

CONGRESS STREET HISTORIC DISTRICT

Historic and Architectural Significance

Congress Street is Portland's "Main Street", the peninsula's primary east-west commercial and transportation axis. The richness and diversity of its architecture and public spaces, particularly along the section extending from Franklin Arterial to Bramhall Square, constitutes a unique record of Portland's residential and commercial development history.

Over the years Congress Street has been the location of choice for many of the city's most important business, religious, residential, civic and cultural buildings. For most of the past two centuries it has been seen as Maine's most sophisticated urban area, where one could witness what was new and most exciting. Although Congress Street has always welcomed change, it has also retained key reminders of earlier chapters in its history. For example, the Wadsworth-Longfellow House, one of the nation's oldest historic house museums, continues to stand alongside the newer department stores and office towers of subsequent eras. This eclecticism and layering of historical periods is the essence of the district's character and what makes it unique among Portland's historic districts, which generally have a more limited "period of significance." In the Congress Street district it is possible to read the long history of the Portland's development in the buildings that line the street.

Boundaries

The Congress Street Historic District is focused on Congress Street itself, between Bramhall Square and Franklin Street, but also includes abutting streets that collectively make up Portland's traditional "downtown." At its western end, beyond High Street, the district is bordered on the north and south by the Deering Street Historic District and the West Ed Historic District. East of High Street the northerly boundary of the district is the south side of Cumberland Avenue. The southern boundary runs from High Street along Spring Street to Temple Street. It turns northerly along Temple, and then easterly along Federal Street to Franklin.

History

If there is one word that characterizes the history and development of Congress Street, it is change. From the street's beginnings as an access road for farmers bringing their goods to market, to its development first into a prestigious residential neighborhood and then into Portland's commercial and cultural center, the character and role of Congress Street have changed repeatedly.

Colonial Falmouth Neck ("Portland" after 1786) began as a series of wharves connected by muddy lanes. Most travel and transport to and from the town was by sea and the principal street, India Street (originally called Broad Street, then King Street), stretching back from the

waterfront, was lined with clusters of homes and businesses. Eventually an access road intersecting the top of India Street was extended to reach the mainland at the west end of the peninsula, and the agricultural towns developing inland. Originally called Back Street or Queen Street, it was known as Congress Street by 1823. Most people probably knew it simply as “the road that leads out of town.” Its most prominent early structures were the First Parish Meeting House (1740, replaced by the current structure in 1825-26) and the hay scales at Market Square (renamed Monument Square in 1892). Up through the Revolutionary War period, Back Street was considered the edge of town.

In the reconstruction of the town following Independence (it had been burned by British naval forces in 1775), Congress Street began to be more actively developed. Market Square was a commercial hub where farm products destined for residents of the booming port were bought and sold. Residential fashion, however, triggered Congress Street’s development to the west, a movement that continued until the 20th century. One of the first private homes to rise after the Revolution was the elegant Wadsworth-Longfellow House (1785-85), now the only remaining example of a single-family residence on this downtown section of Congress Street. By 1800, leading merchants, ship’s captains and other business leaders had begun to commission Federal style homes in the area of Congress Square, High and State Streets. This area continued as the city’s fashionable residential neighborhood up to the time of statehood (1820) and beyond.

After the War of 1812, as Portland began to recover commercial vitality, it sought political power as well. From 1820 to 1832 Portland served as the capital of the new State of Maine. The State House and County Court House were located on the site of the current City Hall, lending new importance to Congress Street. In 1825 a Town Hall with Market House on the lower level was built in Market Square. It was renovated in the Greek Revival style, with columned portico, in 1833, after Portland was incorporated as a city. It served as City Hall until 1858 and continued as a public market until being removed for the Civil War memorial statue in the late 19th century. Its neighbors included a museum of curiosities, a tavern, a hotel and numerous stores.

Stores moved westward more slowly than did fashionable homes. The Charles Q. Clapp Block (H.H. Hay Building) appeared on Congress Square in 1826, but stores and shops were still outnumbered by churches in the vicinity of the Square. Historian Edward H. Elwell, in the 19th century, called the Square a “sort of Zion’s Hill,” being surrounded by nearly a half-dozen churches built between 1831 and the Civil War.

Up through the 1860s “mixed-use” characterized most of the area, except around Monument Square with its large commercial properties. The Great Fire of 1866 did not touch Congress Street west of Temple Street, although City Hall and the eastern reaches of the street to the base of Munjoy Hill were destroyed. In 1866 a hotel was built near the head of Forest Avenue, the first of many built in the area over the following century, moving away from the location of earlier hotels near Market Square. During the next three decades, the area between Market (Monument) Square and Congress Square began to fill in with notable buildings, such as the lavish Queen Anne style J.B. Brown Memorial Block, the Baxter Building, and the Congress Square Hotel. After the Great Fire the lower blocks of Free Street were rebuilt in Victorian styles

consistent with the new buildings in the adjoining Exchange Street area. At the intersection of Free and Middle Streets the Lower H.H. Hay Building was built as a “flatiron” building like the Upper H.H. Hay Building at Congress Square, creating unique “bookends” for the blocks between.

Street cars ran throughout the city, extending the size and capabilities of the downtown (which still very much included the Exchange Street and waterfront areas.) The intersection of Middle, Federal, and Congress Streets at Market Square made the square a pivotal location where traffic flowed to and from the Exchange Street area and the waterfront (this dynamic connection was lost when the 1970’s Maine Way project redesigned Monument Square as a pedestrian only space and eliminated the upper section of Middle Street). East of Market Square, the Victorian style City hall occupied a block of Congress Street and was rebuilt on the same site after the 1866 fire. At the same time, the burned-over block bounded by Congress, Franklin, Pearl and Federal Streets became Portland’s first downtown public green space, Lincoln Park. Over time, it came to be faced with imposing public buildings and churches.

From the 1880s, the section west of Congress Square began to change with the construction of ambitious new civic and commercial structures, often replacing earlier residences. A number of residences which had been built back from the street had new commercial storefronts added up to the sidewalk, the upper floors typically converted to apartments. The elegant Romanesque Revival Portland Public Library was built in 1888, followed by the 1895 Columbia Hotel and the Lafayette Hotel of 1903. Continuing the trend begun in the early 19th century, residential development continued west as it was replaced with commercial development in the expanding downtown. West of Longfellow Square, blocks of substantial single-family residences were constructed along Congress Street, many designed by the city’s leading architects.

At the turn of the century, Portland was a prosperous commercial city with a growing tourist trade. Congress Street reflected what was new in the world and, after yet another fire, in 1909, the City hired one of the nation’s leading architectural firms to design a new City Hall in the fashionable Beaux Arts style. The stretch of Congress Street between Monument and Congress Squares became noted for its fashionable shops and large department stores. In 1910, a new era arrived when the Fidelity Trust Company erected the city’s first skyscraper at Monument Square. The 1920s roared up Congress Street as electric trolleys and increasing number of automobiles brought visitors to the compact downtown that included restaurants, theaters, department stores, movie houses, an historical society and an art museum. Art Deco style arrived in downtown with the construction of the second AT & T Building on Forest Avenue and several smaller structures in the style. Large multi-story apartment buildings were constructed on many of the side streets off Congress Street, reflecting a new style of urban living. By then the Exchange Street area was eclipsed by Congress Street as the business center of the city and what is now known as the Old Port began to decline. By 1930, new downtown structures like the Schwartz, Congress (State Theater) and Chapman (Time and Temperature) Buildings – as well as the new Eastland Hotel – had established the shape of the street for the next forty years.

The Great Depression largely halted new construction and the following economic boom of World War II concentrated resources on the construction of ships and war materials rather than

buildings. After the war, two new five-and-dime stores appeared, one in Colonial Revival style and the other Art Deco, but, in the face of developing suburban shopping centers, the downtown began to languish. When attempts were made to retain or attract business, money was spent on renovating and revamping storefronts to appear “modern” with new materials, many of which did not match the quality of the original construction and have not aged well. Most businesses renovated only the first floor, the area most readily seen by the passing pedestrian or motorist. Reflecting the post-war embrace of “the latest thing” a delayed reaction to the economic constraints of the Depression, and clearly feeling the competition from the new suburban shopping centers, businesses attempted to replace the “dowdy” image of the traditional “Main Street” with the image of the suburban shopping center itself. It was during this period that the upper story space along much of Congress Street became vacant or underutilized. A number of the large homes between Longfellow Square and Bramhall Square were raised and replaced with gas stations, others were converted to commercial uses or divided into apartments.

It was not until the 1970’s that Portland’s economic stagnation began a long slow path to recovery. With the availability of Federal “Urban Renewal” money, the ambitious Maine Way public infrastructure program signaled a new interest in and concern about downtown by city leaders. In 1969, Casco Bank constructed a new skyscraper for its headquarters at Monument Square, soon to be a newly redesigned public space. This ushered in a phase of dramatic large scale new construction, not seen since the 1920s. It came to include such structures as Maine Savings Plaza (1974), the Cumberland County Civic Center (1977), the international style Portland Public Library (1979), and the new Post Modern style wing of the Portland Museum of Art (1982-83). At the same time historic commercial buildings such as the Congress Square Hotel and the Upper H.H. Hay Building were rehabilitated for new uses. A “notorious” donut shop at Congress Square was cleared to make way for a new public plaza.

A primary focus of “Urban Renewal” projects nationwide was to increase the accessibility of older city centers to automobiles. Unfortunately, this often involved the wholesale clearance of built up historic areas for new arterials and surface parking areas. Portland did not escape these negative effects of this infusion of federal money. While Congress Street itself was largely spared, many of the surrounding blocks were cleared. Oak Street, Shepley Street, Preble Street, Cumberland Avenue, Brown Street and Free Street all saw large blocks of buildings cleared for parking, often leaving large paved open spaces surrounded by significant Landmark structures.

Through the 1980s the growth of the Maine Mall area in South Portland and the revival of the Old Port district contributed to the continued decline of Congress Street as a shopping destination. By the early 1990s the last downtown department store, Porteous, Mitchell & Braun, closed and much of the storefront space along Congress Street was vacant. The development of suburban office space had also had a negative effect on downtown by this point, with increasing vacancy rates in office buildings on Congress Street. This was probably the lowest point for downtown Congress Street in terms of economic viability.

As the national economy improved in the 1990s, downtown Portland turned a corner and began to recover. Previous economic recovery of the Old Port district, based largely on its historic character, and the “rediscovery” of Portland’s wealth of wonderful historic homes had stabilized

the population and created an atmosphere encouraging investment in Portland. As property prices reached record level in the Old Port investors began to look toward downtown. The J.B. Brown Memorial Block and the Lafayette Hotel, two large and highly visible historic structures, were rehabilitated under the federal historic tax credit program. The State Theater, the last of what was once a long list of downtown “Movie palaces,” was reclaimed from its use as a pornographic theater and restored. The Maine College of Art purchased the Porteous department store building and began rehabilitation of it as a new main building for the school, continuing a move to Congress Street they had begun with the purchase of the former Portland Public Library in 1979. The Children’s Museum of Maine moved next to the new wing of the Portland Museum of Art at Congress Square, into a building that had once been one of Elwell’s “Zion’s Hill” churches.

A significant contributor to the recovery was philanthropist Elizabeth Noyce, who purchased and renovated a number of large downtown properties. Her investments lead to increased office building occupancy, the opening of a new L.L. Bean store as a retail anchor on Congress Street, and the creation of the Portland Public Market. The City of Portland addressed issues of damaged and dated street lighting and street furniture with the phased installation of attractive new fixtures and worked proactively to attract businesses to Congress Street.

In the early years of the 21st century, Congress Street and downtown Portland entered into a new period of prosperity, with the first significant new development pressures since the 1970s. For the first time since World War II, the upper floors of Congress Street buildings began to be renovated, particularly for residential use. West of Longfellow Square, a large new multi-story residential building, Walker Terrace, replaced one of the gas stations, restoring the street wall and residential usage to that block. The “Bernie’s Fashion” building at the heart of downtown with an undistinguished and deteriorated post-war façade was replaced with a striking contemporary structure. Using the federal tax credit program for rehabilitation of historic structures, the Maine College of Art converted the former Everett Hotel on Oak Street into student housing.

Today the Congress Street area is still evolving, with many underutilized sites available for it to continue its historic role as a showplace for new and exciting architecture. The lessons of the past 40 years – the negative consequences of “Urban Renewal” as well as the positive consequences of historic preservation efforts in other sections of the city – strongly suggest that the district’s important historic resources, something the competing suburban shopping and office developments can never offer, be protected with review of exterior alterations to historic buildings and review of new construction for compatibility with its surrounding context. This is the only way to ensure that future generations will experience the many layers and periods of development in Maine’s most urban area.

Visual Character

The visual character of the district is rich and varied. Unlike several other historic districts in Portland, which were largely constructed within a limited “period of significance,” the character of the Congress Street District is one of layered historical development over time. This results in an area with a delightful mix of historical architectural styles from 18th century Colonial and 19th century Federal to 20th century international and 21st century Post Modern styles, with examples of nearly every significant style of residential, commercial and civic architecture in between. This diversity of styles has been part of the area’s visual character since early in its history and (with a number of large underutilized lots within its boundaries) its continuation into the future is likely.

Represented in the district are the works of many prominent architects from the early 19th through the 20th centuries. Maine architects and architectural firms that have contributed to the street include Charles Quincy Clapp, Francis H. Fassett, Frederick A. Thompson, John Calvin Stevens, George Burnham, John P. Thomas, Miller & Mayo and Orcutt Associates. Noteworthy regional and national firms whose work is represented on the street include Densmore, LeClear & Robbins and Shepley, Bulfinch, Richardson & Abbott of Boston and Richard Morris Hunt, Carrere & Hastings and I.M. Pei & Partners of New York.

In addition to the wide variety of styles found within the district, the scale of development varies significantly as well, from the three-story Wadsworth Longfellow House to the ten story Fidelity Building only a few yards away. Generally, however, the Congress Street Historic District exhibits a greater concentration of tall buildings than the Portland Waterfront Historic District, creating an urban environment reminiscent of much larger cities and almost unique in the State of Maine.

Within the variety of styles and periods of architecture represented within the district, there are several common urban design characteristics that serve to unify the area. First, with few exceptions, the structures that line Congress are built up to the street, creating a strong street wall and sense of enclosure. Second, the best buildings on the street – those identified as landmarks and contributing structures – all exhibit high quality materials and a high level of craftsmanship. Third, the majority of the commercial structures, particularly those built during the 19th and early 20th century, share a basic visual organization with an identifiable base (storefront level), middle (upper façade) and top (terminating cornice.) Within the storefront zone itself, there is also a typical design formula with low bulkheads, large display windows, transom windows, and recessed entries. The beauty of this design formula is that it is flexible enough to accommodate a wide variety of architectural styles, materials and details while at the same time providing a level of consistency that unifies the streetscape.

Today, a number of the commercial structures within the district exhibit a rather schizophrenic appearance. Although the upper facades on these buildings remain in remarkably original condition, the storefronts are the produce of numerous layers of “modernization.” All too often the storefront remodeling did not take into account the materials, architectural proportions or

basic organization of the upper floors and, as a result, any architectural relationship that once existed between the two zones has become severed. Because the ground floor is what attracts most attention from the casual observer, it is often difficult to see beyond the unfortunate remuddling and appreciate the beauty or value of the building. Through the historic preservation review process, there is an opportunity to restore lost stylistic relationships and character by returning to the original design formula and vocabulary of these compromised structure.

While most of the commercial buildings within the district boundaries are architecturally notable, and therefore worthy of preservation, a few structures could be candidates for future remodeling or replacement. These are ranked as “Non-Contributing” buildings in the Historic Resources Inventory. “Non-Contributing” buildings generally fall into three categories: a) structures that clearly have no architectural merit; or b) once-notable historic structures that have been so fundamentally altered to make restoration infeasible (The Baxter Memorial Building at 562 Congress is one example), or buildings less than fifty years old (with a few notable exceptions whose architectural and cultural importance is widely recognized.)

Civic and institutional buildings also contribute to the character of the district. Although only one of the nearly dozen church buildings which have existed in the districts is still in use as a church, two others remain in altered form and one is intact, awaiting a new use. Numerous nearby church steeples are visible from within the district, as reminders of a time when steeples were the highest structures in the city. Municipal buildings include the Beaux Arts style City Hall and Merrill Auditorium, Portland High School, Portland Public Library and fire stations from several periods. Across Lincoln Park from Congress Street, the Cumberland County and Federal Courthouses contribute to the character of the Congress Street Historic District although they are just outside it, in the Portland Waterfront Historic District. Institutional structures include the several buildings at the Portland Museum of Art, the Wadsworth-Longfellow House and Maine Historical Society, the Neal Dow House Museum, the Masonic Temple, Hold Hall/Maine Eye and Ear Infirmary, and the original Mercy Hospital at Longfellow Square (the last two converted to residential use).

Also contributing greatly to the visual character of the district are the public squares and parks that are spaced along the length of Congress Street. These include Lincoln Park, Monument Square, Congress Square and Bramhall Square. These parks and plazas are intentional breaks in the prevailing streetwall and provide welcome breathing room within the otherwise densely developed downtown area. Important pieces of public art within the district include the Firemen Statue (Central Fire Station). The Soldier and Sailors Monument/Or Lady of Victories statue (Monument Square), The Little Water Girl statue (Portland Public Library), Henry Wadsworth Longfellow statue (Longfellow Square), “Michael” sculpture (City Center), the Stanley Pullen Memorial Fountain (Federal Street) and the Lincoln Park fountain.

Less apparent to the casual viewer, but crucial to understanding the development of the downtown district, is the residential character along sections of Congress Street within the district. A wide range of residential properties are located within the district. The single-family Wadsworth-Longfellow House, just west of Monument Square, represents a once common form

of residential development now otherwise completely replaced with later development in the heart of downtown. In several locations, on Free Street and Congress Street, early 19th century Federal and Greek Revival row houses are still visible, with later commercial storefront additions or alterations at the street level. Between Congress Square and Longfellow Square the same pattern is seen with Italianate houses from the middle of the 19th century. Closer to, and beyond, Longfellow Square residences in Second Empire, Queen Anne, Romanesque Revival and other styles of the late 19th' century are apparent with later alterations to convert them to commercial or institutional use. Another development in the evolution of the district and urban residential living is represented by the large early 20th century apartment buildings on Congress Street and on side streets between Congress and Cumberland Avenue. Several large late-Victorian era hotels have also been converted to residential apartments.

The Congress Street Historic District was locally designated in 2009 and received National Park Service certification of 2010.¹

¹ The date of certification was erroneously listed as 2019 in earlier versions of this document. Corrected on 1/9/2024