

Howard Fairweather – Champion for Historic Preservation



HOWARD FAIRWEATHER, new chairman of the Newburyport Historical Commission.
(Barbara Veneri)

Parcel 8 was created in 1968 when the Newburyport Redevelopment Authority demolished six or seven vacant buildings that had formerly housed George Gagalis' barber shop, Ruthie's Diner and Al's 66 Service Center gas station on Merrimac Street, and Burke's Furniture and the Newburyport Hotel on the corner of what was once Bartlet Street. What was left was a vacant lot, 240 feet long, between Market Square and Unicorn Street, about 17,500

square feet in area.

The first Parcel 8 development proposals were received in September 1971. Eight months later, on April 11, 1972, the NRA selected the Merrimack and Atlantic Co. of Salem to develop the land.

In stark contrast to the historic brick buildings nearby, Merrimack and Atlantic planned to construct a modern concrete and glass structure that occupied all 240 feet of the lot. The ground floor was reserved for retail use — including a bank with a drive-through window — and offices would occupy the third floor, but the developers said they were flexible about the uses on the middle floor.

The presented design plan cantilevered as it rose to its three-story height: the first floor was 56 feet wide, the second 70 feet and the topmost floor 79 feet — faced with concrete.

Publication of a photograph of a design model set off a wave of protest that reached all the way to Washington, D.C.

While petitions objecting to the structure and counter-petitions supporting development circulated through the city, especially from the Historical Commission, the NRA asked the urban renewal project's federal sponsoring agency, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Renewal, for a ruling on the parcel's relationship to the adjacent Market Square Historic District.

The local Historical Commission and recently formed citizens' group Friends of the Newburyport Waterfront also requested that the National Advisory Council on Historic Preservation study the applicability of the National Historic Preservation Act on the proposed development. Fairweather, who was still active, even though he had stepped down from the Chair position (1967-70 as Chair) argued that such a massive project would heavily impact the historic downtown and take away the cohesive design element of the Federalist style HUD area.

On Sept. 21, 1972, then-Mayor Byron Matthews and other city officials traveled to Washington to discuss the situation with Sens. Edward Brooke and Edward Kennedy, and Congressman Michael Harrington.

That same day, HUD sent a telegram to the NRA, instructing the authority not to convey the land to the developer "until further notice."

But the very next day, in apparent defiance of the HUD directive, Matthews ordered a building permit issued to Merrimack and Atlantic Corp. Excavation of the building's foundation began soon afterward. In the film, *A Measure of Change*, the Mayor was heavily pushing for a contemporary structure to fill Lot 8.

A "Preliminary Determination of Adversity" report was issued by the National Advisory Council on Sept. 26 and forwarded to HUD, which asked the council to discuss the matter further. The council scheduled a hearing in Washington in mid-November.

The Friends of the Waterfront attempted without success to obtain a court order halting work on the site.

After two days of hearings, the National Advisory Council issued a final report, finding the Parcel 8 design "incompatible" with the neighboring historic district.

The report put the ball back in HUD's court and, in January 1973, the department advised the NRA to "reduce the incompatibility."

In April, the authority agreed to draw up an environmental impact statement on the project and ordered construction stopped until the report was completed. Officials of Merrimack and Atlantic told the authority they would have to "re-examine" their participation in the project.

The site remained a large hole in the ground for more than a year. In July 1974, it was filled in.

After repeated inquiries to Merrimack and Atlantic, asking for clarification of its status as developer, the NRA finally “de-designated” the company on Jan. 8, 1976.

For several years, the area sat as an auxiliary parking area; and was neglected attention by the redevelopment authority mostly due to lawsuits concerning the waterfront.

It wasn't until March 1981, that the authority once again picked a developer for Parcel 8. Local architect, Jonathan Woodman, proposed a design that had been first proposed back in 1977. Basically, 9-bay retail spaces on the first floor and then on the second and third, a mix of businesses and residential units.

After several financing schemes petered out, and a major tenant vacated that they were counting on; Woodman had to pull out even though he had strong support from then Mayor Sullivan. A couple of developers came forward and eventually Osceola Development Corporation was chosen. They broke ground in April of 1983 on the \$2.1 million project and by February of 1984 had at least completed the first-floor retail spaces. Because the final construction was not completed, the NRA refused to relinquish control of the oversight. This turned out to be a wise position.

By the end of July, the project was completely finished.

Again, protests and complaints were made. The roof construction was causing the building to be out of scale with the historic downtown. With negotiations with the NRA, the roof was modified to be more compatible with the historic downtown.

If it hadn't been the firm hand of the Newburyport Historic Commission under Howard Fairweather, a gleaming incompatible structure would be facing every person who exited the Performance Center at the Firehouse.

Born May 13, 1938 in Brooklyn, NY, Howard graduated from Samuel J. Tilden High School in NY in 1956. He then attended Harvard College where he earned a degree in History. Following his graduation from Harvard in 1960, Howard earned his MBA from the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth. Professionally, Howard enjoyed a long, successful career at State Street Bank and Trust Company in Boston, MA.

Howard fell in love with the historic architecture of Newburyport. He purchased 4 Parsons Street and lovingly restored it to its former grander but without sacrificing its ancient architectural features. He was very serious about being a custodian of Newburyport's wider appeal as a center for historic architecture to the nation. He persuaded some of the neighbors to place historic brick and street trees along the way to enhance the appearance and value to the residential neighborhood.

It was this vision that Newburyport was a showcase for historic preservation that guided his conduct as Chair of the Commission.

He eventually resigned from his activist endeavors and focused more on his family in the later years with travels to Europe. All the while still working diligently at the expanding State Street Bank and Trust Company. By the time he retired in 1996, he had achieved the position of Executive Vice President.

He passed away from heart failure in January 6, 2023 at the age of 84.



References

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