

**EXAMPLES OF PAST YORK VILLAGE IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS  
UNDERTAKEN BY THE OLD YORK HISTORICAL & IMPROVEMENT SOCIETY, ET AL.**

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*Background*

*These notes on past York Village improvement efforts are a byproduct of research conducted in the Library & Archives of the Museums of Old York. In the course of reading the records of the Old York Historical & Improvement Society (1900-1983), I was so struck by the Society's attention to York Village throughout the 20th century that I began to take occasional notes on village projects. What follows is by no means definitive in terms of what all was going on to improve the village by the Society or by other organizations, including most importantly the Town. That said, the OYH&IS meeting minutes document three long-term village improvement projects and three targeted design initiatives that prefigure, to a degree, the work of the 21st-century Village Study Committee.*

*[1] Historic Properties: 1900-on*

Everyone is familiar with the importance of the village's historic sites to its character, to the town's sense of place, and to the tourism-based sector of the local economy. Perhaps not everyone is aware of how long "ancient monuments" have been defining elements of York Village. The Old York Historical & Improvement Society's first project—opened on the 4th of July, 1900—was the Old Gaol Museum. An enduring success, it remains the heart of a cluster of six historic village properties now presented by the Museums of Old York, successor to the OYH&IS and two other organizations. The jail established York Village as a tourist destination, and with the other museum properties it continues to do so, and to provide educational perspectives and opportunities to the citizens of York, as well as visitors from away.

*[2] Landscaping: 1902-1974*

Prior to 1902, York Street was without shade trees, the old cemetery was overgrown and the "village green"—the area surrounding Town Hall and the First Parish Church—was a sometimes muddy, always unkempt knoll. In 1902 the Improvement Society took all in hand. A landscape plan for the village green was created, so too for the Civil War monument in the square, trees and flowering shrubs were planted around Town Hall and the church, as well as along York Street and in the cemetery. In that first year the Society spent some \$900 on landscaping in the village. It continued to plant and to maintain village landscape through 1974, work underwritten in part by the Town, the church, York County Bank and several civic groups.

In her 1920 president's report to the members of the Old York Historical & Improvement Society, Helen Aldis Lathrop reviewed the work of the organization since its early days: "The pretty Park

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around the church and Town Hall did not exist. It was a bare neglected field....The Improvement Society has transformed it into the charming spot you see now, and we maintain and keep in perfect order....Perhaps the most important work we have done has been the planting of over three miles of elm trees—a double row on the main street wherever it was possible to plant...” President Lathrop noted that the Improvement Society was so known for its work that some referred to the Society as the “Village Imps.” In 1971, when the Improvement Society was still maintaining village landscaping, the group decided that the monument triangle should no longer remain lawn—it was becoming a hangout—so the triangle was densely planted with shrubs and flowers, akin to the treatment remaining today.

### *[3] The Window Box Project: ca.1972-97*

As part of the effort to beautify the village, window boxes were placed on most commercial and institutional buildings and planted each spring. Initially this work was conducted jointly by the Village Improvement Committee of the OYH&IS, Piscataqua Garden Club and the Old York Garden Club. During the holiday season, the group created and placed dozens of wreaths on village buildings.

### *[4] Development Plan for York Village: 1946*

In August 1946 Arthur C. Comey—a nationally prominent city and town planner—created a plan for improvements to the village sponsored by the Old York Garden Club. His report begins: “York Village center was once convenient, charming if not beautiful, and safe. Today it is inconvenient, ugly and to a degree dangerous.” Comey went on: “And yet, even today the solution is quite simple, it need not be achieved at once by a single burst of activity, but may be brought about over a series of years, accomplishing those improvements most easily brought about and those remedying the most glaring defects first.” The Comey plan involved traffic and parking improvements and what was thought to be the harmonious redesign of existing buildings to give them a “colonial” appearance. A copy of Arthur Comey’s report is attached, followed by a photograph of a portion of his “ultimate plan” for parking in the village [originals: Museums of Old York Archives; Comey’s sketch for proposed building renovations is yet to be located.]

### *[4] Village Square Project: 1964-67*

Late in 1964 the directors of the Improvement Society began to discuss a variety of possible improvements that could be promoted in the village. Their first step was to review the Comey report. Their new thrust concentrated on “colonial” signage and façade renovations and burying utility lines throughout the village. The Society engaged James Garvin, architect and architectural historian then working at Strawberry Banke, to sketch plans for harmonious signs and buildings, and entered into discussion with the New England Telephone Company and Central Maine Power. Garvin submitted his first drawings late in 1965 for redesign of the exterior of the Williams store, giving it “a colonial look.” The directors were pleased and requested drawings for other commercial properties, as well as for improved signage; these drawings Garvin

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submitted in 1966. In June of 1966 estimates came in for Garvin's proposed Federal-style alterations to the York Realty Building: \$2250. The directors tabled the Realty Building proposal, but continued discussions with CMP and the phone company. They provided an estimate for putting cables underground of \$165,000. This cost, it was stated, could be partially underwritten through a federal grant. [To date, outcomes of this project have not been identified. James Garvin has in his files his fall 1965 York Village photographs and a letter concerning signage and sketches for signs.]

### *[6] York Village Townscape Project: 1974-77*

On September 3, 1974 Improvement Society directors discussed a Chamber of Commerce letter seeking participation of the Society in a village townscape project: "Although originally sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce, [the project] is envisioned as a broad-based community Bicentennial effort." The project was to cost \$7000, of which \$5500 had already been raised. The Improvement Society directors voted to allocate \$250 to the Chamber's townscape project. (At about the same time, the Society was in discussion with the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Main Street Program office concerning a possible storefronts improvement initiative in York Village.) By February 1975, the planning firm Vision, Inc. had 100 York participants working on the townscape project. [Beyond these specifics, the records of the Old York Historical & Improvement Society are silent. I am told, however, that the exterior of the Bragdon Real Estate Building, 292 York Street, may be a product of this project.]

### *Attachments*