

## TROWBRIDGE SQUARE

In 1985 the Trowbridge Square Historic District of New Haven, CT was added to the National Register of Historic Places. The district is bounded by Columbus Avenue on the north, Rosette Street on the south, Church Street on the east, and Howard Avenue on the west. It includes about 200 buildings and 26 acres of land. Nine square blocks in the northern part of the historic district make up the Trowbridge Square neighborhood.

Why is the neighborhood considered historic?

- 1) Trowbridge Square is New Haven's best preserved example of a planned, working-class neighborhood of the 19th century. Most of the houses are small frame buildings on narrow lots, and most of them retain their original design. The area still has its original character of a working class village. The Trowbridge Square neighborhood was laid out in 1831 as a miniature version of the original nine-square plan of New Haven. In this design the center square of nine square blocks is reserved as a park or green and a village is built around it.
- 2) The original neighborhood was designed by Simeon Jocelyn, a social reformer and abolitionist, who wanted to create a racially integrated community for low-income residents. He built a school for African Americans on Carlisle Street, and he donated a lot on Salem Street for an African American church. In 1833 he helped to organize the American Anti-Slavery Society. Simeon Jocelyn helped to raise money for the defense of the captive Amistad slaves who were put on trial in New Haven and Hartford. In 1839 his brother, Nathaniel, painted the famous portrait of Joseph Cinque, the leader of the Amistad revolt. The Trowbridge Square neighborhood is an historical site on the Connecticut Freedom Trail, because of its role in the 19th century struggle against slavery.
- 3) The Trowbridge Square neighborhood includes the former South Congregational Church, built in 1851 by Sidney Mason Stone and financed by Gerard Hallock, Thomas R. Trowbridge, and others. In 1876 the building was sold to the Catholic Church and it became Sacred Heart Church. The Catholic community enlarged the building and built a school, convent, and rectory to serve the mostly Irish American residents who worked for the railroad. The Sacred Heart property makes up one of the nine squares of the Trowbridge Square neighborhood.

# The Trowbridge Renaissance

## Community

By Steve Ross, Inner-City  
Contributing Writer

This winter, the Trowbridge Square Renaissance Organization was formed. Their mission is simple; to claim back their streets and rebuild the community. Trowbridge Square is located in the hill section of New Haven, which is notorious for drugs and violence. Unfortunately, the area is not known for its rich history and prestige.

Reverend Bob Newman of Sacred Heart church is one of the main leaders in this community's lighting-bolt resurgence. Not only because of the church's role in the Trowbridge community, but for the simple reason that he and about 200 other residents got together with one common interest: The Rebirth of Trowbridge Square.

Since 1985, Trowbridge Square has been on the national register of historic places. The neighborhood was laid out in 1831 by abolitionist Simeon Jocelyn. It was designed as a miniature version of the original squares plan of New Haven. Jocelyn wanted to create a racially integrated community for low income residents; he even opened one of the first Afro-American schools in the city right on Carlisle Street.

He also helped raise money for the defense of the captive Amistad freedom fighters who were on trial in New Haven and Hartford. Jocelyn's brother Nathaniel painted the well known portrait of Amistad revolt leader Cinque. The Connecticut freedom trail also feature's Trowbridge as a historical site because of its epic 19th century struggle to abolish slavery.

"It's like a little jewel here that most people are unaware of," said Rev. Newman. He added, "We the community wanted a change, we wanted improvement. We wanted everyone to know of the small riches that exist in this area." The group actually started by accident. The area had three block watch units and one day they all decided to come together because everyone knows there is strength in numbers.

Jocelyn's vision was simple, he wanted black and white to live together productively in a working class community. The Renaissance's vision is a little more complex. "We want to mold a urban village for hard working people. A livable neighborhood is all we want, no drug houses, no drug dealing, anything of that nature is unacceptable. We even want the corporations who may want to buy this property to know who we are before they come in and even attempt to buy us out," explained Rev. Newman.

Big plans and big talks for an organization that has just been started. How exactly do they plan to do all this, in other words what strategies are they taking. "Organized People and Organized money," said Rev. Newman. "We know this thing is not going to be easy and it's going to take work. WE are willing to work to make our situation better," he added.

The organization only has a few activities planned so far but more are sure to come in the very near future. On March 20th there was a neighborhood clean-up day. A number of corporations were in attendance to lend a helping hand. In addition, in May the group has planned an historic Trowbridge day, which will be held in the park. In the far future, the group even has hopes of making a Trowbridge museum celebrating their rich history.

The community is very exciting about what is taking place. "There's hope again and I think that's very important in this day and age. You have to remain positive in order for positive things to come about," said Rev. Newman.

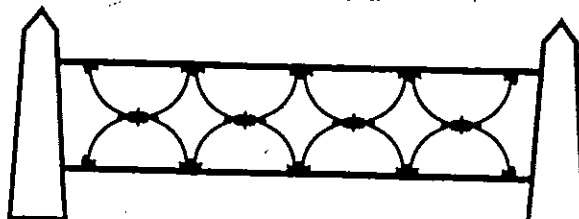
## Trowbridge Renaissance

### Best New Neighborhood Revival

On paper it's beautiful. On a sunny day in real life you can still see why, in the 1800s, Trowbridge Square was such a treasure, and why it still has such potential.

A mini-replica of the downtown Green and nine squares, the neighborhood hidden near the train station and behind Howard Avenue in New Haven was built as a model integrated working-class community, before abolition, by Simeon Jocelyn. It hit hard times in the 1980s

Now a fired-up new neighborhood group, boosted by ECCO (Elm City Congregations Organized), has helped the cops clean out drug dealers. It has led the city's Livable City Initiative to knock down abandoned buildings. It has organized park cleanups and in general brought new energy and hope to a stretch of town that's worth it.





**H 32 Spireworth Square, now Trowbridge Square.** It is hard as you now stand in this disheveled little place to perceive its spatial order, but the map will show you that Spireworth is the central square of a miniature nine squares whose outer dimension is the same as one of the nine squares of New Haven. The first tentative layout goes back to 1800 and to New Haven's great exponent of urban order, James Hillhouse. After the failure of his project, the area fell on hard times—a poor community which by the 1830s was named Mt. Pleasant and described as a “plague spot.” It was then acquired by Nathaniel and Simeon Jocelyn—artists, social reformers, crusaders for black rights, and among the biggest real estate speculators in the city's history (see also N 43). It was the Jocelyns who designed the model layout and its tiny green, reflecting the formal grace of the wealthier center of the city (the name Spireworth alluded to “a slender spindling sort of grass” that grows only in poor soil). But like Hillhouse, the Jocelyns were too hopeful, and by 1850 only three houses had been built (169 Cedar Street survives). Gerard Hallock next entered the scene, along with the Trowbridge family, a merchant dynasty who had owned land in this part of town since the first Colonial grants. It was they who built the church (the tower can be seen just beyond the rooftops—H 33) and probably the cast iron fence, imitating the one on the Green; and in the end the Trowbridges did much developing around the area. The south side of the square was built in the '50s (the southeast corner house remains); the north side in the '60s (all houses remain except the west corner); the west side in the '70s (all remain except the north corner); and the east side was finished off in the '80s with four houses on the upper end (all remain). Modernizations have since disrupted this small well-knit place, principally the school (1925, Brown and VonBeren, now the Trowbridge Recreation Center), whose gaping corner demolished the enclosure of the square. The damage was completed by the removal of part of the fence and some of the shapely border of trees outlining the green. Spireworth Square nevertheless remains a place of unusual interest. An unverified tradition persists that one range of houses was built by the Jocelyns for fugitive blacks from the South. In any case the square is a rare example of working-class housing over a sequence of four decades. It is also a contribution to American 19th-century urbanism of a rare sort.



**H 33 South Congregational Church, now Sacred Heart Church, 1851. Sidney Mason Stone.** Donated by Gerard Hallock and Thomas Trowbridge, the church was designed, in Hallock's words, to “please the eye with beautiful proportions and a simplicity that never tires, rather than tickle it with ornament for a time, to be disgusted in the end.” Hallock's pro-slavery sympathies in the Civil War caused many of the congregation to leave (see H 19), and in 1875 the church was bought by the Catholics. This is one of Stone's few surviving works. The present entablature covers original Romanesque arcading under the cornice, and the cupola and belfry replace a Gothic tower.



**H 34 Katherine Harvey Terrace, 81–95 Liberty Street, 1961. Office of Carleton Granbery.** With private gardens behind walls and an inviting little central court, this unpretentious elderly housing looks snug and cosy. The grass is green, shrubs in the court are flourishing and cared for, and vines grow over the garden walls. Down the street: Liberty Square Homes, 1962, Carl Koch, Cambridge, Mass.

# Residents forge blight-fight brigade

By Randall Beach  
Register Staff

**NEW HAVEN** — Several hundred church members, neighborhood activists and preservationists held a community pep rally Thursday night at Sacred Heart Church on Columbus Avenue, culminating in the creation of a blight-fighting brigade called Trowbridge Renaissance.

The gathering, held by Elm City Congregations Organized, celebrated recent gains that drove

drug dealers from some neighborhood spots. But those in the historic old church vowed not to rest until the entire area is rid of drugs.

"I want our neighborhood to be like it used to be when I grew up here, so our kids can be safe," said Judith Oliveras, a Carlisle Street leader.

The meeting was led by the Rev. Robert Newman, pastor of Sacred Heart Church and an ECCO leader. Newman noted that Trowbridge Square, now listed on the National Register of Historic

Places, was founded in the mid-19th century by Simeon Jocelyn, an abolitionist who wanted an integrated community.

"Our aim, as it was in the past, is to make this an urban village where people live in harmony," Newman said.

Newman welcomed the multi-racial audience and encouraged a "roll call of power" in which representatives from churches in New Haven, Hamden and Bethany stood up and pledged they were "ready for action."

*N.H. Register, p. A3*

*2/19/99*

## Trowbridge Square ECCOs

**A**s usual, New Haven's most fired-up activist group put public officials on the spot at a mass meeting Feb. 18.

But this ECCO (Elm City Congregations Organized) encounter had a different twist. Organizers this time weren't making politicians squirm by demanding a difficult new commitment to ECCO's goals.

Instead, organizers applauded the officials even before questioning them. They asked the officials if they would *continue* to support the goals of a new ECCO-spawned activist group in the tiny Trowbridge Square area of the Hill neighborhood.

At the meeting, inside cavernous Sacred Heart Church, the group also christened itself Trowbridge Renaissance.

Neighbors began organizing last year in Trowbridge Square, an almost-secret nine-square-block area tucked inside Howard and Columbus avenues near the train station, which was founded by an abolitionist in the 1830s as an integrated working-class model.

New Haven's Livable City Initiative, or LCI, has razed blighted buildings identified by neighbors. Cops have helped drive drug dealing from the Liberty Street co-ops.

The new goals: preserve two historic Salem Street homes; wipe out drug-dealing remnants; perform a neighborhood cleanup (March 20); plan a May 15 community festival.

The night's toughest challenge was posed by one of the officials, rather than to him.

LCI Director Henry Fernandez warned the neighbors to stay vigilant against gentrification once high-speed trains come to the New Haven line. He also urged them to bug him about what should replace the demolished buildings.

"An organized community," Fernandez said, "can say, 'This is what we want, this is what we don't want.'"

—Paul Bass

*N.H. Advocate*

*2/25/99*