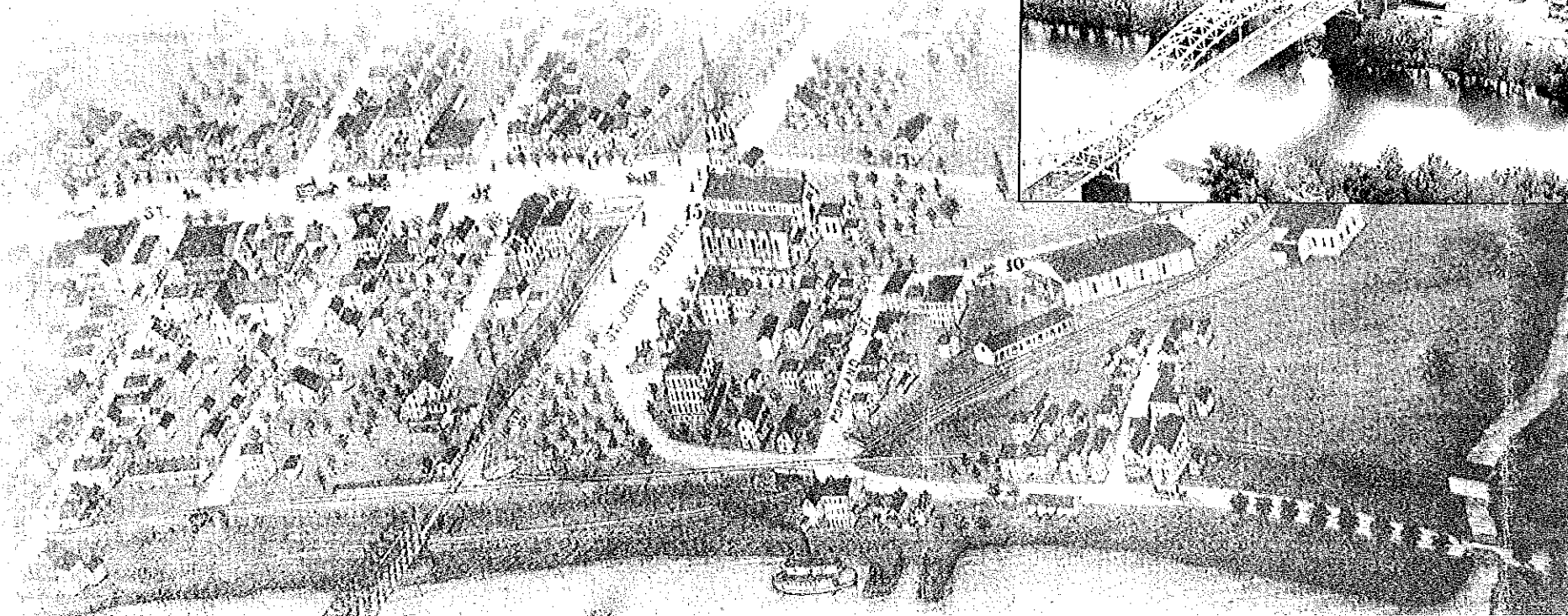
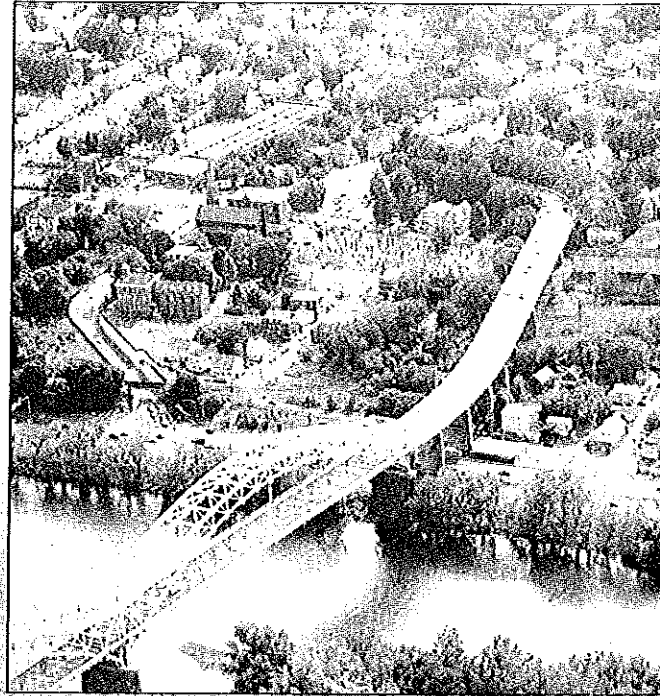


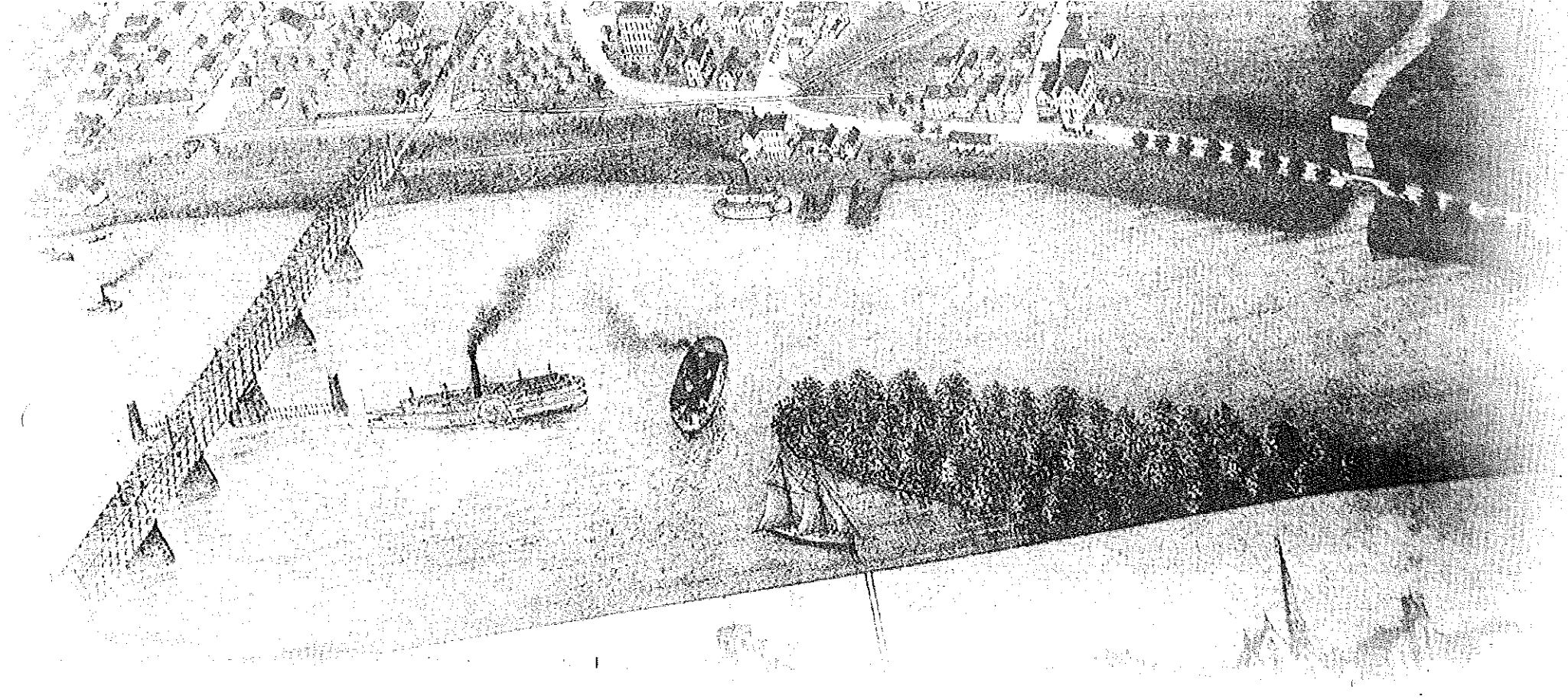
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Connecticut

There Goes The Neighborhood

Cut Up by Tracks and a Highway, Old Part of Middletown Fades Away





Greater Middletown Preservation Trust

By JEFFREY B. COHEN

ALVATORE D'ALESSANDRO once found an arrowhead in his Bridge Street backyard, perhaps evidence of the first people to live here along the Connecticut River. According to Alfredo Jr., there is a right-of-way on his lot that grants passage for a Mrs. [redacted] to let her cows walk to the river and then there is the faded lettering on the facade of the Mount Hope Church on the corner of Miller and Bridge Streets that reads "John Swanson's," a 19th century [redacted] [redacted].

It's a neighborhood with a long history, as reminders of the English, Irish, Italian, African-American and Hispanic newcomers who worked the mills, fished the river, worked in Portland at the

quarries, each filling the vacancies left when their predecessors moved up and on.

As they did, they left behind a home fated for isolation. There is only one way into this intersection of a neighborhood by car. Sliced by one railroad track and bounded by another in the 1870's, left in the shadow of the Arrigoni Bridge to Portland in the 1930's, and cut off from the river by Route 9 in the 1950's, this corner of Middletown's North End grew up out of the way.

If the city gets its way, this historic neighborhood will soon be just that — history. City officials are working hard to find money to knock the neighborhood down; years of drugs, blight, pollution, traffic and train accidents make it cheaper to demolish the neighborhood than service it. Tenants and owners don't want to save the neighborhood, either. They just want what they say is fair — reasonable buyout offers and a time line

An area that is cheaper to raze than to fix.

for the move with teeth.

As it is, the only reason to come to the neighborhood at Miller and Bridge Streets is if you are going home, going to eat at the one restaurant, going to pray at the one church, or going to buy drugs.

The city declared this neighborhood "no longer viable or suitable for residential purposes" in 1999, and if its redevelopment plan gets the \$1.7 million it needs to buy the 17 remaining properties, relocate the approximately 85 people who live there and raze the remaining structures, no one will have rea-

son to come here at all. The city doesn't even have a plan of what to do with the property when it is vacant.

"We basically concluded that this is not a neighborhood we want Middletown residents living in," said William Warner, the city's director of planning. "It's our responsibility as a city to protect our residents."

Or as Mr. Maturo put it: "It was a good neighborhood in its time. But it's probably outlived its time, and it's time to do something else with it."

Meanwhile, as residents and owners wait for the wrecking balls they said can't come fast enough and the buyout offers they said won't come in high enough, life is in limbo.

"They told us it would all be over in four years," said Bruce Kilgore, a homeowner and Miller Street resident. "They said, 'You've got three years to get ready,' and a lot of us have."

The problem is not enough money to carry out its 1999 plan to buy the property in four years isn't that residents can do anything because who would soon-to-be extinct can't move until the property and relocate.

Joyce and Peter [redacted] announced its plan to live in the home for more than 20 years and retire there.

"I'm 54, he's 57, mortgage now?" [redacted] had chances to buy but we're all tied up. If [redacted] until they make up

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Photographs by Thomas McDonald for The New York Times

The neighborhood around Miller and Bridge Streets, with train tracks running through it and Route 9 in front

There Goes the Neighborhood

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\$20,000 in relocation expenses." So there is nothing to do but stay, said Olasee Turner, a 62-year-old resident. "You can't move, and you can't sell, all you can do is wait."

The city said it realizes what residents are going through and they are working as fast as they can.

"It's a long process," Mr. Warner said. "There's all kinds of excuses we could make, but we had funding for Phase 1, and until we finish Phase 2, we don't need to go to Phase 2."

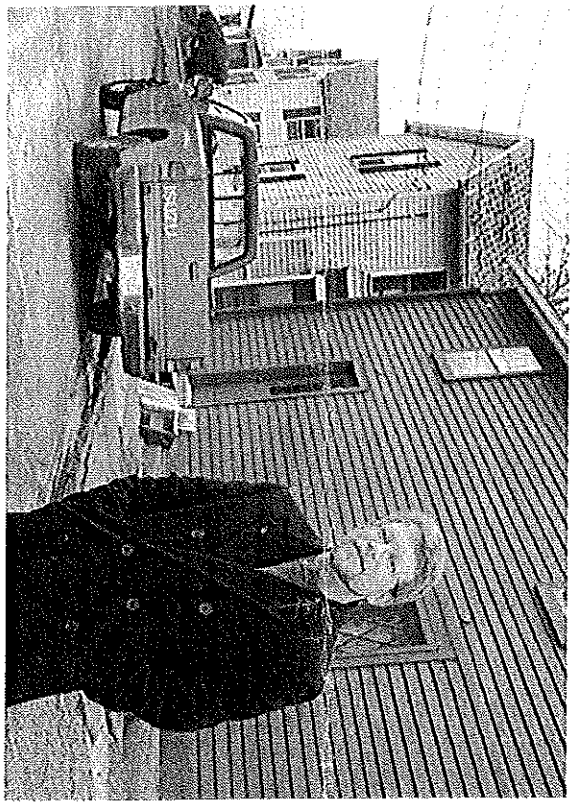
The first part of the project was buying and razing a house on the north side of Miller Street, the last home remaining in that area. Many other homes have already been razed after they were obtained by the city through foreclosure. Phase 2 will move the project into another area of the neighborhood.

Joanne Liljedahl, 74, said she is tired of waiting. Like her mother, she was born in the three-family house on Bridge Street that she now owns and rents. She remembers the Pasamanos who lived in the building for more than 40 years and who sent five sons to World War II. She remembers how her neighborhood was uprooted to make Route 9.

Ernie Butts is known as the mayor of Middletown's North End and he remembers the trains that passed behind his and every other Bridge Street home. "Living just at the railroad tracks, it seemed like the train was going to come in the house while you were trying to sleep," he said. Still, he lived here in the 1960's and liked it, he said.

"Me and my children, we'd walk across the bridge every evening just to be doing something," he said.

When Mr. Maturro bought his Bridge Street restaurant in 1966, it was just the Riverside Restaurant. He added "Alfredo's" to make it his



Bruce Kilgore, who owns a house on Miller Street, would receive about \$60,000 from the city, but he said that would not be enough.

own. The building was originally Gilletti's grocery store and tavern, Mr. Maturro said, and it was moved twice by the state to make room for the Arrigoni Bridge and Route 9.

But by the time Mr. Maturro moved into the neighborhood, many of the Italian families had moved away or just grown old. By the early 1980's, they were even older.

"There were a lot of older landlords going into convalescent homes, saddled with properties they didn't want to maintain," said Mr. D'Alessandro, who bought Bridge Street properties in 1983. He later moved out and rented, often to students at nearby Wesleyan University, he said.

The late 1980's were when the drug business made its move into the area, and it has yet to completely leave. Still, for people like Royal Hartigan who moved here from Wesleyan housing, the neighborhood maintained its appeal.

"Even though coming to this place was kind of a sad step down, there was something about it that was good in the sense that it was real," Mr. Hartigan said. "Even if it was a bad place, it's where you were. It's where you had your dreams, your thoughts, your emotions."

Sadie Jones gave birth to triplets while living on Miller Street. She and her family moved out years ago, and she later tried renting the property out. But thanks to too many bad tenant experiences, Ms. Jones just lets the property sit, clean but vacant.

"The house doesn't mean anything to you," she recalled a city official saying. "And I turned around and I said, 'No, it never really meant anything to you because you never lived there.'"

"I don't disagree that they should get rid of the area, that's O.K.," Ms. Liljedahl said. Nevertheless, "I'll die

when my house gets demolished. I will die."

In 1998, organizers from the North End Action Team, a community group, got involved. They saw health and public safety problems, the danger of the railroad and highway crossings, and the potential for lead contamination from the bridge above, said Lydia Brewster, the director of the group. Then there was the isolation.

"For the neighborhood to continue to exist, it had to be reconnected to the city," Ms. Brewster said. But she found that between the railroads, the restaurant, the residents and the state and city governments, there were too many interests to agree on how to do that.

Another thing Ms. Brewster found was that perhaps her group wanted to save the neighborhood more than the neighborhood wanted to be saved, and that made organizing difficult. In the end, the group may have drawn just enough attention to the neighborhood to force the city to act — not to save the neighborhood, but to raze it.

"It was one of those, 'D.O.T.-will-eventually-take-care-of-this-neighborhood,' things," said Mr. Warner. He said the State Department of Transportation had long hoped to use that area to connect Route 9 to the bridge or to widen the highway. So when the matter came to the city's Redevelopment Agency in 1999, there wasn't much to discuss.

"I don't want to say their minds were made up," Mr. Warner said. "But everybody knew the fate of Miller and Bridge Streets because a solution would probably cost more than buying up all the houses and relocating the people."

Nevertheless, more than three years into the project, there is not enough money to complete even the first phase, and it only includes dealing with one of the project's 19 lots. Money for future phases has yet to be secured, Mr. Warner said.

The city is applying for funding under Section 108 of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974, which allows municipalities to borrow against future Community Development Block Grants, he said.

The money is virtually guaranteed and that guarantee could bring loans as high as \$1.425 billion. With that money, the city will make its offers.

"Residents can accept or reject it, and we can go ahead with eminent domain if we have to," Mr. Warner said, adding that there is room for negotiation. "That's the power of the redevelopment plan. It will be done in 10 years."

But 10 years is a lot longer than the four years owners were originally promised, said Mr. Maturo, whose restaurant building is valued at \$152,460. "To make you sit and wait until they're ready to make a move, I don't think that's fair," he said.

Unlike Mr. Maturo, the Mount Hope Church at 115 Bridge Street

can't afford the wait, said Dave Smith, one of the members of the church. Founded in 1959 and home to 15 members, who all own the building, the congregation is stuck.

No one would buy property in a condemned neighborhood, so the church can't sell. The congregation can't afford to take out a mortgage somewhere else and it can't forgo the \$31,000 relocation allowance the redevelopment plan calls for, so the church can't move. The town values the church at \$45,214. Meanwhile, the congregation is shrinking.

"It's a lot cheaper for the city if the neighborhood just disintegrates, but we can't replace what we've got with the money they want to give us," Mr. Kilgore said, adding that