

Stiles Curtis House Proposal Review

3 Park Street
(c.1838, c.1853 or 1870)



Submitted by
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I have reviewed the proposed plan by Norwalk Green Living to construct a 9-unit residential addition behind and adjacent to the historic home at 3 Park Street, The Stiles Curtis House. The plan is well-conceived and will be architecturally sympathetic with the surrounding buildings in the Norwalk Green Historic District. The height and massing of the new construction will be complementary to the existing building and will not overwhelm it. This wood-framed Italianate house is listed in the National Register of Historic Places as a contributing asset to the Norwalk Green Historic District. The nomination states, “The Norwalk Green Historic District, a significant collection of well-preserved nineteenth and early-twentieth-century residential and institutional architecture which reflects the development of the city between 1760 and 1930. The predominant nineteenth-century character of the district is conveyed by fine examples of the Greek Revival, Gothic Revival, Italianate, Second Empire, Queen Anne, Stick, and early Colonial Revival styles.” It includes sixty-seven buildings, of which fifty-eight are contributing. The period of significance of the District is from 1760 to 1930. The nomination, written in 1987, specifically mentions the Stiles Curtis House as the “...most detailed example...” of the Italianate style on The Green and praises it by saying, “Without question the Stiles Curtis House is one of the best preserved” of notable houses in the District. It retains this distinction in 2022, despite being covered with aluminum siding.

The Stiles Curtis House is a wonderful example of the Italianate style. It has the characteristic flat roof with a central cupola. The cupola also has a flat roof that is supported by elaborate brackets. All four sides of the cupola have a row of round arched windows that are a hallmark of the style. Other characteristic features are: second story windows with triangular pediments, and an arch-topped main entry door with arch-topped sidelights. Porch spandrels echo the arched doorway and the flared railing flanking the porch entry stairs is a particularly elegant touch.



Stiles Curtis born in Stratford on February 25, 1805. He came to Norwalk about 1832 with his first wife, Hannah (Whiting). They purchased the lot on which the house now sits from Levi Clark in February of that year and likely soon built a home on it in the Greek Revival style, which was popular at that time. There is a Greek Revival mantelpiece in the center room of the house which supports this theory.

Stiles Curtis was a wealthy merchant and banker who was involved in some of Norwalk's most important early civic activities and businesses. His first appearance in politics was in 1836 when he was elected as one of the first Burgesses (commissioners) of the Borough of Norwalk, Which is now known as the First Taxing District. He served as Warden (chairman) from 1845 through 1851. The Borough became Norwalk's first public water supplier in 1870 and continues in that role as The First Taxing District Water Department in 2022. In 1849, he was one of the founders of the town's first bank, The Norwalk Savings Society. In 1857, he was one of the founders of The Bank of Norwalk, only the second commercial bank established here. He served as its second president from 1875 until his death in 1882. He was also involved in the packet boat business in 1852 when he, along with Stephen Olmstead and Edward C. Bissell began operating the vessel *Pacific*.

Along with these local endeavors, Stiles Curtis had wider business interests. The 1850 census lists him as a "Tinman" in the fabricated steel industry with a "Value of real estate owned" of \$10,000 (about \$370,650.00 in 2022). He was living at 3 Park Street with his second wife, Jane, two daughters, three sons, an unnamed Irish manservant and Eliza Hanford. By 1850, he was listed as a "Merchant" with real estate valued at \$25,000 (about \$870,800 in 2022) and a \$10,000 (about \$348,300 in 2022) personal estate. He was still living on The Green with Jane, three children, two other adults and an Irish maid. The ten years from 1860 to 1870



were exceptionally good for Stiles Curtis. In the 1870 census He was listed as a “Manufacturer” with real estate worth \$28,500 (about \$629,000 in 2022) and a personal estate of \$240,500 (about \$5,308,000 in 2022). He was still at 3 Park Street with five relatives, Sarah Hull and two Irish maids. The source of this wealth can be found in the 1871 Norwalk City Directory, which lists him as the President of the Union Manufacturing Company. This business was located in New Britain, Connecticut and it made many metal products, from everyday use tools to much more complex and higher tolerance requirement tools like lathe chucks and planes. They were known for the quality of their castings and machine work. He appears in a census for the last time in 1880 when he is living at 3 Park Street with his third wife, Martha (Hull), two daughters, a son and three Irish maids. He died in 1882, leaving the house to Martha.

While it is possible that Curtis built the Italianate addition to the front of his Greek Revival house as late as 1870 (the date used for the Norwalk Historical Society plaque) when he became an exceptionally wealthy man, it would have looked old fashioned by that time. The Italianate style was most popular from the 1850s until shortly after the civil war, which makes the date of 1853, used in the National Register of Historic Places nomination, more likely.

This is not the only building in the Norwalk Green Historic District that has been either sympathetically altered or built new in a way that preserves the historic integrity of The Green. For example, The Samuel Weed House next door at 2 Park Street, was built in 1917 to harmonize with the Belden-Bissell House, which itself evolved through changes and additions from 1780 to 1860. The 1850 Congregational Church on the north side of 3 Park Street burned in 1924 and it was replaced by a Colonial Revival building in the Georgian form that was popular in the 18th century. Even St. Paul’s on The Green was built in 1930 as a replacement for the wooden church built to replace one that was burned in Tryon’s raid of 1779.



The plan proposed for the Stiles Curtis House would repair and preserve this important part of Norwalk's architectural and historical heritage. The house will continue to stand as it is to remind us of our past. The new construction that is proposed for the property behind the house would follow the established precedent of new construction that harmonizes with existing buildings. The new units will have low-pitched roofs and cupolas. They will not dominate the existing building in either size or massing and they will fit into the existing streetscape. This project would also provide the economic base that will ensure the preservation of this house for many years to come.