



## An Introduction to Newburyport History

The **Newburyport Preservation Trust** exists to promote preservation education and advocacy. But just what are we preserving, anyway? And why? How did Newburyport get to be the way it looks now? Has it always been this way? The narrative below is a brief and broad overview of Newburyport history that purposefully avoids identification of heroes, villains, brilliance, or ignorance. But to be sure, it is the resilient citizens of all persuasion, working through or around the inherent disharmony of democracy, that have made Newburyport work. Readers desiring more detail are encouraged to consult the bibliography and links on the Newburyport History page at [www.nbptpreservationtrust.org](http://www.nbptpreservationtrust.org).

For those interested in the dramatic changes in recent decades, a must-see video is the 30-minute documentary about Newburyport's restoration, *A Measure of Change*, by Lawrence Rosenblum (1975).

## Newburyport History In-Brief: A Preservationist Perspective

The present city of Newburyport, Massachusetts, on the Merrimack River, was originally the northern "Waterside" area of Newbury, Mass., which was settled as an agricultural enterprise by English colonists in 1635. Newburyport became a separate town in 1764, and a city in 1851.

The port city flourished with shipping, fishing, and the West Indies "triangle trade" until the economy slowed after the 1807 Embargo Act (and War of 1812). It was in the flush 1790-1820 period that so many of the city's notable Federal-style homes were built. In 1811 a fire destroyed over 16 acres of wood-frame buildings, and when the downtown was rebuilt, brick construction and thick firewalls were required.

In the 19th century, shipbuilding remained a big business (including the clipper ships of the 1850s), although mid-century saw a manufacturing economy evolve in Newburyport, with several large cotton mills and numerous shoe manufacturing businesses employing the newest arrivals to the U.S.

The early 20th century brought the beginnings of the long slow decline of mill manufacturing along the Merrimack River. In Newburyport, its own experience of the Great Depression began before 1929 and lasted for decades. (One accidental result of the protracted economic stagnation in the neighborhoods was the general "preservation-by-benign-neglect" of the city's stock of unspoiled Georgian, Federal, and Greek Revival domestic architecture.)

... over please

View of Newburyport from Salisbury  
by Fitz Henry Lane (1846)



Clipper Ship Dreadnought (1853)



Shipyard (1890s)



James Cotton Mill (1890)



Clam Shanties & Shuckers  
(1910)



Newburyport (c. 1907)



High Street (c. 1910)



State Street (c. 1910)



State Street  
(1955)



Liberty Street (1920s)



Unicorn Street (1930s)



Inn Street (1968)



Waterfront Warehouses  
(1968... & 1880)



Urban Renewal (1968)



Waterfront (1968)



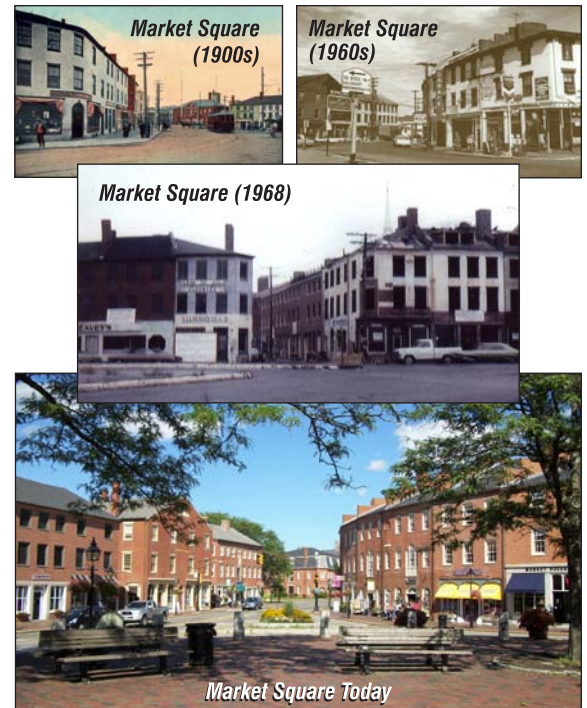


... continued from previous page

The late-1960s redirection of urban renewal and the 1970s preservation and restoration of the post-1811 downtown buildings spurred investment by both businesspeople and homeowners. This confidence led to improved and restored properties, lifting the city out of its doldrums and sparking its renaissance. In the decades since, Newburyport's "waterside" location and its historic character – framed by its authentic architecture – have made the city a desirable place to visit as well as a desirable place to live.

– R.W. Bacon,  
for the Newburyport Preservation Trust  
January 2012

**Photo credits:** The black-and-white photos of Newburyport in the 19th-20th century are used by permission of the Newburyport Public Library Archival Center. The color photos of Newburyport's urban renewal demolition are by William Eusko (donated to the NPL by Joanne Brislin, and used by permission). The pre-1923 public domain postcard images are from the author's collection.



## Newburyport History Sources & Bibliography

**A Sketch of the History of Newbury, Newburyport, and West Newbury**, by Joshua Coffin (1845). This dense 416-page tome, packed with excerpts from town records, still stands the test of time over 150 years after its publication. The author, Joshua Coffin (1792-1864), was Dartmouth graduate, a founder of the New England Anti-Slavery Society (1832), an itinerant schoolmaster, and the town clerk in Newbury for seven years.

**History of Newburyport, Mass. 1764-1906** (Vol. 1), by John J. Currier (1906). John James Currier (1834-1912) was an exceedingly prolific local historian – the first volume alone is 766 pages. Vol. 1 includes valuable information about Newburyport's streets and buildings.

**History of Newburyport, Mass. 1764-1909** (Vol. 2), by John J. Currier (1909). For those that didn't get enough in Vol. 1, there are 679 more pages in Vol. 2. Currier also wrote *History of Newbury, Mass. 1635-1902*, a work of 755 pages.

**A Brief History of Old Newbury: From Settlement to Separation**, by Bethany Groff (2008). This is an excellent up-to-date introduction to local history by historian and museum professional Bethany Groff, who happens to be a regional site manager for Historic New England, based at Spencer-Peirce-Little Farm in Newbury, Mass.

**Poverty and Progress: Social Mobility in a Nineteenth Century City**, by Stephen Thernstrom (1980). This book is a study of the Newburyport economy and stratified society in the mid- to late-19th century. Inspired by the five-volume *Yankee City* series of 1930s social and economic analysis by W. Lloyd Warner, the author of this study tackles the earlier period with more historical context.

**Life in Newburyport 1900-1950**, by Jean Foley Doyle (2007). The author's two books on the city's 20th-century history proceed chronologically using a formula that covers political, economic, and social history separately by category. The raw material for the books included newspaper accounts, city records, interviews, and photos from the Newburyport Public Library's Archival Center and the Historical Society of Old Newbury. The author is a lifelong Newburyport resident now retired from a 30-year career teaching history and international relations at Newburyport High School.

**Life in Newburyport 1950-1985**, by Jean Foley Doyle (2010). This book picks up where Doyle's previous book left off, and using the same format, carries the story of Newburyport through the mid-1980s.

**Newburyport and Its Business District**, by Josephine P. Driver (1964). This 10-page article was published in the spring 1964 issue of *Old Time New England*, a quarterly journal of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (now known as Historic New England). The article features 19th-century photos of Newburyport by George E. Noyes, and voices concern about urban renewal plans that were taking shape at the time.

**Newburyport and a New Kind of Urban Renewal**, by Paul J. McGinley, Executive Director, Newburyport Redevelopment Authority (1971). This 5-page article was published in the spring 1971 issue of *Old Time New England*, a quarterly journal of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (now known as Historic New England). The article recaps the preservation vs. demolition decisions of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

**A Port in Progress**. (2007) Between March and November 2007 the *Newburyport Daily News* published a 37-part series of articles on Newburyport's 1970s renewal entitled "A Port in Progress." The series was so well-received the *Daily News* published a hardbound book of the same name including all text and photos.