

HISTORIC PRESERVATION ANALYSIS

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND LOCATION OF THE LATHON WIDER COMMUNITY CENTER

The South End, a distinctive mix of residential and industrial areas, emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, located on a peninsula just south of the downtown area of Stamford. The neighborhood is organized around major roads like Washington Boulevard, Atlantic Street, and Pacific Street, which run north-south, and Henry Street, a key east-west artery.

The growth of this area was initiated by the founding of Yale & Towne Lock Works in 1868, which spurred the development of residential zones until 1929. Originally, the South End was mainly composed of country estates on the higher ground between the Mill River and Atlantic Street, a sprawling farm in the center of the peninsula, and Woodland Cemetery on the eastern shoreline. A notable transformation of the area began in 1868 with the large-scale division of Hoytville across the flat, low-lying parts of the peninsula. That same year, Henry Towne from Yale & Towne Lock Works began the construction of factory buildings after purchasing several lots north of Henry Street.

The architecture in this district, primarily from 1870 to 1930, features styles such as Italianate, French Second Empire, Victorian Gothic, Queen Anne, and Colonial Revival. Noteworthy buildings include four churches, the Lathon Wider Community Center (previously a school), and a fire station. The northeastern section is marked by industrial buildings, predominantly the former Yale & Towne Lock Works, Stamford's most substantial industrial complex. The residential buildings vary, with older mansions west of Atlantic Street and more modest homes like Victorian Gothic cottages, 19th-century row houses, and early 20th-century three-deckers. The South End is a quintessential "walking city" in Stamford, where residents typically live close to their workplaces amidst a diverse array of ethnic communities.

The Lathon Wider Community Center, positioned on a large block in the heart of the South End, boasts a symmetrical facade facing Henry Street. The building's oldest part features vehicle access from Woodland Avenue (also known as Ludlow Street on some historic maps) on the block's opposite side.

The site of the Henry Street Public School is traceable to at least the 1892 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, showing a structure with a projecting entry from a rectangular base, similar to the school's current central entry. The map describes it as a 2 ½ story frame building with a brick basement and a slate or tin roof, consistent with other buildings in the street and neighborhood. Sanborn Maps from the following decade provide similar descriptions of this school building.

EVOLUTION OF THE BUILDING STRUCTURE

The site around 137 Henry Street, home to the Lathon Wider Sr. Community Center, stands as a testament to the vibrant history and development of Stamford's South End. This area's transformation is meticulously chronicled through aerial photographs and historical documents spanning numerous decades, offering a detailed perspective on the neighborhood's evolution.

Situated on Henry Street, an important east-west route traversing the peninsula, the Community Center is centrally positioned in the South End, an area marked by its unique blend of residential and industrial architectures. This prime location embeds the center within a diverse urban milieu, where various types of buildings have existed side by side in harmony for more than a hundred years. The Community Center itself, with a history of providing vital community and educational services for over a century, stands as a key element in the neighborhood's panorama. Its longstanding presence and contribution to the area have made it much more than just a building; it is a cornerstone of the South End community. This historical significance is reflected in the way it seamlessly integrates into the fabric of the neighborhood, bridging the gap between different eras and styles of architecture, and serving as a testament to the area's rich and evolving history.

In its vicinity, the remnants of Yale & Towne, just a block to the east, and the Blickensderfer Typewriter factory, two blocks north, stand as enduring symbols of the area's robust industrial heritage that dates back from the late 19th to the mid-20th centuries. These historical structures not only reflect the industrial boom of the past but also contribute to the architectural character of the neighborhood.

Directly across Pacific Street, other notable structures like the Tabernacle of Grace Church building and the refurbished Engine Company #2 building further enrich the community's historical narrative. These buildings, along with the Community Center, have played pivotal roles in serving the community through various eras, adapting to the changing needs of the residents while retaining their historical essence.

The Lathon Wider Sr. Community Center, as a contributing building within the South End Historic District, harmonizes with the surrounding architecture. Its two-story stature is in keeping with the scale of other historic buildings in the vicinity, ensuring a cohesive visual and spatial relationship. This congruence underscores the center's integral role in the historical and cultural fabric of the South End, making it not just a structure, but a landmark that embodies the collective memory and ongoing narrative of the community.

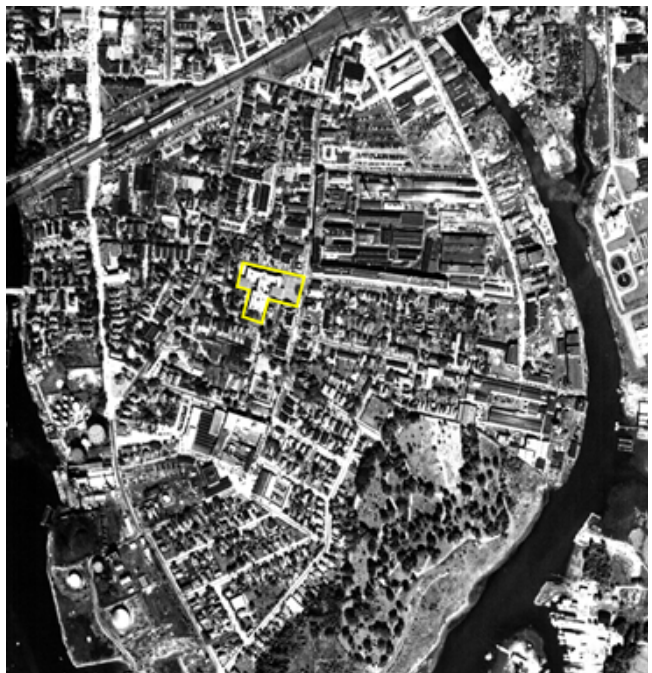
In the 1934 aerial photograph, the site is dominated by a linear building along the south side of Henry Street, notable for its clear, elongated structure. This period also shows a central addition to the building, which was significant for its time. Interestingly, another large addition extending towards Woodland Avenue is visible in this photograph. However, by the time of the 1970 aerial image, this extension had been demolished, indicating a shift in the site's usage or design philosophy.

The 1951 aerial photograph marks another developmental phase, showcasing the east and west gymnasium additions. These expansions suggest a growing community use or possibly an increase in educational or recreational activities at the site. The photograph shows these additions as prominent new structures, seamlessly integrated with the existing building.

Figure 27: 1934 Aerial of Stamford's South End



Figure 28: 1951 Aerial of Stamford's South End



By 1985, the aerial view reveals a more complex layout. The introduction of connecting hallways between the central addition and the east and west wings had created enclosed courtyards, transforming the building's functionality and aesthetic. These courtyards might have provided communal or recreational spaces, indicative of a more community-focused design. The presence of playground or park equipment, initially possibly seen in the 1985 aerial photograph and more clearly in 1996, suggests a continued focus on community and recreational spaces.

The 2010 aerial photograph introduces the latest major alteration - a single-story entry from the parking lot. Partially conceptualized in the 1995 drawings by Barun Basu Associates, this entry included essential functional elements like an elevator and a staircase. However, the grander plans for a larger lobby space and a skylit cafeteria, as indicated in the drawings, were never realized. This points to a possible scaling back of the original design intentions or budgetary constraints.

Changes in the surrounding landscape are also evident. The transformation of what was once a lawn at the southwest corner of Henry and Pacific Streets into paved sports courts, first appearing in either the 1970 or 1985 aerial photographs, reflects a shift in recreational needs or urban development trends. Similarly, the circular pool form in the memorial garden, visible by 1970, adds to the site's communal features. The emergence of a large open lawn with sparse trees in the southwestern corner, following the demolition of houses on Woodland Avenue (visible in the 1965 aerial photograph), marks a significant change in land use and urban form.

This detailed chronology, is corroborated by the National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form for the "South End Historic District" and city-held construction information, firmly places the construction of the original building around 1925. Moreover, this documentation reiterates the building's identity as the South End Community Center, historically known as the Woodland Avenue School, marking it as a cornerstone of community life in the South End of Stamford.

Figure 29: 1985 Aerial of Stamford's South End

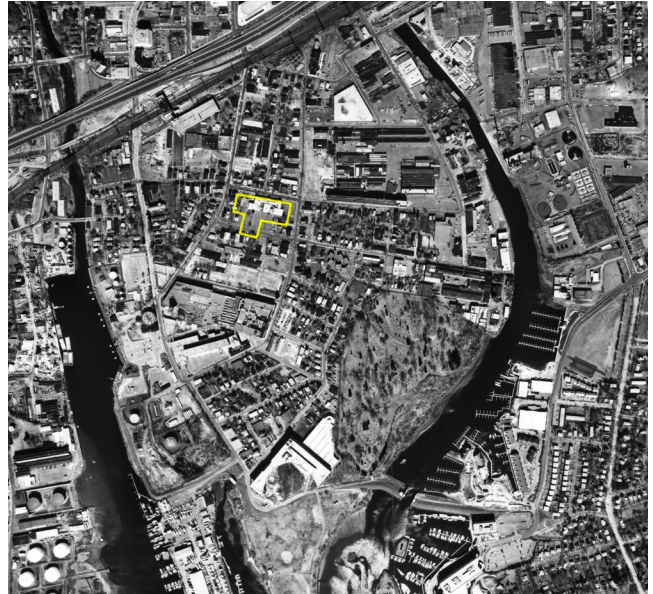


Figure 30: 2010 Aerial of Stamford's South End



HISTORICAL DOCUMENTATION AND COMMUNITY CENTER RENAMING

The center was renamed the Lathon Wider, Sr. Community Center in 1996 to memorialize the dedication of Lathon Wider, Sr. to the South End. He was a resident of the community and served as a representative for it as part of the Third District of the City of Stamford between the years 1977 – 1988. The garden with circular reflecting pool memorializes George Johnson who was also a community leader and representative of the Third District in the 1990s.

ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES AND CONSTRUCTION DETAILS

The architectural nuances of the building at the South End, described as “Vernacular with Georgian Revival elements” in the Inventory-Nomination Form, vividly reflect its circa 1925 construction. The building’s design is centered around a balanced, symmetrical layout on Henry Street, anchored by a central, projecting entry that embodies the Georgian Revival style with its classical proportions and detailing. This entry is characterized by shallow pilasters, and a classical door surround, with more elaborate window and door treatments at the central entry point. This blend of simplicity and ornamentation is a hallmark of the style. Adding a layer of complexity, Art Deco elements such as the stylized spiral brackets, flat dentils at the central entry on Henry Street, and the ornate fluted and floral motifs on the secondary cornice band, infuse a contemporary flair, indicative of the period’s architectural diversity.

The building’s material palette is predominantly red brick, laid in a meticulous Flemish bond pattern, which provides a textural and color contrast with the buff-colored cast stone trim details. The most striking feature is the pair of flattened Tuscan pilasters at the central, projecting entry on Henry Street. These pilasters support an expansive entablature, adorned with classical dentils and a robust cornice, framing the entry in a grand manner. Above the door, bright yellow letters announce the building as the Lathon Wider Community Center, adding a modern touch to the traditional façade.

The entirety of the Henry Street façade is meticulously crafted, featuring smaller, detailed ornamental bands at the cornice level, and a secondary, flatter band positioned slightly lower. The larger window units are accentuated by a soldier course, adding a vertical rhythm, while the sills of the second-floor windows are marked by a row of vertical headers. These details are complemented by a classical band that traces the sills of the first-floor windows and panels, encircling the entire Henry Street façade along with the ornamental upper bands. However, certain sections, specifically the pilasters at the front corner of the central entry and the panels along Henry Street, have been modernized with a coating of smooth stucco, creating a visual contrast with the original brickwork.

The junction where the central entry projection meets the main façade suggests a layered construction history, possibly indicative of multiple design phases or mid-stream adjustments. This is further evidenced by the integration of new dark bronze window and door units across the building, as well as the installation of contemporary lighting fixtures and ventilation hardware, though some of these elements have been subsequently removed, leaving noticeable voids.



View of Lathon Wider Community Center from Henry Street

On the Pacific Street side, the building continues the intricate brick and band detailing from Henry Street, with the addition of two single-story bays providing architectural interest. This pattern is mirrored on the building's western side, adjacent to the memorial garden. The later gymnasium additions on the east and west sides stand out with their common bond brick pattern and oversized, multi-paned windows that illuminate the large interior spaces. The eastern gymnasium on Pacific Street is further embellished with a striking wall mural, a creative contribution by local artists.

The facade facing Woodland Avenue displays the building's evolving history, marked by the different phases of additions and demolitions, as evidenced in the aerial photographs. Here, the central wall, left after an earlier addition was demolished prior to 1970, features a contemporary brown aggregate finish with pronounced stucco frames around the window and door openings, adding a modern twist. This façade is also adorned with large signs indicating the various organizations within the building. Some window and door openings have been filled in, but the original brick coursing is retained, blending these modifications seamlessly with the building's historical context. The brickwork shows signs of repointing, often in different colors, highlighting areas of restoration and repair.

The building's main entrance, located at the western courtyard adjacent to the parking lot, is marked by a set of gabled doors under a blue metal roof, leading into a single-story lobby. This entry area is thoughtfully landscaped, yet it has an enclosed feel due to the placement of mechanical equipment near the designated accessible parking spots, creating a functional yet somewhat isolated courtyard space.



Main Entrance to Lathon Wider Community Center

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

The building mass along Henry Street, dating back to around 1925, boasts classic architectural details of exceptional quality, distinct from other structures within the historic district. These features can be restored to their original state with relatively minor interventions, highlighting the building's architectural significance. In contrast, the later additions to the building, while in fair condition and restorable, lack the same level of intricate detailing and the inviting, traditional street presence of the original structure.

In the event of considering the demolition of the existing building, it would be advisable to at least retain and restore the original rectangular massing on Henry Street. This part of the building not only embodies the rich architectural heritage of the area but also serves as a key element in maintaining the historical integrity of the district. Furthermore, introducing at least one accessible entry on this side of the building would enhance its approachability, catering to residents from the north side of the neighborhood who access the area on foot or by car.

Such an addition would be in line with the spirit of the 1986 South End Historic District nomination, recognized as Stamford's prime example of a 'walking city'. This concept emphasizes the importance of pedestrian-friendly urban design, fostering a sense of community and accessibility.

Additionally, it is recommended to continue honoring the contributions of Lathon Wider, Sr., and George Hoyt. Their legacies of community service are deeply interwoven with the fabric of the city, and preserving their memory is crucial as Stamford continues to build and evolve. By integrating these elements, any future developments or renovations can pay homage to the past while crafting a space that meets contemporary needs and celebrates the community's enduring spirit.