

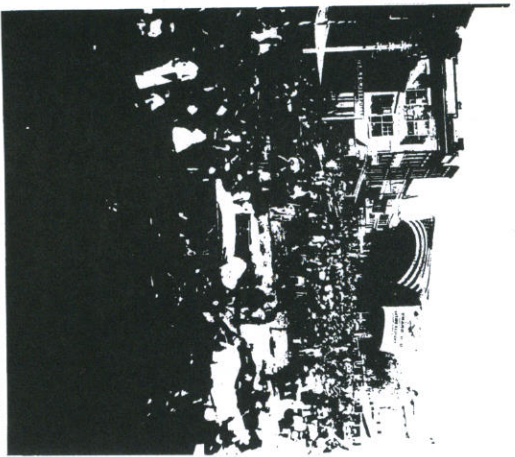
THE PARADIE

Gateway to New London

By John Ruddy

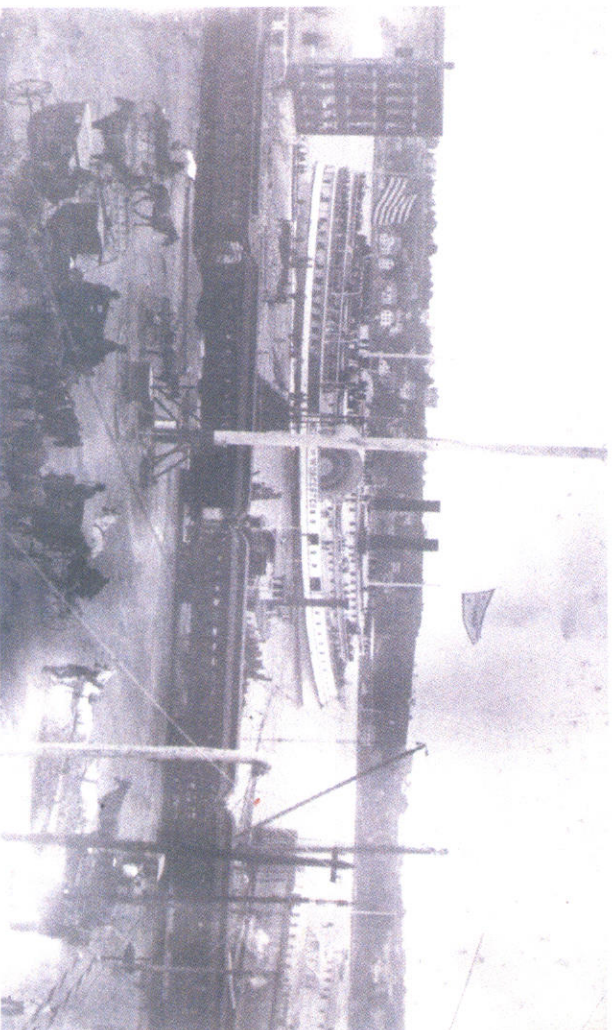
For three and a half centuries of life in New London, the area at the foot of State Street known as the Parade has been the city's front door. From the fort that once fended off enemies to the train station that now welcomes travelers, the Parade has been the face New London shows to the world.

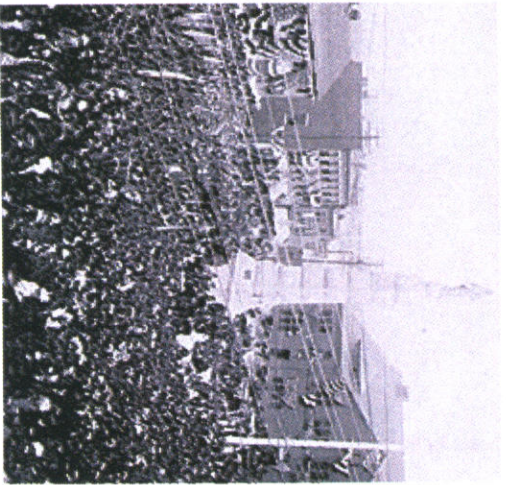
Taking its name from the military drilling ground it once was, it has grown and changed along with New London. In 1691, spurred by a threat from French privateers, the town erected a battery on the spot, its only defense until Forts Griswold and Trumbull were built during the Revolution. By then the Parade had become home to an Episcopal church, a firehouse and a courthouse. When the town went up in flames at the hands of Benedict Arnold, these were lost, but new institutions rose from the ashes to replace them, including a newspaper, a jail, and Union Bank, which in time would become Connecticut's oldest.



Above top: The Parade, hand-colored engraving, ca. 1855, courtesy New London Landmarks. Above bottom: Oct. 1868 General Grant presidential rally at the Parade, photograph, courtesy Richard F. Gipstein. Right: Foot of State Street ca. 1886, photograph. Courtesy Public Library of New London.

During the 19th century the Parade evolved into a transportation hub, the place where journeys began, whether to Ocean Beach by trolley, to Groton by ferry or to New York by train. And as commerce increased, New London's merchants grew rich from stores on the city's most visible piece of real estate. The Parade was a place of saloons, expressmen and fish wholesalers, but also of communal activities. These included weighing produce at the public scale, watering horses at the public trough, and campaigning at political rallies. All of this took place beneath the Liberty Pole, a tall flagstaff that was the Parade's most prominent feature for many years.

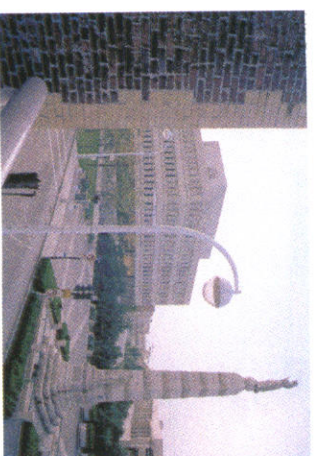




Above top: Dedication of the Soldiers and Sailors Monument, photograph, May 6, 1896, courtesy Clark van der Lyke. Above bottom: The Parade, with the Neptune Building at right, ca. 1960, photograph, courtesy New London Landmarks.

On the verge of the 20th century, New London underwent an urban renaissance, and the look and character of the Parade changed fundamentally. Until then it was little more than a dirt-strewn space with an open view of the river. But in the span of a decade, it gained three signature structures that would form its lasting identity. First, in 1887, came Union Railroad Station, whose sober heft shut out the view but lent grandeur to the waterfront; then, in 1896, a granite monument to the city's soldiers and sailors, courtesy of whaling scion Sebastian Lawrence, who would later give the city its hospital; and finally, in 1898, the magnificent Neptune Building, which replaced an earlier landmark, the Old Yellow Building. The Parade now formed a perfect postcard image of a growing city with aspirations for the new century.

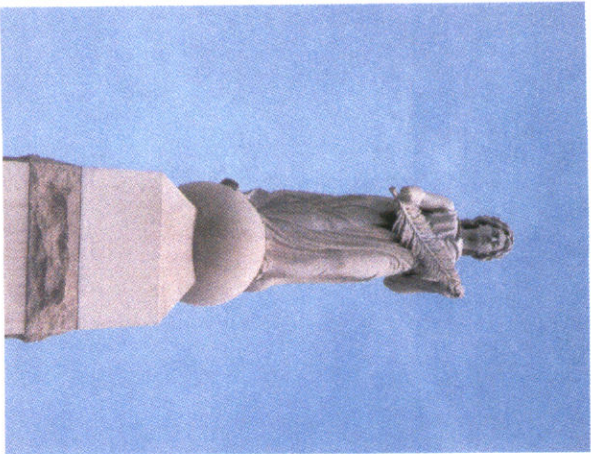
With the unveiling of the Soldiers and Sailors Monument, which took place amid great fanfare on the city's 250th birthday, the Parade took on a ceremonial aspect. A parklet displayed cannons and an anchor to celebrate the city's military and whaling past. But with the coming of the automobile, this disappeared, replaced by parking spaces. A new generation of stores lined lower State Street, places like Whelan's Drug Store, Fern's Restaurant and Mallove's Jewelers. Moviegoers lined up for the latest releases, first at the Crown, then at the Victory. And buses replaced the trolleys at a depot next to the Neptune Building, while cabs lined up for fares in front of the train station.



Above top: The Parade, postcard, ca. 1916. courtesy New London Landmarks. Above middle: The Parade, postcard, ca. 1930, courtesy New London Landmarks. Above bottom: The Parade, photograph, 1983. courtesy Ted Hendrickson.

New London thrived for the first half of the 20th century, then times changed again. Highways and suburbia sapped the strength of downtowns nationwide after World War II, and soon the Whaling City was in trouble. With businesses closing, the city launched a plan of urban renewal that involved wholesale demolition with little thought to what would follow. Again the Parade reflected the larger picture. In 1967 the Neptune was razed, leaving the area with a sense of incompleteness mirrored elsewhere by countless empty lots. Everything on the north side of lower State Street soon followed. Union Station, one of the last creations of famed architect Henry Hobson Richardson, narrowly avoided the wrecking ball, thanks to a public outcry from preservationists.

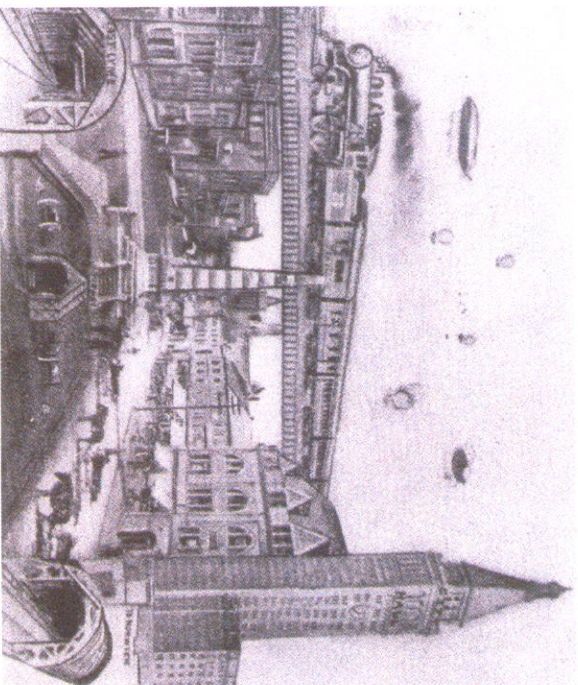
The Parade was raised and graded, blocking the view up State Street, and became a lifeless plaza. Where traffic had once swung around the monument to head up the street past the G.M. Williams Co., now there were trees and benches but little activity, although the Soldiers and Sailors Monument became an occasional rallying place for anti-war protests. The Nathan Hale Schoolhouse, which had been everywhere else in town, was parked there to help fill the void.



Above top: The figure atop the Soilders and Sailors Monument, photograph 2009, courtesy Ted Hendrickson. Above bottom: A panel from the Soilders & Sailors Monument: Don't Give Up The Ship, photograph 2009, courtesy Ted Hendrickson. Right: An artist's conception of New London of the Future, ca. 1909, courtesy Richard Gipstein.

With downtown again showing signs of life, it's fitting that the Parade is now shedding its '70s-vintage torpor and being re-imagined as a modern public space. The berm built during the redevelopment era is gone, restoring much of the traditional view from Union Station to the top of the street. Trees have been removed, along with the concrete pedestrian bridge to the Water Street parking garage, opening a wider area for public events.

If New London is to bloom again, it will have a fresh new face to show the world.



Special thanks to our contributors: Martin Berliner & the City of New London, John Desjardins, Richard Gipstein, Gregg Wies & Gardner Architects, Ted Hendrickson, Robert Hauschild, Lyman Allyn Museum of Art, New London County Historical Society, New London Landmarks, Public Library of New London, John Ruddy, Clark van der Lyke.