

George H. Lawler Jr. - The Unsung Hero that Saved Newburyport



George H. Lawler Jr., a major figure in city government for close to five decades who played a key role in Newburyport downtown's preservation and renewal. He is remembered as a mayor who helped save the center from demolition in the 1960s and put the city on a track to stress preservation in its redevelopment, bucking a national trend for demolition.

He was born in Newburyport on October 1, 1927, the son of the late George H. Lawler and Mary A. (Hurley) Lawler. His father was a police officer. He grew up in the transformative years of the City of Newburyport – a city that went from Depression Years to World War II and then witnessed the eventual leaving of the industrial base that had supported the community. Businesses were slowly leaving the downtowns and starting up along strips like Route One and Storey Avenue. He graduated from Newburyport High School in 1946. Following his father's footsteps, he served as a police officer for several years before winning his first term on the City Council in 1954. George was especially supportive of police and fire. Perhaps that is because his father was shot in the line of duty during a robbery (but survived).

He remained on the City Council until he took the mayor's office in 1964. After two terms as mayor in City Hall, he worked for the Newburyport Redevelopment Authority until 1971.



Though in failing health due to respiratory illnesses and other problems, he continued to be active in municipal affairs. He was the chairman of the Board of Water Commissioners before his death at his home at 22 Woodland Street at the age of 85. George was a devoted husband to his wife, Barbara (Corbin) Lawler, who predeceased him in 1987. By the time of passing, Lawler was the father of four children, and six grandchildren. He had been widowed for several decades.

Newburyport in the early 60's

Following Mayor Al Zabriskie, he pushed for preservation rather than demolition.

In the early '60s, a tentative plan called for tearing down almost the entire historic

downtown and replacing it with a strip mall and parking lots. It was the standard model of urban renewal at the time, a path that many cities had followed.

Lawler was a key factor in developing an alternative to such a scenario.

In an interview in 2007, he recalled, “Parking was a big deal then, and some original plans to improve the boarded-up downtown buildings called for structures to be torn down and replaced by parking lots. The bulldozers were going to come, and everything was going to go.

“But there were people in town who wanted to save some of the buildings and when such a (demolition) model was shown around in 1964, some people started saying ‘wait a minute.’”

A Preservationist Hero

He was a Newburyport native and grew up in the city as it struggled through hard times. At age 37, he found himself in the mayor’s office, at a time when the dilapidated state of the city’s downtown had citizens and politicians pushing hard for change. The trend at the time when nearly every city was tearing down the old and replacing it with the garish new. Lawler listened to one of the key voices in that debate — the city’s historical society and preservationists — and took the steps that turned the tide in their favor.

First, he refused to sign a federal document that would have put in motion plans to tear down about two blocks of historic Federalist-era buildings on State Street, as well as all of Market Square and Inn Street. The “urban renewal” plan was to replace them with a one-story strip mall and a big parking lot.

“It was on my desk,” Lawler told The Daily News in 2007. “All I had to do was sign it and it was done.”

Second, instead, he sent a letter to the Newburyport Redevelopment Authority, asking it to emphasize restoration in its plans for redeveloping downtown. In a Daily News account about downtown development written in 2007, Mary Wilkins Haslinger, daughter of Dr. Wilkins, stated, “If George hadn’t written that resolution that asked the NRA to consider preserving the old buildings instead of tearing them all down, everything could be gone now.”

His resolution impressed officials at the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), who controlled funding for much redevelopment in the state.

Third, Lawler drove to Dr. Wilkins’ High Street home and sat in the driveway, waiting for him to return from work. At first, Wilkins refused Lawler’s offer to join the NRA board. But Lawler persisted, promising him that he would not be a token preservationist voice on the NRA. Finally, Dr. Wilkins relented and joined the board.

It proved to be a pivotal appointment. Wilkins’ persuasive advocacy of restoration changed the NRA’s direction, little by little.

Other mayors who followed Lawler would see the restoration concept through to its fruition. Most of those mayors are duly recognized and feted in the downtown with memorials and plaques, but not George Lawler. None of the bricks or concrete was laid during his time in office, but the foundation he laid underlies everything. We should remember that! He was a quiet and humble giant in the history of Newburyport, a man who made the right decisions at a crucial time. “I’ve always thought that George Lawler is the unsung hero of Newburyport’s urban renewal story,” said Mary Wilkins Haslinger.

A Community Service Dynamo

From 1971 to 1987, he was City Clerk. Lawler continued his activity in civic life after leaving that position due to upcoming retirement. But he couldn’t stop not serving the people of Newburyport, going on to serve on the City Council once again after leaving the clerk’s office. Mr. Lawler also served numerous city boards and commissions, including his active service as chairman of the Board of Water Commissioners from 2002 until his death.

In addition to his municipal service, Mr. Lawler also contributed his time to other notable civic organizations in Newburyport. He was a founding father and two-time general chairman of Yankee Homecoming and one of the original incorporators of Opportunity Workshop and a member of the board of the Friends of the Council on Aging. His contributions to the city he loved are too numerous to mention. His devotion to his city was only surpassed by his love of his wife, children and grandchildren.

As the result of his lengthy municipal service and broad institutional knowledge of the city’s history, local ordinances and state laws, George was called upon by several mayors and city leaders for his wisdom and counsel over the years. He served as an informal adviser to numerous city leaders and his rare knowledge and insight into municipal affairs will be greatly missed.

Beginning in 1968, after Lawler left the mayor office, a plan focusing on preservation would move forward under a new mayor, Byron Matthews. But Lawler is remembered as a transitional figure who helped stop the bulldozers and start residents thinking about its historical architecture.

“George really gave of himself when it came to helping the city,” said former Mayor Byron Matthews, a friend, associate and neighbor for decades. “I was on the council when he was mayor, and then he was city clerk for several of my terms as mayor.

“He should be given credit for preserving Newburyport’s Downtown.

His accomplishments:

Mayor from 1964-67

City Councilor (1954-1963)(1988-1991)

City Clerk (1971-1987)(Held until near his retirement in 1992)

Co-founder of NAID – Newburyport Area Industrial Development

Assistant Director of the Newburyport Redevelopment Authority (NRA) from 1968 to 1971.

He was a founding father and two-time general chairman of Yankee Homecoming

One of the original incorporators of Opportunity Workshop

Board member of the Friends of the Council on Aging.

Chairman of the Board of Water Commissioners from 2002 until his death.

George was the recipient of numerous civic service awards, including the Monsignor Thomas M. Lane Community Service Award presented by the Ancient Order of Hibernians.

He also brought the clipper ship Flying Cloud to Newburyport in 1967 to celebrate and promote the city's rich maritime history.

References:

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