanon to the seacoast caused the construction of many new inns and taverns.

Several decisions throughout the years continued to influence the qualities of the streetscape and the park itself. In 1849, the meetinghouse was moved out of the common to the present site of the City Hall (although no clear records exist that explain why exactly the meetinghouse was moved). A major influence on the pedestrian qualities of Colburn Park was a decision in 1860 by the legislature to offset the two highways from the park and install pedestrian paths instead.

A major fire in 1887 destroyed about eighty buildings in central Lebanon, nearly the entire manufacturing district; however, because the fire was stopped at what is now the pedestrian mall, the downtown district was spared, albeit isolated for a time. Fortunately, despite the fire, a healthy population increase continued because of the rapid growth of other industries that lessened the impact of the disaster which had left many people unemployed. This growth spurred construction which resulted in a number of the still standing historic structures. Hanover Street had once entered from the northwest, but a second major fire in 1964 resulted in new streets, bridges, and traffic patterns as well as the pedestrian mall. Once again, a time of "Urban Renewal" took hold with a strong sense of community and planning continued to strengthen the unified sense of the park and the surrounding streetscape.

Several architects are represented in the classical details of the commercial buildings, most notably Ammi Burnham Young, who was born in Lebanon and went on to design several buildings of distinction across New England. The early residential buildings are fine examples of how local builders perfected classical detailing. The building locations are a response to the grid of the street layout. The commercial and civic buildings on the north and west are built to the street line and the structures on the east and south sides of the park are set back on large, lush lawns with the streets' edges defined by granite curbs. Regardless of the variety, age, and styles of the buildings' architecture, a unified image is presented by the streetscapes because of the use of similar materials, heights, building types, design features and site qualities.

The Colburn Historic District was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1986.

Sources:

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