

## Wesleyan in the 1830s (Middletown, 5-6 Apr 24)

Middletown, CT, USA, Apr 5-06, 2024

Katherine M Kuenzli, Wesleyan University

Wesleyan in the 1830s: Historic Preservation and the Stories We Choose to Tell.

Wesleyan was founded in 1831 by Methodist church leaders and prominent residents of Middletown. In addition to the handsome College Row (Brownstone Row) buildings that constitute its historic core, the campus features many distinctive domestic structures which the school gradually acquired as its student body and curriculum expanded.

Our symposium focuses on the domestic structures built in the 1830s and interrogates the relationship between high and vernacular building styles and the oppositional ideologies underlying the Triangular and opium trades, the Colonization movement, Abolitionism, and free Black community formation which they once served. Consisting of an evening keynote lecture, three papers, site visits, and a roundtable discussion, our symposium surveys the histories of these structures as well as the ways these histories have been preserved or erased. We invite consideration of how these properties and histories might be better preserved, represented, and integrated into the cityscape of Middletown and the campus of Wesleyan today.

Our symposium examines significant and representative domestic sites on either side of Foss Hill which afforded connections between Wesleyan and the world: three elegant houses along High Street which were built by the families of prominent white merchants and ministers; and the Levrett Beman Historic District (or Beman Triangle), home to some twelve enterprising Black property-owning families grouped around the African Methodist Episcopal church. Together, these four sites, all created around 1830, provide a lens onto some of the most influential and controversial developments in early nineteenth-century America and lend insight into the university's founding decade. These properties exist in varied states of preservation today and only two of the elegant houses have achieved National Historic Landmark status.

Taking these sites into consideration, our symposium poses the following questions:

How can historic preservation invite a critical and constructive engagement with the past and provide a framework for community and campus engagement?

What responsibility does Wesleyan bear to maintain and preserve the historic value of domestic structures that have or potentially have National Historic Landmark status?

How can these sites be maintained in ways that advance the university's core educational mission? How does one balance preservation versus adaptive re-use?

To what extent have past conservation efforts depended on the artistic and architectural signifi-

cance of structures? From today's preservation standpoint, is not the spatial location and configuration of a neighborhood of equal significance to grand architectural styles?

While the Russell House and Fisk's house are well-preserved and vital components of Wesleyan's campus today, the historic portions of the Alsop House and the Beman Triangle need preservation in ways that will mark their histories related to emancipation and segregation in New England and make them vital components of campus life. Whereas the High Street mansions are very visible, perched atop a ridge overlooking the Connecticut River at the heart of Wesleyan's campus, the Beman Triangle is much less so, as it was built on former swampland. Yet the properties on the Beman Triangle are one of the few intentional communities built by African Americans in the mid-19th century that still stand. What would be an appropriate use for the properties at Beman, which have been the subject of archaeological investigations and public history initiatives? How might the pioneering history of the Beman Triangle be integrated into the presentation of the very public buildings along High Street? Might some of the historic spaces of the Alsop House provide a site for reflection on these overlapping and conflicting domestic, economic, and political histories that coincided with Wesleyan's founding? Such questions lie at the core of this symposium, which explores the potential for historic preservation to play a vital role in fostering an inclusive, critical, and diverse educational environment, as Wesleyan prepares to celebrate its bicentennial.

#### SCHEDULE

FRIDAY, APRIL 5, 2024

4:30pm-5:45pm

#### DROP IN REGISTRATION AND WELCOME

The Alsop House, 301 High Street, Middletown, CT

6pm

Ring Family Performing Arts Hall, Center for the Arts, Wesleyan University

#### INTRODUCTION

Katherine Kuenzli, Professor of Art History and Chair, Department of Art and Art History, Wesleyan University

#### OPENING KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Tara Dudley, Assistant Professor, School of Architecture, University of Texas at Austin

The Ties that Bind: Race, Gender, and Preservation at the Periphery of the Forty Acres

SATURDAY, APRIL 6, 2024

9am-12pm

#### MORNING PRESENTATIONS

Ring Family Performing Arts Hall, Center for the Arts, Wesleyan University

Joseph Siry, Professor of Art History, William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of the Humanities, Wesleyan University

Russell House and Alsop House: The Villa as Style and Ideology

Jesse Nasta, Assistant Professor of the Practice in African American Studies, Wesleyan University

The Other Side of Foss Hill: Middletown, Connecticut's Beman Triangle as an Early Black Activist Space, 1828–1860

Suzy Taraba, Dietrich Family Director of Special Collections and Archives (Retired,) Wesleyan University

"Erected on Faith:" Willbur and Ruth Peck Fisk's House, Colonization, and Women's Stories

Coffee and light refreshments will be provided, starting at 8:15am.

12pm–1pm

LUNCH

Daniel Family Commons, Third floor of Wesleyan's Usdan University Center, 45 Wyllys Avenue

1:30pm–4:00pm

SITE VISITS

Russell House and Alsop House

Lead by Alain Munkittrick, Partner, Munkittrick Associates, LLC

Former President's House / Center for the Americas

Lead by Elizabeth Milroy, Professor of Art Emerita, Wesleyan University, Lecturer in Historic Preservation, University of Pennsylvania

Beman Triangle

Lead by Jesse Nasta, AME Zion Church Historian Mardi Loman and Wesleyan Assistant Professor of the Practice in African American Studies

Washington Street Cemetery

Lead by Jesse Nasta, Wesleyan Assistant Professor of the Practice in African American Studies

4pm –5:30pm

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

Ring Family Performing Arts Hall, Center for the Arts, Wesleyan University

Elizabeth Milroy (moderator)

Tara Dudley, Joe Siry, Jesse Nasta, and Suzy Taraba

Ahmed M. Badr, Director, Patricelli Center for Social Entrepreneurship, Wesleyan University

Coffee and light refreshments will be offered

Symposium sponsored by Wesleyan's Departments of Art and Art History, African American Studies, American Studies, the Davison Art Center, and the Dean's Office.

For the complete symposium schedule, registration, speakers, and fees see

<https://wesleyan-in-1830s.conference.wesleyan.edu/>

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