

Signs of The Times

Thomaston has taken it upon itself to reinvent the walking tour — and other towns are taking notice. By Joshua F. Moor.

Next to or across from twenty-five of the most interesting properties around town are plaques that not only explain the background of the particular site but also show what it looked like a century ago.

THOMASTON has an identity crisis. All that remains of its signature landmark, the Maine State Penitentiary, is a grassy field. Its Main Street boasts one of Maine's most remarkable collections of nineteenth-century architecture, yet its eastern skyline is still dominated by a big, ugly cement factory. The broad, tree-lined streets here are



some of the most pleasant in New England, but few motorists leave the gridlock of Route 1 to explore them.

Coming to grips with this complex community has never been easy for either locals or visitors. But thanks to a Cushing museum expert and his pale yellow plaques, Thomaston has come to life in a whole new way for anyone willing to spend a few minutes strolling the sidewalks here.

The signs, twenty-five in all, comprise Thomaston's "Museum in the Streets," an entertaining, bilingual, self-guided tour that leads walkers along Main and Knox Streets, two roads listed on the National Historic Register. The details they contain offer glimpses into the parlors and bedrooms that people have called home for the better part of two centuries. The first such walking tour in the nation, the stories and vintage photos on these plaques go beyond explaining the town's architectural styles and pull back the curtains to expose the everyday lives of the shipbuilders, bankers, sailors, and quarry workers who built this community into what was once one of America's most significant maritime ports.

ONE sign located at the public landing bears a laminated image of the full-rigged ship *Samuel Watts*, taken in 1870, as she pulled away from the other wooden sailing ships being built on the Thomaston waterfront. Anyone glancing at it is immediately struck by what has changed here. But look closer and you'll see that the same stone navigational marker still stands in the St. George River, and boatsheds still line the shore. You notice how little has changed here in 200 years — and how much.

The Museum in the Streets focuses on a loose collection of properties hand-picked by the Thomaston Historical Society for their historical and architectural significance, as well as for the stories behind them. The rich details within these narratives are often as interesting as the houses themselves. Instead of just describing the history of the toll bridge over the St. George River, for example, the plaque there explains, "Some say that north of the bridge the first Indian trading post was established by the Pilgrims of Plymouth Colony in 1623." At Captain David Jenks' former Main Street residence, built in 1795 and originally used as a tavern, walkers are

While people taking the self-guided walking tour can start at any of the sites on it, a map of the itinerary is on the side of the Thomaston Café in the center of town, and folding maps are available in most local shops.

In addition to attracting visitors, the privately funded signs have proven popular with local residents and children, bringing Thomaston history to life for everyone who lives there.



told that despite being one of the oldest structures in town, its history is a bit hazy. "Depending on which history you read, the story changes," it says, disclosing that this walking tour takes on no scholarly airs. But a description of the 160 wood-fired limekilns that dotted the St. George riverfront in 1828 instantly sends your senses back 175 years, stating simply, "Imagine the smoke."

Thomaston's two-mile walking tour takes most amblers an hour or two and can be begun anywhere in town. A map is available in local shops and is also posted on the side of the Thomaston Café downtown. The plaques add a breezy introduction to the architecture of the homes that have been attracting savvy homebuyers to the town in recent years. Main Street's Ranlett-Gould House, for example, with its classic Greek Revival lines and ionic columns dating from 1849, stands as an anachronism to the modern SUVs and tractor-trailers that rumble past it on Route 1. Just steps away, tall maple trees on broad, sleepy Knox Street help shade former millionaire shipbuilder Samuel Watts' house, the largest in town, according to the plaque, and boasting a thirty-by-forty-foot front room large enough to swallow many modern homes (Watts built a home to "reflect his standing in the world," the sign says). Most of the ultraviolet-resistant plastic laminate plaques, which have a ten-year warranty and are mounted between two six-foot-tall posts, are positioned on the same side of the street and not directly in front of the house they're describing, but on town property beside the sidewalk across the road. They were deliberately placed both to protect homeowners' privacy and, in many cases, to allow walkers to stand precisely where the photographer stood when he captured the vintage photographs that adorn each sign.

The plaques themselves, though, are only part of the Museum in the Streets experience. Step back from the one marking the Ranlett-Gould House and you'll practically stumble into the front yard of a fine, and unmarked, 1840 example of the Federal style. Around the corner from a Knox Street plaque explaining the elaborate Italianate style of an 1854 home constructed by local builder James Overlock, with its sheltered side entrance and overly large porch brackets, sits a Queen Anne Victorian, its wrap-around deck and peaked rooflines pre-

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THOMASTON, MAINE

THE MUSEUM IN THE STREETS



FROM TEACHING TO SHIP BUILDING

Robert Watts arrived in Thomaston from Ireland where he taught school. After several years, he changed his occupation to ship building, a much more lucrative profession. He had the famous wooden Churchville mansion built for his family in 1855. The flat face of the front facade is noted, noted to resemble stone. The large square are a prominent feature.

The Watts house originally had the same French wallpaper as the Ranlett-Gould house. An exact copy of the paper panels replaced the originals after they were purchased and professionally restored. The Ranlett-Gould house the living room and the wallpaper were added to the collection of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. The paper is a beautiful creation complete with images of Greek ruins, pyramids and tropical flora. The colors are vibrant and capture the essence of the high style of the Victorian era.

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FROM TEACHING TO SHIP BUILDING

UN PROFESSEUR DEVENU ARMATEUR

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Un jour, Robert Watts quitta l'Irlande pour s'établir à Thomaston avec l'intention d'enseigner. Mais après quelques années de profession, il change d'avis et devient armateur. Une profession bien plus lucrative. La construction de sa maison est confiée à James Overlock en 1855. La façade est remarquablement plate, elle se fait remarquer par sa simplicité et son caractère.

L'intérieur a longtemps eu le même papier peint que la maison Ranlett-Gould. Une copie exacte a remplacé le papier original qui se trouve aujourd'hui au Smithsonian Institution, un musée de Washington. Le motif de ce papier est un mélange fantastique entre des ruines de style grec, des pyramides et des plantes tropicales. Les couleurs vives et le style de dessin sont typiques de l'époque victorienne.

Bienvenue à Thomaston

The Museum in the Streets is bilingual, curiously.

PERHAPS the most unusual aspect of Thomaston's walking tour is the complete French translation that accompanies the description on each plaque. When Patrick Cardon brought his concept of the Museum in the Streets to Thomaston's board of selectmen, he insisted the town adopt this bilingual style, a trademark of his European tours.

"Bilingualism is not an issue of language, it's an issue of tourism," Cardon explains, adding that the tours can also be used in foreign language classes. He insists on this bilingual component as a way to unite the plaques in all his tours. "It all has a similarity of image, regardless of where it's located," Cardon says. "In France, people relate to this as a product. Here, I want it to be a Maine product."

Although not everyone in town was enchanted with the notion of bilingual signage, Thomaston Town Manager Valmore Blastow, Jr., says the town ultimately chose French as a second language because of the

state's longtime relationship with French-Canadians.

For Luthera Dawson, a longtime Thomaston resident and member of the town's historical society and library who helped dig up the information for the plaques, the bilingual component was a stretch. "I wasn't all that excited about the French at first, but I went along with it," Dawson says. "If we were up around Lewiston, I think we'd get more French-speaking people, but we don't get that many around here. But since the plaques were made in France and Patrick speaks French, it was almost a natural, and I'm not sure we could've gotten out of it."

Cardon says several of the Maine town managers he's consulted with about potential tours in their communities have expressed some concern with the tour's bilingual component, but he remains steadfast in his desire to have a second language represented, whether it's French or some other. "It raises an awareness that we're not all the same," he maintains.

CLOVER MCALLISTER

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senting an equally interesting, and yet unexplained, structure. It is as if the sites on the tour are not so much destinations, but rather waypoints to pique everyone's curiosity about all the people who built and lived in this lovely old shipbuilding town.

FOSTERING the community's own sense of pride in its heritage has been the driving force behind the Museum in the Streets program, according to Patrick Cardon, a resident of nearby Cushing who developed the concept. A former museum administrator, Cardon has established five similar walking tours in France and owns the trademark to the Museum in the Streets concept. "We started with a fairly glib statement: 'If people won't come to the museum, let's take the museum to the people,'" Cardon says. "The idea is to take the museum out of the museum, out of a building, and make people aware that where they live is a museum of its own."

As Cardon sees it, his Museum in the Streets helps bring Thomaston to life in ways that other tours cannot. "If you can find a guidebook, it's just a mute representation — it won't tell you what happened behind the doors and windows," he says. "This is not anonymous, it's about people: their lives, their part in history."

It is also the juxtaposition of old and new that brings Thomaston to life. Just a few steps from a plaque describing the congenial history of the side-by-side Baptist and Episcopal churches on Main Street, for example, a plastic lettered sign at the Masonic Temple advertises an upcoming five-dollar public supper (fish chowder). Even the impressive Ranlett-Gould House sports a satellite dish tucked away behind its porch, a modern amenity missing from the vintage photograph of Captain Ranlett's home. And you'll be hard-pressed to find any vinyl siding in Thomaston, but the town's true character is revealed as much in its imperfections as its renovations; the paint on many homes is peeling, and many have the trademark barn slowly seceding from the main house. These homes are and have always been lived in, and these flaws are simply wrinkles on their otherwise impressive facades, and they all contribute to the town's character.

Valmore Blastow, Jr., Thomaston's

town manager, says the tour helps both locals and tourists discover the town's rich history. "Thomaston is a historical community, so this kind of plays right into the make-up of the town," Blastow explains. "It's one of the few communities that have kept so many colonial structures intact along the Route 1 corridor, without them becoming commercialized."

"The tour gives you an instant peek into the community without doing a lot of research," he says. "You can just be passing through the town and take the tour and go away potentially knowing more about the town than someone who's lived here his whole life."

But it was a relatively new resident, the Algerian-born, Egypt-raised, and

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New York-educated Patrick Cardon who has brought Thomaston's sense of history to life. Born to a family of Suez Canal workers, Cardon, 55, immigrated to the U.S. when he was seventeen, eventually earning a doctorate in Egyptology from New York University and later serving as a museum administrator and independent museum consultant in France. Cardon fell in love with Maine after a landfall in Camden during the 1970s. He humbly admits he speaks "a fair number" of languages and still spends several months of the year at his home in the Loire Valley, but says the Cushing farm he purchased in 2000 is the spot he and his wife now call home.

After settling in Cushing, Cardon didn't waste much time in approaching Thomaston's selectmen, who enthusiastically approved his project, provided that funds for it could be raised privately. The Thomaston Historical Society and Thomaston Public Library agreed to help research and write the legends for the plaques. Cardon says gathering the \$21,000 needed to manufacture the series of plaques took only a few days, thanks to Fred Moon,

Cardon's brother-in-law and a fellow Cushing resident, and a generous gift from the midcoast's own credit-card giant and benefactor MBNA.

LUTHERA Dawson, who at ninety-two admits she was recommended to help with the history tour because "I'm so darned old I've lived through a lot of it," says the project's success has exceeded her expectations. More often than she anticipated, she reports, she is noticing groups of people huddled around the plaques. "Some people have seen the place and thought they'd come here someday," she says, "and now they're finally making it."

Cardon says he has pitched his concept to other town managers around the state, hoping to set up two Museum in the Streets "trails" in Maine: one going up the Kennebec River Valley through Augusta, Waterville, and Skowhegan, and the other along the coast, through Thomaston, Rockland, and Belfast. Most are excited about his idea, which would cost each town about \$10,000 to implement. An avid history buff ("In the absence of history, you end up living in the day-to-day," he says) who is completely smitten with Maine, Cardon shrugs off any suggestion he promotes the Museum in the Streets for profit. "I make some money, but I don't make a lot," he says. "If I wanted to make a lot of money it'd be franchised, and I don't want to do that because there's a quality that I really want to keep track of."

The real reward, Cardon says, is meeting local treasures like Luther Dawson. As enthusiastic as he is about developing these self-guided tours, the community involvement is key, and if one is cool to his idea (Camden's Planning Board rejected his proposal this spring, unable to squeeze the plaques within the town's rigid sign ordinance), he will not push the issue.

On the corner of Main and Robinson Streets, a plaque describing Captain Edward Robinson's home mentions that the side street was named to honor his widow, Penelope Fales Robinson. It's a detail made all the more interesting by also noting that for years locals insisted on calling it Penelope Lane, to emphasize that it honored a great woman, and not her husband.

With the Museum in the Streets, Thomaston honors both of them, plus so much more in this remarkable community. □