

Statement of Significance Summary:

The Barre Downtown Historic District (the “District”) represents the dramatic and rapid transformation of a small, agriculturally-based community to an urban, industrialized environment beginning in the 1880s. The District’s rapid growth was triggered with the advent of rail service in 1875 and the resulting full-fledged development of the local granite industry. It is of statewide significance under Criterion A for its rapid urban growth in the late 19th century and Criterion C for its architecture. The period of significance begins in 1860, with the construction of the oldest extant building in the District, and ends in 1967, when the most recent contributing resource was completed.

Narrative Statement of Significance:

The Barre Downtown Historic District (the “District”) represents the dramatic and rapid transformation of a small, agriculturally-based community to an urban, industrialized environment beginning in the 1880s. Its rapid growth was triggered with the advent of rail service in 1875 and the resulting full-fledged development of the local granite industry. Barre, which was not incorporated as a village until 1886 and as a city until 1895, was a community poised for the right moment in time when the availability of an efficient and economical means of access to potential outlying markets would permit the exploitation of a long-recognized local resource: granite. While the export market for Barre’s granite was enormous, the lack of a railroad to transport the material kept this major inland stone industry in check until 1875, when the Montpelier and White River branch of the Central Vermont Railroad opened a line to Barre Center. Barre’s true potential was not realized until 1888, when a quarry railroad was opened by a rival line. Together, these two railroads made the transportation of granite from the quarries safe and economical, and Barre quickly became a center of the granite industry. Barre’s growth began in the early 1880s, but the major building boom took place in the 1890s, after the opening of the quarry railroad. The District thus reflects in both an architectural and historical sense the surging growth and urbanization of a small Vermont community directly resulting from a burgeoning industry that came to dominate every aspect of local life and the environment. Further, the district reflects pride in granite as an important local resource in the varied ways it was applied to buildings during the boom years, even when other materials, such as terra cotta and cast iron, were more commonly used on a national basis. Barre, in north central Vermont, soon attracted with its promising granite industry a major influx of skilled stone workers primarily from Scotland and Italy, but also from Sweden, Finland, Spain, Greece and Lebanon; the craftsmanship and virtuosity with which both immigrant and local artisans handled granite are indicative of long traditions of stone working and are directly reflected in the architectural quality and character of the District.

Granite became a feasible material for building and commemorative purposes in the United States in the early 19th century through the pioneering work of Solomon Willard in his capacity as architect and superintendent of the Bunker Hill Monument in Boston. Willard, who supervised the project from 1825-1842, developed basic mechanical devices for quarrying, working, and laying blocks of granite. At Willard’s suggestion, the Bunker Hill Monument Association purchased a quarry in Quincy, MA, to furnish the material for the obelisk. Construction engineer Gridley Bryant designed a horse-drawn railway to transport the stone over three miles from quarry to tidewater. As was his intention, Willard succeeded through this project in stimulating the

development of the granite industry. The Quincy quarries, with their advantageous seaboard location, were subsequently opened and supplied granite for use all over the eastern coast. Barre would have to wait through the next half of the nineteenth century before full-scale quarrying and manufacturing of its abundant stone resources could occur.

Settlers first came to what became the town of Barre in 1788, and by the early nineteenth century the area's granite resources were gaining renown, as described by naturalist Zadock Thompson:

Cobble and Millstone Hills, in the southeast part, which afford inexhaustible quarries of excellent granite, which is used as building stone, and wrought into millstones, which are transported to different parts of this state, and to New-York and Canada. By means of drills the granite is split into any shape required.¹

In Thompson's 1842 *History of Vermont*, the light-colored granite of Cobble Hill is described as follows:

This granite is a source of profit to the individuals who own it, and as the country around advances in improvement and wealth, it is eagerly sought by those who can afford the expense, as a most durable and ornamental article in building...Large quantities of it are transported to Montpelier, Burlington and other parts of the country.²

Early quarrymen in the Barre area were reportedly Robert Parker, Thomas Courser, and Abijah Abbott. Parker and Courser are believed to have opened the first quarry in the area and to have been the first manufacturers of Barre granite. Parker's son, John, and John's son-in-law, Elipahlet Hewett, succeeded in the business and, in an 1834 newspaper advertisement, announced that they can quickly furnish hewn or rough stone of all descriptions, namely "underpinning(s); door steps; sills; caps; pillars and circles; window caps and sills; hearth and stone steps; mantel pieces and tomb stones; posts, caps and balls; jet stone, grist and oil mill stones."

A notable event in Barre's early granite history was the construction of the Vermont State House building in Montpelier from 1832 to 1837. The foundation, underpinning, window caps, sills, cornice, and pillars were taken from a quarry on Cobble Hill owned and worked by Oren Wheaton and his father Pliny; labor was furnished by the state. Ashlar for the walls came from Millstone Hill, and Hewett supplied granite stone for the lower floor.³ In this pre-railroad era, transportation was slow and difficult: teams of horses and oxen made the laborious and frequent 10-mile trip from the quarries to Montpelier.

An important family which was early involved in the Barre granite industry was the Wheatons. Oren Wheaton learned granite cutting from John Parker, and with his father, Pliny, owned and operated a quarry on Cobble Hill for many years. In 1840, Pliny completed for his family's use a house constructed entirely of granite. The cut granite for the c. 1840 Barre Congregational Church (HD #12) and that for the courthouse in Montpelier was furnished by Pliny Wheaton in 1840 and

¹ Thompson, Zadock, *A Gazetteer of the State of Vermont* (Montpelier, VT: E.P. Walton, 1824), 57

² Thompson, Zadock. *Vermont, Natural Civil and Statistical*. (Burlington, VT: Chauncey Goodrich, 1842), Part III, 11.

³ State of Vermont, *Laws of Vermont, Passed October Session, A.D. 1832*

1844 respectively. After Oren died in 1861 the family tradition was carried on by Pliny Oren Wheaton, who owned seventy acres of quarry land and manufactured building materials of many kinds. Some of the buildings in the District for which he provided the dressed stone are: the Spaulding Graded School (HD #9), the Bolster Block (HD #24) and the Worthen Block (HD #43).

In general, granite quarrying and manufacturing in the pre-boom days proceeded slowly. The 1858 Walling map of Washington County shows Cobble Hill with two quarries and Millstone Hill with three. Hemenway's Vermont Historical Gazetteer of 1882 only reports eight quarries in operation. However, by 1894, just a few years after the opening of the quarry railway, there were seventy quarries in operation. Where there had been only a half dozen manufacturing firms in 1880, by 1894 there were 119 in Barre alone.⁴ As the industry grew, area farms were broken up or purchased in entirety for quarrying operations, and some firms assembled acreage from several farms. Barre village, with its flat land in the valley along the Stevens Branch and its rail access, burgeoned with granite manufacturing and dealer's sheds in the Burnham's Meadow and Granite Street areas not far west of the expanding commercial axis along North Main Street.

What launched this sudden growth was rail service; but its arrival would be long in coming. In 1844 the Vermont Central Railroad, as it was then called, was planning the route of its main line from Burlington, VT, to Windsor, VT, via White River Junction, VT. The line followed the Winooski River Valley southward from Burlington since it was the only point where the Green Mountain range was naturally penetrated. Once the line reached Berlin, VT, however, two routes became possible: one by way of the Dog River and the other via the Winooski and the Stevens Branch, its tributary. The latter, known as the "Gulf Route", would have included Barre. A survey report of this route, presented to the Vermont Central Board of Directors, cited in its support the potential business of the Barre granite industry (more than 600 tons were already going to Burlington annually). Despite this and other arguments, the Vermont Central main line took the Dog River route, passing through the town of Northfield, home of Charles Paine, the president of the Vermont Central Railroad. Lacking a rail connection, for almost twenty-five years Barre granite had to be transported by horse and ox teams ten miles to the nearest station.

When the Montpelier and White River Railroad was chartered in 1867, Barre began to plan for its future by obtaining an act the next year that would give it bonding capabilities to aid in the construction of the railroad. A town meeting vote in 1871 authorized the town to bond itself, and a committee was appointed to negotiate with Governor Smith, then head of the Central Vermont Railroad. After lengthy negotiations and in consideration of a sum of \$55,000, Barre village received its first rail line in 1875.

The next major link, a railroad connecting the quarries to Barre village, was equally crucial. In 1888, the Montpelier and White River Railroad constructed a branch from its main line Williamstown, VT. Located just five miles southwest of Barre's quarries, there was a fear that Barre granite would be channeled to Williamstown for cutting and subsequent shipping instead of to Barre village. Town leaders quickly worked out an agreement with the Montpelier and Wells River Railroad whereby the town would take stock to the amount of \$40,000, and a quarry railroad to Barre village would be constructed. The survey was begun in the spring of 1888, and by July the track was being laid. The Granite Block (HD #19) built in 1888 to house the Granite Savings

⁴ Dr. J. Henry Jackson, Historical Souvenir, Barre, VT, 1894 (Barre, VT: Nickerson & Cox, 1894)

Bank and Trust Company is, in many respects, a confident statement of Barre's prosperous future as a granite industrial center.

Prior to the 1880s, Barre village had ambled along in terms of growth, much as the granite business had; however, its potential as the population center for the town was early recognized, guiding its later development when the granite industry finally took hold. What grew eventually into Barre City was in the early nineteenth century referred to as the "lower village," and further south along the Stevens Branch was the "upper village" (now South Barre). To the north along what became North Main Street was Thwingville where Joshua Twing, a mill builder, had his machine shop, foundry, and gristmill. To the northeast of the lower village was Gospel Village. By about the second quarter of the nineteenth century the lower village began to outstrip the upper which had been at first the most popular business area. Further, the common in the lower village, with its crossroads location, became a natural hub for town activities including church meetings. The Congregational Church decided when the time came for a new building to relocate from Gospel Village to the common believing that it would soon be closer to the population center. In 1848 the Universalist Church began a subscription for funds to build a new structure in the lower village; the new pastor believed it to be surpassing South Barre where the church was then located. The first religious society at the common was the Methodist Church which began to build a meeting house in 1801. The building was situated right on the common until it was moved in 1820 to front on Washington Street. Since that time the Methodists have traditionally used that general site for location of their churches.

The present nature of City Hall Park began to be defined well before the building boom of the 1880s. Town meetings, for example, were held in the Methodist meeting house on the common for over twenty years beginning in 1802. When it came time in the 1880s to construct an urban-scale City Hall and Opera House, the location chosen was one fronting City Hall Park. Two prominent locations along the park were reserved early on for specific functions. In 1802 the "checkered store"—at first a tavern and then later a commercial/office building—commanded the strategic corner site linking the park and Main Street where the present Aldrich Building (HD #48) now stands. The building, which was fitted up with a mansard roof in 1869, served as a prominent landmark all through the nineteenth century. It spurred commercial development along North Main Street, and, later known as the Aldrich Building (it housed the National Bank of Barre of which Leonard Frost Aldrich was president for fourteen years) it set a tradition for the dedication of this site to Aldrich that has carried through the 20th century. Another key site on the hub was that commanding the view of City Hall Park from atop the hill that climbs up Washington Street. This has traditionally served as a location for educational institutions, starting with the 1852 Greek Revival-style Barre Academy, and, later, the Spaulding Graded School (HD #9).

As late as 1884 Barre village was still very rural. A small spate of contiguous commercial development was strung northward along the west side of Main Street beginning approximately opposite the Aldrich Building. Important among these were several Italianate buildings ranging from two to four stories—the H.Z. Mills store, French's Block, and the Reynolds Building—that defined the bend of Main Street as it opens out toward City Hall Park. These buildings were part of Barre's pre-boom development and in their modest wood frame construction contrasted sharply with the more monumental brick and granite commercial blocks that were built in the late 1880s.

The second half of the 1880s saw some important changes keynoting the accelerated urbanization that Barre Village, incorporated in 1886, was to undergo in the 1890s as a result of the quarry railroad and burgeoning granite industry. This marked the beginning of the large brick and granite commercial blocks with Nichol's Block (HD #36), the Stillman Wood Block (HD #47), Averill's Block (HD #18), and the Granite Block (HD #19). The use of granite columns along the shop level of the Granite Block and that of cast iron along the adjacent Averill's Block points out the kind of design duality found among Barre's commercial blocks; some, such as the former, translating conventional late nineteenth-century design details into masterfully used local materials. During this time, the Congregational Church (HD #12) was expanded and remodeled under the stylistic influences of Richardsonian Romanesque sources and prefigures the spate of picturesque plan churches that would be built in the mid-1890s. The Richardsonian Romanesque style also served as the base for Barre's first substantial town hall. The large brick building, occupying the site of the present City Hall and Opera House, had multi-storied round-arched windows, a hipped roof, and projecting end pavilions with arcaded ground floor.

The population growth in Barre town was phenomenal during the decade of the eighties. Throughout the nineteenth century from about 1830 on it hovered around 2000. From 1880 to 1890 the count had swelled to about 6800. The influx of Scots and Italians from their respective homelands, or via other granite centers in the United States, began during this decade as well. An 1897 publication, referring to the fact that many Scots came from Aberdeenshire in northern Scotland, called this region the "nursery of Barre granite cutters," and Barre, the "Aberdeen of Vermont."⁵ The period of the entrepreneur had begun, and residents began to establish their own quarries, manufacturing sheds, or granite tool companies. Others began commercial enterprises to support the needs of the swelling population and the granite industry. By 1886, the Barre Branch of the Granite Cutters National Union had formed.

The 1890s was the period of great architectural development and commercial expansion in Barre Village. The stylistic pattern established in the late 1880s was generally followed: both the use of the late picturesque phase of the Victorian period and, for commercial buildings, an eclectic mix of Victorian-era sources. At the beginning of the decade is the Richardsonian Romanesque-style Spaulding Graded School (HD #9) and the Worthen Block (HD #43) with its combination of Panel Brick, Italianate, and Victorian Gothic features. Gothic Revival and Gothic Revival mixed with Romanesque sources became the basis for two mid-nineties churches: the Church of the Good Shepherd (HD #12) and the First Baptist Church (HD #4) respectively; also from this time is the Queen Anne-style Hedding Methodist church (HD #6). The metal-sheathed Quinlen Block (HD #29) emerges mid-decade with a heavy reliance on classical motifs for embellishment. Granite is glorified in the extensive rock-faced surface of the Miles Building (HD #27), and the present City Hall and Opera House ends the decade (built 1899 to replace the previous one which was destroyed by fire) drawing from both Neo-Classical and Romanesque Revival sources. In this decade granite was a very important material for building details, and in the case of the Miles Block its lavish use appears almost as an advertisement for Miles who was part owner of a quarry. The end of the decade was marked by an important marriage of ethnic traditions with the Scots and Italians collaborating on the creation of the Robert Burns Monument (HD #9A). The Scots raised the money for the monument, and the Italians executed it in granite.

⁵ J.H. Walbridge, "The Granite City," *The Barre Enterprise*, April 27, 1897

This was the period when the linear block-to-block nature of the west side of North Main Street was really developed. The east side of the street was slower to fill in and remained more loosely developed and spaced well into the twentieth century. During this decade, several public improvements occurred such as electric street lighting and an electric street car. Barre was incorporated as a city in 1895, and a daily newspaper was started two years later.

The 1900s brought two important Neo-Classical style buildings: the Aldrich Public Library (HD #2) and the large 1909 brick and granite commercial building on the east side of North Main Street (HD #44). Late Victorian influences persisted with the Richardsonian Romanesque-style Central Vermont Passenger Depot of 1908 (HD #35), and eclecticism still lingered as with the design of the Barre Fire Station (HD #14). This decade also introduced the transition from large-scale commercial blocks with tripartite horizontal design divisions to more modestly scaled (though still horizontally delineated) commercial buildings. After this decade, commercial buildings became increasingly abbreviated into mere storefronts. The 1904 Blanchard Block (HD #17), however, still followed the late 19th century building format.

By 1910 the architectural character of Barre City had been formed, and the building boom in this area wound down almost as rapidly as it had begun. Only a few key buildings, such as the United States Post Office (HD #15) and the Hotel Barre (HD #3) post-date this period, and both are based on the Neo-Classical Revival style. In the 1920s-1940s, the new commercial format of low, wide buildings with massive window display areas fully emerges as with 145 North Main Street (HD #41), 159 North Main Street (HD #39) and the M.H. Fishman Building (HD #26). Although more modest in scale than their late-19th century predecessors, even these buildings include granite detailing in the form of large, flat rectangles of highly polished granite veneer.

Barre's conversion from rural center to urban, industrialized city took place in just 25 years. It reflects the critical importance of rail transportation to the growth of industry in the 19th century, and it directly shows the close relationship between industry, commerce, and architecture. Further, it was built by ethnically diverse people who were attracted to a small Vermont village because it promised a prosperous future. These people used their skills in granite working with pride in shaping a very distinctive Vermont city.

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