

English Language, Large Print

**Creating Community:
400 Years of Fairfield Stories**

Land, Ecology & Place

Generously supported by CT Humanities, Fairfield Rotary Foundation, and AARP Community Challenge Grant.



Fairfield Museum
AND HISTORY CENTER

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Land, Ecology & Place

The land and its life-sustaining resources were vital to daily life for Indigenous people and the communities that came after.

Relationships with Land and Water

The land's geography and natural resources have brought people here for thousands of years.

Native people relied on existing waterways for travel, trade, and natural resources. Miles of shoreline along the Long Island Sound offered access to abundant marine life. Even the coastal marshes provided food and materials for shelters. A short distance inland, fertile ground was ideal for planting crops like corn, beans, and squash. Trees, plants like cattails and strawberries, and game like deer and bear supported Indigenous communities and, later, other settlers.

Today, much of the land we live on has been affected by human settlement and development. Many communities are now working together to preserve the remaining natural spaces and ecosystems.

Indigenous communities believe in taking care of the land and all living things for future generations. Storytelling, song, dance, and ceremonies help sustain the relationships with the land and living things, and Elders pass on knowledge that has been handed down for thousands of years. The concept of reciprocity—being thankful and finding ways to express gratitude—is a key part of maintaining and revitalizing the land and ecosystems today.

Land Conservation Today

Land trusts focus on acquiring land or establishing conservation agreements with landowners.

With proposed development threatening the ecosystems of the remaining open spaces, land trusts serve as an essential way to care for natural resources. Over 100 land

trusts exist across the state of Connecticut, including the Aspetuck Land Trust that has preserved over 2,200 acres of open space primarily in the towns of Easton, Weston, Fairfield, Westport, Monroe, and Bridgeport.

Basket Weaving Activity

Splits (reeds and strips of wood) were common weaving materials for Native and colonial communities.

Try your hand at weaving! Start making a basket by threading material back and forth through the metal rods. See if you can create patterns by switching out materials. What could your basket be used for?

Life on the Land

The land known today as Fairfield supported the communities that lived here.

When English colonists settled in Fairfield, they were drawn to the fields already cultivated by Native people.

They established a town center and divided up large areas of land for farming. Like Indigenous people, the early colonists needed to meet basic needs: growing food, building shelter, and making goods needed for their daily life. For the community to grow and thrive, each member had to contribute.

Making Use of the Land

Native people's storytelling traditions taught the cycles of nature and how to make the most of available resources.

Along the shore, Native people fished, trapped eels, and harvested oysters and clams. In wooded areas, they intentionally burned trees to clear the land for farming and flush out animals for hunting. Native people in this area also developed significant agricultural practices alongside hunting and gathering strategies, growing corn, beans, and squash—together known as the Three Sisters. They later shared these practices with English colonists, who had to adapt quickly to their new environment.

The English were introduced to Native plants and crops, but they also brought European plants and animals with them. Colonists raised cows, sheep, and pigs for milk, wool, and meat. Animals were often allowed to roam freely, causing problems when they dug up cornfields cultivated by Indigenous people. Colonists also introduced grains and grasses from England like rye, oats, and hay, which were important in feeding their livestock. European herbs like tansy, marigold, and hyssop were grown for medicinal purposes.

In both Native and English communities, there was a gendered division of tasks. Women predominantly gathered, cultivated, and made clothing while men generally hunted or did the more laborious tasks for the farm. Children were also expected to contribute to the family from a young age, such as scaring animals away from crops waiting to be harvested.

The Three Sisters

A well-known Indigenous growing strategy called “Three Sisters” is a form of companion planting, comprised of beans, corn, and squash.

Native people planted corn, beans, and squash together, knowing each crop supported each other when grown together. Stalks of corn grow tall, allowing the vines of the beans to climb up. Beans add nutrients to the soil.

Squash, in turn, spreads over the ground, covering the soil to keep it moist and prevent weeds. Each of these plants provided a harvest that could be stored for months, providing adequate food and nutrition outside of the growing season.

Watch Schaghticoke storyteller Darlene Kascak share stories about the Three Sisters.

How did Native Americans learn about Three Sisters companion planting?

One story tells how the plants grew as a gift to the people following the burial of Sky Woman, known as the creator of Turtle Island, or North America. Another presents each of the sisters—corn, beans, and squash—as characters to illustrate how these plants were different on their own but were stronger together.

Illustration Credit: *Three Sisters Companion Planting*.

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Southport Globe Onions

Onions became a major crop in the 1840s and 1850s with the creation of the Southport Globe onion.

Unlike small and delicate spring onions, the larger Globe onion could be easily dried and shipped to far-off destinations. Onion farmers would line up their wagons and ox carts for blocks at Southport harbor, waiting to load barrels of onions onto ships headed for New York City. Irish immigrants who were escaping the effects of the 1845 potato famine, also known as the Great Hunger,

were hired as farm laborers. Born to an Irish family in Southport, William O'Dwyer once said he “weeded every acre of Southport Onions during [his] youth.”

Farming Traditions

From the town's settlement in 1639 through the 1800s, most Fairfield residents were farmers, passing down a way of life through generations. They were busy year-round, plowing and fertilizing in the spring and planting and harvesting in the fall. They cared for their livestock, cut firewood, repaired tools, and delivered goods to market.

Enterprising farmers also sought out new crops and places to sell them. For instance, in the 1830s, Abigail Couch Sherwood raised silkworms on her family's farm on Hull's Farm Road in Southport, shipping silk to England. Others began growing a cultivar of Globe onions that were easily stored for long periods, making them ideal to ship overseas. Eventually, Southport transformed into a thriving

port for such crops. However, fluctuating crop prices, pests that destroyed harvests, and the growth of nearby Bridgeport's harbor led more Fairfield residents to turn to another occupation: maritime trade.

Life on the Water

Being close to a water source was important in Fairfield's development.

Proximity to coastline and waterways meant fertile land, the ability to transport people and goods, and easy access to resources, including food and building materials. As the town expanded, residents' ways of life and means of supporting themselves changed, shifting from farming to maritime trade. As Fairfield strengthened its connections to ports across the world, water became all the more important to the town's identity.

The Coast at Work

In the 1800s, residents in Fairfield and Black Rock profited from the coastline.

By putting its coastal resources to use, Fairfield moved from dependence on farming to becoming a vital part of the global marketplace. Natural deep-water ports in Southport and Black Rock (now part of Bridgeport) supported the growth of ship-building, whaling, and maritime trade. Farmers from Mill Hill and Greenfield Hill in Fairfield kept watch for the arrival of ships that would carry their agricultural products like oats, flax, corn, and rye to ports in New York City and the South. Black Rock merchants traded with vessels destined for the West Indies, Italy, and India. Return voyages brought back a variety of highly valued imported products like sugar, china, molasses, silk, linseed, and citrus fruit, among other goods.

The port also served other important purposes. A steamship from the shipping firm of Wakeman & Dimon,

owned by William Webb Wakeman of Southport, was commissioned by the U.S. government to transport troops and equipment during the Civil War. That same ship's log highlights an unusual but valuable trade item that was also being carried on board: guano (dried bird droppings). Harvested from the Caribbean and South American islands, guano was used as fertilizer by American farmers, who claimed that it could nearly triple their crop yields. The 1856 Guano Islands Act sought to claim guano islands, harvesting and delivering it to the United States at a low price for farmers.

Life at Sea

Though farming was still a good way to make a living in the mid-1800s, a life at sea offered adventure, travel, and profit.

A seaman's wages could be twice as much as those earned by farm laborers, but life at sea was risky. Shipwrecks, storms, illness, and starvation threatened seamen far from home. Local captains were becoming

increasingly familiar with navigational tools such as compasses and nautical charts. Choosing a life at sea also meant spending months or years away from friends and family. Letters give insight into their lives and ship logs provide records of their voyages.

The Jennings Family

A number of Jennings men felt the call of the sea 1810s-1860s

Abraham Jennings went to sea as a teenager and rose through the ranks. With a gift for mathematics, he learned navigation and was promoted to first mate and eventually captain, allowing him to support his large family back in Fairfield. Jennings commanded multiple voyages to China during the 1810s, bringing his 10-year-old son John with him to Canton (Guangzhou) on one occasion.

In 1838, at the age of 15, Isaac Jennings followed in the footsteps of his father Abraham and his brother John. He

eventually became a captain, making voyages to India, Italy, and France, among other places.

Global Imports

What was being brought back in exchange for goods exported from Fairfield?

Fairfield men, including those of the Jennings family, commanded ships that were part of a global system of trade that became vital to America's economy. Abraham Gould Jennings sailed to China at a time when Chinese tea, porcelain, and silks were in high demand in the United States. He and his son John traded fruit and other goods in Europe and throughout the Mediterranean. Isaac Jennings sailed to San Francisco on his way to Calcutta, India, where he loaded linseed, animal hides, and ginger root.

Black Rock Harbor

Fairfield possessed two main ports in the early 1700s: Southport and Black Rock. The construction of roads, bridges, and wharves linked Black Rock to the “mainland,” allowing merchants and tradespeople in Fairfield better access to the busy waterfront.

By 1740, Fairfield was prospering. Ships sailed out of Black Rock Harbor carrying local farm products, lumber, and livestock bound for markets in Charleston, New York City, the Caribbean islands, and the West Indies. In return, they brought back rum, molasses, salt, and other goods to Fairfield.

But by the late 1800s, Black Rock’s importance as a commercial seaport was fading as industrialization took hold in Bridgeport. Like much of the Fairfield shoreline, Black Rock became a popular place to settle down. The neighborhood was annexed by Bridgeport in 1870 and gradually became home to the estates of Bridgeport’s manufacturing elite as well as wealthy New Yorkers. The

area also provided homes for workers seeking jobs in Bridgeport factories.

Black Rock Harbor Mural

Old Black Rock Harbor About 1810. 1948. Robert Lynn Lambdin. Gift of Thomas Quinn, 2017.7.0.

Conservator Mary Holland cleaning the mural's surface. Courtesy of the Williamstown Art Conservation Center. Wesport artist Robert Lambdin spent two months researching at the Fairfield Historical Society before painting this mural for the Black Rock Bank and Trust Company.

Robert Lambdin took some artistic license here, including the Fayerweather Island Lighthouse that was built later in 1823, the earlier styles of clothing, and the lack of workers of color. Regardless, the mural captures the port at the height of its commercial activity in the early 1800s. The

mural eventually was donated to the Museum to be preserved.

Kathleen Moore

Keeper of the Fayerweather Light, Black Rock Harbor 1812-1899

From the age of twelve on, Kathleen (Kate) Moore helped her lighthouse keeper father at Fayerweather Light, located off of Black Rock Harbor. After assisting her father for 47 years she was officially appointed Keeper herself in 1871. Moore served in this role until 1879. Moore was dedicated to bringing sailors home safely, and is credited with saving 21 lives during her decades of service on Fayerweather Island. Later, she made money leasing oyster beds in the Long Island Sound, and moved to Brewster Street, to a house with a view across the harbor. In 2014, a U.S. Coast Guard cutter (a 65-foot vessel designed for Coast Guard missions) was christened the *Kathleen Moore* in her honor.

“On calm nights I slept at home...my face turned so that I could see shining on the wall the light from the tower and know if anything had happened...” Kate Moore, quoted by the *New York Sunday World* in 1889

The Rise of Industry in Fairfield

While agriculture and trade remained part of Fairfield’s economy, transportation and technology fueled a shift toward industrialization.

In 1848, the New York and New Haven Railroad arrived, making the transport of goods, supplies, and people easier and more efficient. With increased access to material and markets, the growth of manufacturing in cities like Bridgeport exploded. The rise of industry spurred the arrival of immigrants seeking a better life. By World War II, manufacturing in the area was at its height, diversifying the local workforce and establishing a dynamic in which people work in Bridgeport and live in Fairfield.

Town Life and City Work

As industrialization grew, Fairfield and Bridgeport became linked.

The Industrial Revolution not only shifted the production of goods from handmade to machine-made, but overtook Fairfield's focus on farming and maritime trade. Factories in Fairfield such as Fairfield Rubber (later DuPont) and Aluminum Company of America (Alcoa) were established, but it was Bridgeport with its railroad access and harbor in Black Rock that became a true industrial center. The city's factories such as Bullard Machine Tool Company, Ives Manufacturing Company, and Wheeler and Wilson Sewing Machine Company, mass-produced tools, sewing machines, metal goods, and toys for consumers and businesses. Factory jobs and the city's growing economy attracted immigrants from Hungary, Italy, and other countries, and by 1900, more than half of Bridgeport's population was foreign-born.

The outbreak of World War I caused a manufacturing boom, as Bridgeport factories supplied goods to the Russian, French, and British armies. By 1916, the city was making two-thirds of all the small arms and ammunition used by Allied armies. Thousands of people worked at large factories like Remington Arms.

While Bridgeport became a center of industry, Fairfield was increasingly seen as a desirable place to live. A trolley connected Bridgeport to Fairfield, making for an easy commute, and wealthy people from New York City took the train to find relaxation in Fairfield. The town's beautiful beaches, large estates, and high-end hotels made it an attractive spot to spend a weekend or a summer.

Gwendolyn Ward

Assembly line worker at General Electric in Bridgeport b. 1923

Gwendolyn (Gwen) Ward is the descendant of Edward Randolph, the last man in Fairfield to have a firsthand

experience of slavery. Her mother, Harriet Randolph, married Frederick Ward Sr., who grew up on Long Island and had Black and Native ancestry. Gwendolyn Ward grew up in Fairfield with her siblings Edith, Charlotte, Frederick, Jr., Nelson, and adopted brother Stanley Jones, attending Sherman School and graduating from Roger Ludlowe High School in 1942. After her graduation, she took a job working on the small appliance assembly line at General Electric in Bridgeport, where she worked for 45 years. She married George R. Thomas, a member of the U.S. Coast Guard in 1947. Ward and her family lived at Round Hill and Barlow Roads in Fairfield, the home of the Randolph family since the late 1800s, and later on Bunnell Street in Bridgeport.

Industry and the War Effort

World War I fueled the growth of Bridgeport companies like Remington Arms, but it wasn't until World War II that Bridgeport reached the height of its manufacturing. Thousands of immigrant workers were employed by

Remington and other companies to meet the increased demand for weapons in wartime. Newcomers to the area also established local businesses and led to the growth of densely built housing in the community.

Bridgeport and Fairfield residents not employed in factories also supported the war efforts. The development of the American Red Cross played a key role in supplying materials for American troops and civilians overseas, and the Air Raid Defense trained civilian “wardens” to show their neighbors how to prepare for a military air raid. Even simple acts like purchasing war bonds and canning food allowed every member of the community to play a part in ensuring that those on the frontlines would have the resources to fight.

The Railroad Arrives

The first train of the New York and New Haven Railroad came through the area in 1848, connecting Fairfield and Bridgeport to New York City.

The introduction of the railroad improved transportation for both goods and people, leading to widespread industrialization and a new balance of work and leisure. In 1800, it could take a day or more to get from New Haven to New York; after the railroad, New York was accessible in just over two hours. Fairfield residents could take the train to the city for business and New Yorkers could come to Fairfield to enjoy “country life.” As the railroad replaced maritime shipping in transporting goods, Bridgeport became even more of a hub for business and industry.

Women at Work

In both World Wars, women became an integral part of the factory workforce.

With men fighting abroad and an increasing need for ammunitions, women found a place working in the area’s factories. In 1915, Remington Arms alone employed 5,000 women. During World War II, women gained even more of

a presence in the workforce. Poster campaigns featuring “Rosie the Riveter” proclaiming “We Can Do It!” motivated women to do their part.

In 1947, women comprised one-third of the Bridgeport area’s workforce. The return of American soldiers after the wars, however, meant that women were often encouraged to return home and leave the workforce. While some remained in their jobs, the growth of suburbs brought many women back to home and family life.

Supporting the War Effort

Civilians helped during wartime by making changes at home.

Advertising was used to boost morale and encourage patriotism among those on the home front during wartime. By starting victory gardens (vegetable, fruit, and herb gardens planted at private residences and in public parks) and then canning that produce, citizens could take care of

their families. The public could also help the war effort by purchasing war bonds, essentially loaning money to the federal government that would be paid back with interest.

Life at the Beach

The railroad brought summer visitors to enjoy Fairfield's shoreline.

Early in Fairfield's history, the coastal marshes and beaches were important natural resources. Farmers used marsh grasses for hay and the coastline supported maritime travel and trade. The arrival of the railroad vastly improved people's mobility, making Fairfield's sandy shores a popular summer and weekend destination.

Summer homes and cottages lined the beaches. Pavilions were built for town residents and "day-trippers," while club memberships ensured exclusivity for the wealthy.

Fairfield as a Destination

Fairfield became a summer escape from the stifling heat of the city.

The introduction of the railroad in 1848 improved commerce and Fairfield's appeal as a resort town. At the same time, Bridgeport's political power grew alongside its population and economy. In 1853, the industrial city became the county seat, replacing Fairfield as the home of the county's government. Even as Fairfield lost political influence, it gained a reputation as an idyllic place to visit. At the turn of the century, visitors flocked to the town to stay at popular hotels like St. Marc's, which boasted more than one hundred rooms, its own bowling alley, lawn tennis, and even horseback riding. Some of the greatest attractions for visitors were Fairfield's beaches. Beach communities full of small cottages like Little Danbury and Pine Creek began to appear along the coast. Many came to recognize the charm of Fairfield, and it was increasingly perceived as a good place to live by those who worked in cities like Bridgeport and New York.

The Trolley in Fairfield

Trolleys connected Fairfield and Bridgeport, making it easier for people to move between the two communities for work, shopping, and entertainment.

While some in Fairfield embraced connections between the two communities, others fought the trolley line's placement on Main Street (now Old Post Road). They feared it would destroy the well-tended street and argued it would drive residents out of town because "they could no longer have the quiet and rest for which they come there, in the summertime, on purpose to enjoy." Despite this opposition, the town voted to move forward with the trolley.

Where Could You Go on the Trolley?

Fairfield Beaches

Community Theater, Fairfield: Starting in 1921, the theater offered vaudeville performances and movie screenings for Fairfield residents and visitors.

Sunnieholme, Fairfield: The estate of Annie B. Jennings in Fairfield offered a variety of gardens that could be enjoyed by the public.

Steeplechase Island, Bridgeport: Steeplechase Island was an amusement park in Bridgeport with carousel rides, roller skating, and concessions.

Factories and Downtown Bridgeport: Employees of Warner's Corset Factory in Bridgeport's South End could take the trolley to work. The trolley could take riders to shop on State Street in downtown Bridgeport.

Howland Dry Goods Store: This department store in Bridgeport sold shoes, hats, wallpaper, carpets, coffee, tea and more. It opened its new six-floor building in 1908.

The Developing Suburbs

The end of World War II prompted a shift in family dynamics and ways of life.

From 1940 to 1970, Fairfield grew faster than in any other period in its history, with its population more than doubling. After the war, men returned from overseas and women returned to domestic life. Thousands of people moved from Bridgeport into Fairfield, part of the mass migration to the suburbs that took place across the country.

Accommodating such growth made for a rapidly changing landscape. Marshes, which had once been mowed for hay or used as pasture for animals, were now filled in to meet the need for new streets, schools, and modern homes.

Fairfield's new residents were mostly the children and grandchildren of European immigrants who had worked in Bridgeport. They aspired to have a house with gardens and access to good schools for their children. But while the town became a place where the "American dream"

was possible for some, it was not accessible to everyone. Discrimination in both employment and housing meant that people of color often faced more obstacles when they tried to pursue the same goals and opportunities. In Fairfield County, practices like redlining, in which residents of certain areas are denied housing loans or insurance due to their race or ethnicity, and restrictive covenants in deeds allowed real estate developers, homeowners, and neighborhood associations to legally prevent minorities from moving into white neighborhoods. The formation of groups like the Connecticut Inter-Racial Commission in 1943 recognized this kind of race-based discrimination and advocated for equal opportunity and justice across the state.

Fairfield's Community Builders

Everyone can play a role in building their community. Meet some of Fairfield's past residents who made an impact on the community we enjoy today.

Annie B. Jennings (1855-1939)

Instrumental in establishing the Fairfield Historical Society (now the Fairfield Museum)

Jennings spent her early years in San Francisco, where her father traveled to make his fortune during the gold rush. The family returned to Fairfield in the 1860s and soon became extraordinarily wealthy through their investment in John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil Company. They lived a life of leisure, spending time in elaborate townhouses on New York's Upper East Side and estates in Fairfield in the summer.

Jennings was instrumental in establishing and supporting a number of important institutions that helped transform Fairfield from a resort destination into the town we know today, including the Fairfield Historical Society (now the Fairfield Museum), Fairfield Public Library, and Birdcraft Museum.

Mary Katona (1922-1982)

Served as Fairfield's Town Clerk for 21 years

The daughter of Hungarian immigrants, Katona grew up on a poultry farm on Fairfield's Black Rock Turnpike that was purchased by her father. Delivering eggs helped her connect with the community, and she reflected later that it "was the egg route I used to have that laid my political future." In 1958, she was elected as a state representative, the first female Democrat to represent Fairfield in the legislature. Her election as Fairfield's Town Clerk in 1961 made her the first woman to hold that position in thirty years. She would go on to be re-elected ten times.

Katona was also a leader within the Hungarian community and active in many community organizations. She has been remembered through a scholarship at the University of Bridgeport as well as through the founding of the Mary Katona Memorial on Katona Drive.

Charlotte Ward (1919–2015)

Supported her country and community for over 30 years

Ward graduated from Roger Ludlowe High School in 1937 and was the only Black woman in her class. In high school, she participated in the National Honor Society, Connecticut Club, and Social Service Club. Her commitment to community involvement continued into her adult life. In 1942, Ward enrolled in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corp (the women's branch of the United States Army), where 6,500 of the 140,000 enlistees were Black women. She also worked as a secretary in the home services department of the Red Cross in Bridgeport from 1947 to 1961, and was active in the Order of the Eastern Star—a group related to the Freemasons. By 1961, Ward had become Grand Worthy Matron of the Prince Hall Grand chapter of the Masonic group in 1961.

Cameron Clark (1887-1957)

Designed buildings and preserved history in Fairfield

Architect Charles Cameron Clark was a resident of Fairfield's affluent and scenic Greenfield Hill neighborhood. He designed residential and civic buildings throughout the Northeast, including Helen Keller's home in Easton. In the 1930s and 1940s he was part of the Colonial Revival movement that romanticized the architecture, design, and ideals of colonial America. During this period, the town of Fairfield looked back on its early history, organizing a series of celebrations of the town's 300th anniversary of settlement. Clark also renovated Old Town Hall in 1939 (still standing today), and designed numerous homes in the Colonial Revival style. He was named to the American Institute of Architects and cited for outstanding achievement in design.

The Nuclear Age

As World War II was coming to a close, nuclear weapons came to the public's attention. In 1945, the United States dropped the first atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Four years later, the Soviet Union tested its own nuclear bomb. Residents of Fairfield—along with the rest of the United States—felt the fear of nuclear attack and the danger posed by this new weapon of mass destruction.

Fairfield's suburbs expanded in the 1950s under the shadow of the Cold War, a battle for dominance between the two superpowers—the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR)—that lasted for decades. The threat of a nuclear war with the Soviet Union was great enough that, in 1950, Congress established the Federal Civil Defense Administration to prepare Americans for a nuclear emergency. The Civil Defense Administration created fallout shelters and the Emergency Broadcast System. Local preparations included building a

defensive missile base in Fairfield in 1955, largely to protect Bridgeport as a center of military manufacturing.

The WPA in Fairfield

During the Great Depression in the 1930s that followed the 1929 stock market crash, many Fairfield citizens joined the ranks of the unemployed across the country. As more and more households needed relief, Fairfield struggled to remain solvent.

In 1935, Congress voted to fund the Works Progress Administration (WPA), an ambitious plan to alleviate the national crisis by providing employment to millions of men and women. Dozens of federal projects were launched from 1934 to 1942, improving the community's infrastructure, public health, and quality of life. The WPA supported town planning efforts including comprehensive street naming, a house numbering system, and mapping projects like this large hand-drawn map reproduced here.

Can you spot the homes, barns, garages, and even chicken coops and outhouses? How did the construction of highways affect the landscape?

This map documents Fairfield right before construction of the Merritt Parkway in 1938 and I-95 (the Connecticut Turnpike) in 1957. While both highways improved transportation, they also led to the alteration, and, sometimes, the decimation of neighborhoods. I-95 cut right through parts of Fairfield and Bridgeport, damaging immigrant neighborhoods like Tunxis Hill and the West End.