

The John Worthington House

by Doris Sherrow

The large, white colonial-shaped house at 533 Main Street was built between 1842 and 1845 by a Haddam man, **John Isham Worthington**. Worthington had married **Jane Sage**, who grew up in the four-bay colonial at 41 Bartlett Street. The Worthingtons had a son, **Joseph**, born in 1835; they seem to have had no other children.

In 1839, John bought a parcel of land that included the then-century-old **Ebenezer Gibbs** house at 523 Main. The three of them could have lived comfortably in the Cape Cod style Gibbs house, small though it is. However, in 1842, Worthington mortgaged the property with the one house on it. When the bank quitclaimed the property back to him in January of 1845, the deed mentioned "buildings." In all likelihood, he had built his new house by then, because the following year, he sold the little Ebenezer Gibbs house to **Robert A. Mitchell**.

The Worthingtons' new house was built in the classic Greek Revival style, two stately stories tall and gable-to-street. At the time it was built, there would have been far fewer houses than you see today in that area. The nearest neighbors would have been 523 and 513 Main, to the south, and 497 Main to the north, all early-to-middle 1700s colonials. Another colonial-shaped house stood across the street at 532 Main; it was built around 1804 by **Joseph Sage**, John Worthington's wife's grandfather. Nearby were 492, 496, and a now-gone colonial at 506 Main to the south, and 572, 582 and 584 Main to the north. Thus, Worthington's elegant Greek Revival house would have been an impressive innovation amidst a colonial neighborhood.

Worthington was a sailing captain. He piloted, among other vessels, the **Joel Hall** in 1836, and a schooner named **Joseph Rodgers** and owned by the Middlesex Quarry Company in 1851. In 1864 (this information coming from the records of the Gildersleeve Shipyard as published in Beers' History of Middlesex County), he was part-owner of a schooner bearing his name - his son **Joseph** was captain!

He also held civic power: he was tax assessor in 1846, on the first board of directors of the First National Bank (which stood at 269 Main, where Fleet now stands), and one of the directors of the Middlesex Quarry Company in 1884.

When Worthington died in 1889, his son, Joseph, was living across the street in 532 Main, the house that had been his mother's father Joseph Sage's. Consequently, 533 Main Street passed to the grandson, also named John Isham Worthington. But the grandson lived only another seven years. He died at the young age of 38, and Joseph Worthington sold the house to the Freestone Savings Bank. It passed into the hands of Oliver Gildersleeve, and in 1905, to William and Atlida Andrews.

William Andrews was a former New York City attorney, retiring to the country at age of 54. He brought with him his wife **Atlida**, and her widowed sister, **Nicolena Neilson**, a nurse. (It's interesting to note that this area of Portland seems to have had a beckoning charm for the New York City crowd in the early 20th century - the parents of **Ruth Callander**, who donated 492 Main to house the Portland Historical Society, bought that house in 1918, also to escape the city!)

On September 6th, 1910, Andrews and his sister-in-law Nicolena took a ride down through Middletown, in a small electric automobile which he was borrowing from the Electric Auto Company in Hartford. He had a larger one on order; Electric Auto had

loaned him this one while he waited for his "dream car" to arrive. He had even modified John Worthington's barn into what the Penny Press called "an automobile house" - apparently the word "garage" had not yet been invented!

Unfortunately, Andrews' driving experience consisted solely of the two weeks he had been borrowing this small electric car. He was heading back north up Route 17, three miles from Middletown center, when another car, driving south, approached him. He steered to the right, then veered off the side of the road. The car spun 180 degrees then overturned. Both he and his sister-in-law were killed. Not long after, the widow Atlida Andrews, whose health had been failing even before this dreadful tragedy, sold the house to **Oscar** and **Julia Hedstrom**.

If you were surprised by William Andrews' early 20th century vehicular fascination, let me tell you about **Oscar Hedstrom's!** Carl Oscar Hedstrom had come with his family from Sweden when he was nine years old. Early on, his dad gave him a bike, which he treasured. At sixteen, he took a job at a watch factory, and soon rose to the status of toolmaker.

This mechanical talent also expressed itself in his hobby, building racing bicycles. His 1960 obituary stated, "Hedstrom... was regarded as one of the best riders of the day, appearing in the old Madison Square Garden and other arenas." In 1901, he joined Hende Manufacturing Company, the Springfield, Massachusetts manufacturer that produced the **Indian Motorcycle**, once the fierce competitor of **Harley Davidson**. His inventions pushed the Indian from a bicycle with a motor on it, to a smooth-moving, efficient device for traveling - fast! By 1913, **Hende Manufacturing** was the world's top producer of motorcycles.

But Hedstrom left Hende in 1913. One of his race driver friends had been killed, plus there was friction in the company over whether to strive for progress or profit. Hedstrom favored progress; the investors wanted only profit.

In 1911, the Hedstroms had purchased the beautiful Worthington house in Portland. With the Indian motorcycle no longer his main concern, Oscar went to work on the house. The 1927 tax assessor's card for the house at 533 Main Street says, "remodeled 1913."

When **Gail Porteus** and I were researching the Portland History and Architecture book for the Greater Middletown Preservation Trust in 1979, we had a wonderful conversation with **Helen Carlson**, Oscar and Julia Hedstrom's daughter. Mrs. Carlson showed us old pictures and told us great stories about her childhood in the beautiful house.

She remembered vividly how her father had remodeled the house when she was a young girl. A pre-1913 photograph showed the three-bay, gable-to-street Greek Revival part on the right side, with a two-story rear ell protruding, ridge-to-street, from the back of the left side.

Hedstrom, never one to fear an engineering challenge, had had the original gable-to-street roof lifted off the Greek Revival style main block, rotated 90 degrees, and extended further to the north to cover a front room on the north side of the house! The result was a handsome imitation of the two-story, five-bay colonial house.

During the remodeling, the Hedstrom family--little Helen and her parents--camped in three rooms, while carpenters swarmed about them, Helen told us with a laugh!

Unlike his hard-driving predecessor William Andrews, Oscar Hedstrom survived to

the age of 89. Even after his resignation, he was still called on to solve mechanical problems with various Indian motorcycles. Helen, the Hedstroms' only surviving child, married Town Clerk David Carlson in 1930, a year after he had built the house at 535 Main, on the northwest corner of her parents' large lot.

So that's why John Worthington's stylish 1840s Greek Revival house looks so much like a mid-1700s colonial. Every house holds many stories, depending on how many people have lived there. The Worthington house holds the stories of three families with a tremendous amount of zip, people who have dreamed and accomplished many things. Or maybe most houses do, but they simply don't speak very loudly...!