

## Dr Robert W Wilkins Contribution to the Revival of Newburyport

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February 1961. Source: Boston University Photography

A group formed under the Historical Society of Old Newbury (the HIST) brought forward the idea of restoring the buildings in the downtown historic district instead of tearing everything down. Nationally renowned cardiologist Dr. Robert Wilkins, Ruth, and Edmond Burke, and other residents approached the city's elected officials about not losing the heritage of Newburyport's historic downtown.

Boston Globe, May 7, 1968, courtesy of the Newburyport Public Library Archival Center.

George Lawler (mayor 1964-1967) was mayor when the delegation from the HIST led by banker John "Hack" Pramberg, architect Edmond Burke and Dr. Wilkins paid a visit, in 1968 the restoration of downtown Newburyport would go forward under mayor Byron Matthews (mayor 1968-1978).

The Historical Society of Old Newbury's grassroots committee was successful in saving the historic integrity of the downtown area. And since that time Newburyport has grown and flourished, its downtown is a national example of how historic preservation can save a community from blight and neglect.

**Below is the article from the Newburyport Daily News which eventually was converted with other articles into a book, Port in Progress, published January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2008:** (The events sound like some kind of a Hollywood movie complete with crisis, drama and an edge-of-the-seat realization that all could be lost at any given moment.)

"It was 1960. In Washington, D.C., Ike held the White House, with John Kennedy and Richard Nixon each hoping to be the next to occupy the Oval Office.

In Massachusetts, Democrat Foster Furcolo was governor, trying to deal with

the fading of the post-war economic boom, striking unions, rusting industrial complexes and fleeing manufacturers taking jobs with them as they left for friendlier business environments.

In Newburyport, the economy and historic downtown center were crumbling.

Local merchants, like Byron Matthews running his family's market, were holding their own, but other businesses had already fallen by the financial wayside.

Al Zabriskie had been elected mayor. His theme was "A better Newburyport for all people." Setting a nine-point agenda, he promised "action and progress, rather than words and stagnation." His plan included open government, better schools, more off-street parking, a search for new industries and urban renewal of the downtown.

George Lawler, then 33 years old, was president of the City Council.

On High Street, the well-respected cardiologist Dr. Robert Wilkins had made his home. The history and architecture of his adopted city fascinated him.

Over the course of the next decade, those four Newburyporters' lives would intertwine. Each would take actions that would steer Newburyport's future, and eventually bring about the restored downtown that is cherished by residents today.

## **Birth of the NRA**

It all started with the newly elected mayor, Zabriskie.

"By 1960, most of the buildings along lower State Street were already boarded up," said Lawler. "Things weren't good. Many business owners just locked the doors one night and never opened again."

Lawler said Zabriskie led the City Council to adopt the statute that gave birth to the Newburyport Redevelopment Authority in February of 1960, then appointed its first members.

Redevelopment authorities are powerful entities. They aren't part of the elected city government. They are governed by appointed members with specific goals to accomplish, and with considerable money and power at their disposal to get their task done. The NRA's five-member board could take properties from owners who refused to sell once the city's urban renewal plan was finalized with federal authorities at Housing and Urban Development.

"Without Al, the process wouldn't have started," said Lawler, who became mayor after Zabriskie from 1964 to 1968. "After the appointment of the NRA — it was still 1960, I think — the city filed with HUD for \$50,000 to do the planning and survey study of the area to come under urban renewal."

In the early stages of planning, the area surveyed was very large, Lawler said. It stretched from Winter Street to Lime Street and from High Street to the waterfront. Considered too ambitious a venture to tackle, the area was reduced by about 85 percent — to 22 acres of downtown Newburyport.

"They decided to make the urban renewal district just the central business district," Lawler said. "We settled on one side of Green Street down through Market Square, and one side of State Street and one side of Pleasant. ... That designation was done by about 1963 or 1964, I think. After that, the model was made for the original urban renewal plan."

The model called for tearing down almost the entire historic downtown and replacing it with a strip mall and parking lots. (The model is now on display at the office of the Daily News of Newburyport, 23 Liberty St., through permission of the Historic Society of Old Newbury.)

"Parking was a big thing back then," Lawler continued. "The lack of parking was considered a big problem here, so the original plan called for some buildings to be torn down and replaced by parking lots. At that time, urban renewal meant everything (in the urban renewal district) would go. The bulldozers were going to come, and everything was going to go."

By 1960, residents in the region had a choice: They could travel the extra miles to new shopping malls with easy parking and many retail and entertainment offerings, or they could patronize downtown business districts

with limited parking — often with parking meters and the occasional parking ticket — and fewer and fewer stores. More and more, shoppers chose not to shop downtown.

The downtown's urban renewal concept seemed logical at the time. Yet even the best intended plans can be flawed and need altering, Lawler said. And that's exactly what slowly happened in Newburyport.

"As the model of the new plan was shown around in 1964, some people started to say, 'Wait a minute,'" Lawler said.

### **Enter Dr. Wilkins**

Unhappy with the model, a group formed under Newburyport's historical society, the Historical Society of Old Newbury, to bring forward the idea of restoring the buildings in the district instead of tearing down everything. Under the guidance of nationally-renowned cardiologist Dr. Robert Wilkins, Ruth and Edmond Burke and other residents approached officials about slowing things down so the heritage of Newburyport's historic downtown commercial center could be physically maintained in the urban renewal plan.

Eventually, Wilkins contacted Newburyport resident and famed Williamsburg, Va., architect William Perry to reinforce their case and come up with another model based on restoring buildings.

Members of this group sent letters to federal authorities at HUD, as well as to anyone they felt could affect the result they desired, including the National Trust for Historic Preservation. They pressed their cases by insisting there was nothing incompatible with breathing new economic life into Newburyport's business center and also restoring the historic buildings within it.

The tide began to change, but it didn't happen overnight, nor even over a year's worth of nights. It literally took years.

The change in attitude coincided with Lawler's first term as mayor. A delegation from the historical society led by banker John "Hack" Pramberg, architect Edmond Burke and Wilkins paid Lawler a visit. Their tone was

polite, not demanding, he said. They simply asked to be heard.

"It was about 1964 when they met with me," Lawler said. "I thought they were making a good case. All they were asking for was consideration for historic preservation and restoration. I thought they were very fair. We had some very, very good meetings."

After the meetings, Lawler made a bold move.

"I wrote a resolution as mayor and brought it to the NRA," he said. "I wrote it as a favor to the people who came to me. All they were asking for was consideration. It got them a foot in the door, and they were happy with that."

Lawler's resolution basically asked the NRA to give consideration to developers who wanted to restore buildings in the renewal district instead of demolishing them. His resolution impressed HUD when it got a copy of it.

Meanwhile, Perry built a new urban renewal model, which was first shown in early February of '65 at a Chamber of Commerce meeting. Its reviews were excellent.

Perry's firm also contacted the R.M. Bradley Company, a well-respected Boston real estate firm, which agreed making restoration a part of Newburyport's urban renewal project would actually make the urban renewal plan better. The company sent a letter to the NRA in April of 1965 saying exactly that.

The public hearing on the plan to tear down most of the downtown came in May, 1965 — almost five years after Zabriskie's urban renewal movement began and about a year after preservationists came forward. About 200 people attended, Lawler recalled. Although there were naysayers, Wilkins and his committee were recorded as being in favor of the NRA's plan, though they also stressed the benefits of restoration.

"They understood that some buildings simply had to come down," Lawler said. "And they understood if they couldn't find developers who would commit to developing the properties their way, it wouldn't happen."

"Before Newburyport, urban renewal was bulldozers," he said. "When we did this, restoration wasn't the popular thing to do."

The NRA's original bulldozer-esque plan of redeveloping Newburyport was approved by the City Council that May, Lawler said, and was ready to go to HUD. All it needed was Lawler's signature.

"All I had to do was sign the papers and send them off and the downtown would have been gone," Lawler said.

### **Change in plan**

Lawler never signed the documents. Instead, he went to see Dr. Wilkins.

"I drove to his house at 299 High Street. I parked in his drive way, and I waited for him to come home," Lawler said. "When he did, I asked him to accept the seat as the governor's appointee on the NRA. He said 'no' at first, because he thought he'd just be used (to pacify the preservationist community). I promised he wouldn't be used, and he took a seat on the NRA."

"Wilkins was very fair; he was not one-sided," Lawler said. "He understood that not every building in the redevelopment area could be saved. Especially on the waterfront where there were some very dilapidated buildings."

That decision was pivotal. After being appointed to the NRA, his fellow Authority members elected Wilkins' chairman.

"After that, with Dr. Wilkins on the NRA, little by little things changed," said Byron Matthews, who was on the City Council at the time and would take over as mayor in 1968.

Dr. Wilkins' influence stretched well beyond Newburyport. As one of the leading cardiologists in the nation, inventor of the G-suit used by combat fighter pilots, and a pioneer in the field of understanding the dangers of high blood pressure, he enjoyed respect and instant name recognition in government and research circles.

By 1965, the NRA began purchasing or taking the property in the urban renewal district one property at a time, Lawler said, something that continued until 1968. After each purchase, the NRA would requisition money from HUD for reimbursement. The buildings were then boarded up, and to the public, it may have seemed that nothing much was happening.

Lawler remembers the complaints about the perceived lack of action.

"There was a lot of itchiness among the people," Lawler remembers. "They wanted to see something done. They didn't understand things like this took time."

Urban renewal wasn't the only thing on the city's economic agenda, Lawler said. There was also a joint effort working with the Newburyport Area Industrial Development Corporation to create an industrial park off Graf Road going on simultaneously.

Plus, to change the original urban renewal plan to Perry's restoration model, more than language had to be amended, Lawler said. The entire infrastructure for the first plan had to be redesigned to deal with the new restoration-based format. In addition, the NRA had to see if the new plan could work.

"We were traveling in unknown waters," Lawler said. "We had to see if rehab was possible and if people could be found to develop the area by rehab. Remember, before this, urban renewal meant the bulldozers were coming. There was nothing else like this before us."

"Nothing works any slower than government, especially the federal government," Lawler said. "They had to be shown everything beforehand. It was a slow painstaking thing and many didn't understand. I used to walk to the corner of Pleasant and State streets while I was mayor. There always was a group of older men sitting there. They called them the Sunshine Club. They always used to tell me, 'Just tear it all down and start again.'"

Although some buildings did come down, Lawler said, many more were saved. The wait caused frustration initially, but within a few years,

Newburyport's preservation-based urban renewal plan was set to make history.

Beginning in 1968, the plan would go forward under a new mayor — Byron Matthews — with more bold ideas.

## References:

*Port's revival hinged on a few crucial actions*, by Angeljean Chiaramida, Staff writer, *Newburyport Daily News*, April 15, 2007. (These articles eventually were turned into a book, Port in Progress, Newburyport Daily News, January 1, 2008.)

Port in Progress, forwarded by John Macone, Newburyport Daily News, Pediment Publishing, January 1, 2008.

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## The Amazing Career of Dr. Robert W. Wilkins

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Robert Wallace Wilkins (December 4, 1906 – April 9, 2003) was an American medical investigator and educator. He made many contributions in the research of hypertension and cardiovascular disease.

He was the president of the American Heart Association in 1957 and received its Gold Heart Award in 1962.

Wilkins received the Albert Lasker Award in 1958 for his research.

He has been credited with introducing the antipsychotic and antihypertensive drug reserpine to the United States in 1950



In the 1940s, Wilkins aided the U.S. effort in World War II by developing one of the first G-suits, which fighter pilots and paratroopers used in combat. In 1947, the U.S. Navy and War Department honored Wilkins for the project.

Wilkins' most noteworthy accomplishment may be his work to deploy the herbal medicine rauwolfia in Western clinical settings. Rauwolfia, or the dried Indian snakeroot, had been used to treat mental health conditions, fever, and snake bites in India for hundreds of years. In the early 1950s, Wilkins began using the root to treat patients with hypertension. His work suggested the medication was "effective in lowering both pulse and blood pressure." The investigation included clinical trials for the antipsychotic drug reserpine, a purer derivative of rauwolfia, for the treatment of hypertension. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved the use in 1955.

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