

“FIVE STORIES” LIKE “NATICK CENTER?” MORE MISINFORMATION RE: WASHINGTON PLACE

At the last Land Use Committee meeting, Councilors Albright and Crossley said that we should accept as normal the construction of the massive, five-story building proposed at Washington Place, and the use of MU4 zoning, which would facilitate such building throughout Newton. A handful of other Boston area suburbs were leading the way, they argued, and we should get with the program. While such growth was still in the future for some communities they named, Councilor Crossley asserted that Natick Center already had such large, “five-story” buildings in surroundings similar to Newtonville’s, ostensibly in its Historic District, whose architecture and scale are not unlike our own.ⁱ

Having worked in the area, I doubted these assertions, so I decided to investigate. Driving west on 135, as I approached Natick Center, however, I thought “I may have to eat some humble pie.”

For there was St. Patrick’s church (below), perhaps towering five stories at its roofline, and much more atop its spire. Entering the church, however, it became apparent that its massive worship hall with its



broad, vaulted ceiling was simply that. Whatever offices and residences might be there were in other parts of the building (in back) that rose no higher than three stories.

Heading further toward Main Street, another beautiful, giant cathedral, this one Congregational, sprung up, as if challenging St. Patrick’s to see which one could be closer to God (next page.)

Scanning the area, it was clear that no other building reached five stories. So, I wondered, *were the councilwomen advocating MU4s to make Newtonville a spiritual center?* Certainly, with its large proportion of people working in the helping professions and civil service, it seems Newton provides a natural base

for such a center. *Imagine Washington Place being redesigned to reflect Newton’s spiritual diversity, perhaps featuring Protestant and Catholic churches, a synagogue, and a secular/Other Religion/ New Age temple for the spiritual but non-religious.*

Since it was difficult to see how Mr. Korff could make enough money from such ventures, however, I decided this was not what the councilors or Mark Investments had in mind.

Congregational Church

In Natick Center, only a few buildings have more than three stories. Most obviously, there is the old Odd Fellows Hall, a four-story building shaped like a wedge of pie, and home (top floor) to one of the finest fencing schools in America, as well as the *Common Bakery*. But it is small, and nothing like Washington Place (below left). Another building that appears to be four stories is actually three, just north of the Clark Building, at the corner of Summer and Main streets. And like other area buildings, its top floor, which juts up above two other floors, is for recreation – i.e., a ballroom/ dance studio. Its second floor is also a multi-purpose room (below right).



Odd Fellows Building



Corner of Summer and Main streets Building

Proprietors, passersby, and government officials told me that aside from the churches, with the few exceptions noted above, all buildings in the Center are three stories or less. That is certainly true for the government buildings – fire, police, library, and town hall (below).

Fire, Police, and Library



Town Hall



That commercial and residential buildings in Natick Center are almost all three stories or less does not mean that there are no tall buildings, however. Though dwarfed by the Congregational Church (below right), the *Clark Building* appears to approximate the same height as *Washington Place* (below left). Yet, with the exception of some utility rooms in an “attic” in the northern section of the building, it is a three-story building, whose elevators only serve three floors. Rebuilt after the “Great Fire” in 1874 by Nathaniel Clark, the new Clark Building kept its original “Victorian Italianate” structure and added two 80-foot wings. A plaque on the building further notes that it “housed all of Natick’s town government offices, and town meetings were held in Concert Hall located on the third floor” long ago. President

Grant's Vice-President, Henry Wilson, a Natick resident, abolitionist, and "friend of the working-man," reportedly often dined there, despite its rich trappings.

The multi-purpose hall, extending more than 100 feet in length, could host between 1200-1400 guests in its heyday.ⁱⁱ In fact, even today, remainders of its awesome, ornate beauty can still be seen, despite the disrepair in this part of the building (below, bottom). Through the years, the hall has also been used as a theatre, ballroom, and multi-purpose room with tennis courts. The vaulted ceiling in the hall only partly explains the seemingly large height of this building with "only" three floors, however. So, too, do palatial dimensions on the second floor, where the ceiling rises about 15 feet.

Clark Building



Clark Building Viewed from Common



Clark Building Concert Hall



In style, the place is a bit reminiscent of Norumbega Park, where Newton's Marriott now resides, in place of *that* community center. Public spaces appear to have been much more abundant in the past.

To return to the main point, we were misinformed that five-story commercial or residential buildings can be found in this part of Natick, or that buildings there are in any way similar in their density to what is proposed at Washington Place. (Natick's building inspector told me the Clark Building is underutilized. On the other hand Natick, around Route 9 is a different story, with much bigger residential and commercial buildings than can be found in Natick Center. But that area is not analogous to Newtonville.)

In Natick, as in other Boston suburbs in their formative years, building heights, aside from churches (which were ostensibly protected from "acts of God"), were confined to what a 100-foot fire ladder could reach, according to a manager in the Clark Building. This old rule of thumb still holds today in Natick Center. As noted, it's still zoned for three stories, as I was informed by Natick's Community Development Department and many townspeople, and nowhere does it have any five-story buildings other than churches.

ⁱ Councilor Crossley said "Look at Natick Center, which has old 4- and 5-story buildings renovated and in some cases repurposed but all perfectly fitting the context." Deb Crossley quoted from notes taken at the 2/6/17 Land Use Committee hearing.

ⁱⁱ <http://mass.historicbuildingsct.com/?p=1761>