The Bulkeley School

1 Bulkeley Place
1871-73
Prospect Street National Historic District (1980)
The National Register of Historic Places (1981)

Undertaking the history of the Bulkeley School building involves an attempt to capsulize all of New London history because the school is on the site of the community's first center, where its early institutions were located. It also necessarily involves the history of local education and the story of a long-forgotten family. In this attempt, I have barely scratched the surface, but perhaps the attempt will spur others to dig more deeply.

The Bulkeley School building was individually listed on the National Register of Historic Places on August 13, 1981 because of its architectural importance and also because of its seminal role in educating generations of city leaders. The original section of the building is of locally quarried granite block in the Venetian Gothic style, two-and-a-half stories, its original roof colorfully patterned slate, typical of the style. Its original tower (which became the school's symbol) was unfortunately demolished to make way for an addition, but the core of the building has been saved and remodeled. It remains a school and is now home to the Regional Multicultural Magnet School (RMMS), grades K-5.

The Bulkeley School – the building and the institution – was the bequest of Leonard Hallam Bulkley, about whom little is known. It was established as an all-boys' high school and operated from 1873 until 1951, when New London Public High School opened. The building then became the New London Junior High School until it closed in the 1970s.

As explained in *A modern History of New London County, Connecticut,* Vol. I (1922):

> Mr. Bulkeley [aka Bulkley] was a merchant of modest pretensions, whose place of business was very near the school which now bears his name. He was born December 22, 1799, and died December 19, 1849. He left an estate valued at something less than $25,000 to found a secondary school which should be free to boys of New London. In his will he provided that the funds should be kept intact until the trustees, who were named in the will, should decide that they were justified in the erection of the schoolhouse.

A number of subsequent gifts helped increase Bulkeley's endowment, and the school trustees finally decided in 1870 that there was enough money to build and run the school. The then-famous architect, Leopold Eidlitz (1823-1908), was hired to design the building. In Connecticut, Eidlitz had designed P.T. Barnum's flamboyant Indo-Islamic style house in Bridgeport (1848), but most of Eidlitz's work was in New York, including

the State Capitol building in Albany.[1] Because many of his buildings have been lost, New London might be considered ground zero for the work of this important architect, who designed the following as well as the Bulkeley School: The Jonathan Newton Harris House (1859-60) at 130 Broad Street; Harris Place at 165 State Street; and the granite Congregational church (1850) at 66 Union Street. [2]

The property for the Bulkeley School was given to the Bulkeley trustees by the city. The building costs were considerably more than anticipated – $40,000 – and additional funds were raised. How little the growth of the city was then anticipated may be gathered from the fact that when the school opened, it provided seating capacity for only forty-two pupils in the main study hall. Over the years additions were made with the help of many donations and several bequests.

Gelatin glass negative print, probably by Everett A. Scholfield, 1875, Mystic Seaport archives.

When the school opened in September 1873, it replaced another public/private high school on Huntington Street known as the Bartlett High School.[3] What was left of Bartlett's endowment funds were added to Bulkeley's. The first graduation class from Bulkeley took place in 1875. By 1920 there had been well over 800 graduates all told, though there was no graduating class in 1917 due to the war. The largest classes were in the 1930s when there were up to 600 boys in attendance.

Through the 19th century, free education was offered to younger children through the local district system, with only something like 20 percent going on to higher

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[1] See, Kathryn E. Holliday, "Leopold Eidlitz and the Architecture of 19th century America, University of Texas, Austin, https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/12108. Kenneth Franklin Jacob, " Leopold Eidlitz: Becoming an American Architecture, U. of Pa. (2005) https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/76388494.pdf.

[2] The Jonathan Newton Harris house (1859-60) was built for businessman and mayor. Starting in the 1890s it served as a school and then became a church, which it is to this day (United Methodist). The house has a unique combination of Gothic detailing and an Italianate form. The building's siting on a hill with a huge front yard gives the building a commanding presence on Broad Street.

[3] The Bartlett Grammar School was created by a bequest from Robert Bartlett in 1678. At the time, a "grammar" school connoted a secondary school emphasizing Latin and Greek designed to prepare boys for college. In time, grammar schools in America came to be comprehensive schools, bridging the gap between primary and high school. Accordingly, the Bartlett school was renamed the Bartlett High School in 1855. It was located on Huntington Street. Why Leonard Bulkeley did not leave his legacy for the improvement of Bartlett High remains a question. Some news articles mention a story about a group of truant boys pelting him with stones. This event supposedly spurred him to wanting to provide better educational opportunities for boys in New London. But this story does not explain what Leonard Bulkeley found wanting about Bartlett. In 1896 a new Bartlett *Grammar* School (elementary school) was built at 216 Broad Street. Today this building is a private office building.

education. Bulkeley was free to New London boys aged 12 to 21 years. The tuition cost was supported by the endowment, by donations, by money contributed by the town, and eventually by tuition from out-of-town students. But the school was not open to *all* boys who might have wanted to attend. It was selective. According to Leonard Bulkeley's will, the school was to be open to those "who shall pass an examination in a manner satisfactory to the said trustees." What exact factors entered into the trustees' decision will never be known, but they were in charge – not a school board elected by or answerable to taxpayers.

Even into the 20th century, Bulkeley boys continued to have to pass entrance tests, and a high proportion went on to college. But initially, as with other similar schools of the time, there were two tracks: a classical course, which was considered a prerequisite for those who could afford college, and a practical, business course, for boys destined to go straight to work after graduation. The school was also known for its athletics, with its particular rival being Norwich Free Academy. In 1951 it won the all-New England basketball championship. It also excelled in debating contests. It was considered one of the best secondary schools in the state.

It may seem surprising that a history of the Bulkeley School as an important New London institution has yet to be written.[4] However, a survey of education in New London has not yet been written either, much less a history of school integration. The best there is dates from 1894. A short summary in *The Whaling City* (1976) by Robert Owen Decker is based on that earlier work.[5]

Judging from a survey of Bulkeley School yearbooks, the student population was quite diverse, ethnically speaking. Interesting, Leonard Bulkeley's will included the following statement: "My wish is that no priest or clergyman be ever employed as a teacher in said school." Clearly, Bulkeley School was to be a non-sectarian school open to New London boys of all faiths. However, very few Black faces may be found in the yearbooks. One young man of color I was able to identify was Edward Wilson Baxter, who is pictured as part of the football team in 1912 and in the Class of 1914. A little research shows that Baxter was born in Virginia in 1892, was working as a teamster on Bank Street when he was drafted in 1917, and died the next year, in 1918, whether as a consequence of military service or not is unclear. His gravestone stands in Jordan Cemetery, Waterford: "Aged 26 years/Only Colored graduate from Bulkeley High

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[4] The New London County Historical Society, the New London Public Library, and New London Landmarks all have archives of materials on the Bulkeley School. In addition to the yearbooks, there is the Bulkeley News 1(913-1921), the Bulkeley Banner (Vols. 1 & 2 from 1952-53), a school directory, photographs, and other items at the New London Public Library.

[5] Private schools had long operated in New London with both private tuition and per pupil city stipends. Robert Owen Decker's *The Whaling City* includes a cursory overview of education in New London. Decker bases his review on an essay by Benjamin Stark (1820-1898), "An Historical Sketch of the Schools of New London, 1645-1895," in Records and Papers of the NLCHS, Vol II. (1895-1904). Decker does not address the question of school integration except to mention the one run by Ichabod Pease in 1837 and the introduction of free night schools for boys over 15 in 1867. See, https://archive.org/details/recordspapersofn02newl/page/n21/mode/2up See also "Ichabod Pease" by Tom Schuch, https://visitnewlondon.org/black-heritage-trail/ichabod-pease/

School." In later years there were undoubtedly others. I found one pictured in the class of 1930, but no name.[6]

The Bulkeley School building had various additions over the years, starting with an assembly room and laboratories in 1899 and further additions in 1912, 1922 and 1934. When the city purchased the school building from the trustees in 1951, the Bulkeley endowment was put into a scholarship fund, now administered by the Community Foundation.

The building eventually became the city's recreation offices, and then it stood vacant for a time. In 1976 the city considered demolishing it. The Mohegan Tribe acquired the building for offices and demolished one the additions for a parking garage. In 1992 the building was chosen as the new home of the Regional Multicultural Magnet School. In 2003 the building was renovated and expanded, with the older additions being replaced with a substantial new brick building attached to the original structure. An article in the *Waterford Times* by Asheley Plaisted-St Piere (19 March 2004) explained that the magnet school had been founded "to integrate students of different race and heritage, creating a school geared toward diversity in the community."

The Bulkeley Family

Little has been published about the school's donor: Leonard Hallam Bulkley (later spelled Bulkeley). He was the last representative of an early and prominent New London family, descendants of the English immigrant, the Rev. Peter Bulkley (1583-1659), founder of the town of Concord, Massachusetts. Peter Bulkley had two wives who provided him with thirteen offspring and many descendants, including Ralph Waldo Emerson. According to an early 19th-century history:

> Mr. Bulkly was twice married. By his first wife he had nine sons and two daughters; and by his second wife [Grace], the amiable daughter of Sir Richard Chitwood, he had three sons and one daughter. Old age, and its numerous infirmities, at length coming upon him, put an end to his zealous and useful labours. He was afraid of out-living his work, and died March 9, 1659, aged seventy-seven years. He was an excellent scholar, a thundering preacher, a judicious divine, a strict observer of the sabbath, an exemplary Christian, and one who was esteemed as a father, a prophet, and a counsellor in the new commonwealth.[7]

One of his offspring – the firstborn of his second wife, Grace – was the Rev. Gershom Bulkley (1636-1713), who was the second pastor of New London. Gershom's mother, Grace, then a widow, accompanied her son to New London where she lived next door to the meetinghouse for the rest of her life. (She died in 1669.) Gershom was also a

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[6] The history of race relations in New London has begun to be better known although school integration has yet to be tackled as a topic. See Madison Taylor, "Meeting Unmet Needs...." in Connecticut College Digital Commons. https://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1057&context=histhp.

[7] Benjamin Brook, *The Lives of the Puritans*, Vol. 3 (1813), available online.

medical practitioner and ended his career in that capacity in Glastonbury.

The story of how Grace Bulkley came to the New World is an interesting one. Apparently the Rev. Peter Bulkley went home to England to marry her. Pregnant with her first child as she boarded the ship, Grace became deathly ill during the voyage. All thought Grace had died, but her husband refused to consign her remains to the sea, as was the usual custom in such cases, wanting instead to bury his new wife in the New World. Three days later, it was noticed that Grace was showing slight signs of life and instead of being buried upon her arrival in Massachusetts, Grace was carried from the ship as an invalid. She soon recovered, and in December 1636 she gave birth to a healthy son, named Gershom, a biblical reference to Moses's firstborn son, meaning "sojourner" or "exile" (Caulkins' New London, 132).[8]

Grace Bulkley is said to have lived near the meetinghouse even after her son had departed for Glastonbury, but exactly where is unclear. Perhaps it was on part of what became the Bulkeley School property. However, Bulkeley Place wasn't named for another two hundred years, about 1887, soon after the school was built. Before the 1870s, the nearby street was called Town Square. The school's front entrance overlooked Huntington Street.

One of the Rev. Gershom Bulkley's descendants was Captain Charles Bulkley, Leonard's father. Captain Bulkley was among America's first officers of the U.S. Navy. When Charles Bulkley died at age 95 in 1848, he was called "the oldest seaman of New London – perhaps of any generation (Caulkins, 574)." During the Revolution he served under New London's Captain Elisha Hinman in the *Alfred* and was taken prisoner by the British. Imprisoned near Portsmouth, England, he and a group of fellow Americans escaped by tunneling under the prison walls and from there managed a daring escape to France. They arrived home in 1779 (Caulkins, 537).

Captain Charles Bulkley and his wife Elizabeth Hallam had five children, with Leonard Hallam Bulkley being the last survivor and only heir of the widowed Captain Bulkley. The family's property included a building at what today is 111 Bank Street, known as the Bulkeley House (much altered). The family had owned a house there even before the Revolution, but it was burned in the incendiary raid of Benedict Arnold in 1781. The family rebuilt the home about 1790. According to Richard B. Wall, writing history columns in The Day in the early 1900s, this was the Bulkeley family's "homestead." Leonard Bulkley's probate record (Ancestry.com) lists one house and lot on Bank Street valued at $4,400 and a store, lot, and wharf on Bank Street valued at $4,600.

The family's wealth derived from the importation of Jamaica rum and later from a vinegar business, which was operated in a facility next door to the homestead, on its south side (building not extant). Leonard's grandfather, Charles Bulkley, Sr. (1710-1763), died a wealthy man. His probate included property on both sides of Bank Street

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[8] Frances M. Caulkins, *History of New London, Connecticut, from the first survey of the coast in 1612 to 1860* (1895). Published several times from 1852.

and a wharf, 566 gallons of rum, estates in Colchester and Haddam, and four enslaved people including a young girl named Judy, left specifically to his daughters.[9]

Leonard Bulkeley died at age 58, only a year after his father. It is said that the family also had property near the site of today's Bulkeley School, but if so, it is not listed in either Leonard's or his father's probate records.[10] In any event, having no immediate family of his own, Leonard left the bulk of his estate to found the new school.

Meetinghouse Chronology

Because the site of the Bulkeley School is near the location of New London's colonial-era meetinghouses, a review of these is needed. This review is based on the work of New London's premier historian, Frances M. Caulkins, in her *History of New London* (1895 edition). It is not based on our own primary source research.

The original plan for New London, as envisioned by John Winthrop, Jr., was typical for the time. The heart of the settlement would be sited on a high hill, in this case overlooking the deep natural harbor of New London. Meetinghouse Hill, as it was called, is today in the vicinity of Granite and Hempstead Streets, bordering what is known as the Post Hill district.

The minister's house-lot was established in 1650 on this hill – 3 acres, occupying the space between the burying ground and Williams Street, along the north side of Granite. A home for the first minister, Mr. Richard Blinman (1615-1687), was built here. Blinman was called to New London from Gloucester (Cape Ann), Massachusetts, and with him came a portion of his congregation, including perhaps the wealthiest in the group, Obadiah Bruen. Most of the group were assigned house lots on the western edge of the community: Cape Ann Lane (Jefferson Avenue). But Mr. Buren was accorded a house-lot on the then prestigious Meetinghouse Hill.

The Bulkeley School from Huntington Street, when it was new. The bell tower over the main entrance has been lost. The turret of the house at 236 Hempstead Street is visible in background at right.
- Courtesy of the New London Public Library.

[9] See, Bruce P. Stark, *The Myth and Reality of Slavery in Eastern Connecticut: The Brownes of Salem and Absentee Land Ownership* (2023), page 32 note: The descendants of Rev. Gershom Buckeley (Buckley), the former minister in New London, are documented as "the most prominent family in 18th-century Colchester, and the largest slave-holding one." Thanks to Tom Schuch for this reference. Tom is currently working on several path-breaking projects on the history of slavery in eastern Connecticut.

[10] Into the 19th century, a large area near the Town Square was owned by the Hallam family. Leonard's mother was a Hallam. Perhaps Leonard had a business there, but this has yet to be documented.

As Caulkins explains it, the only roads in the early days were a few unnamed, narrow, and rutted paths extending out from the meetinghouse. Only in the 1800s were New London's streets finally improved and given names. It was Obadiah Bruen who donated a portion of his property to the town and then sold what was left in 1653 to William Hough (p. 71) who in turn sold it to the town. In this way, the area came to be expanded.

The first meetinghouse was a converted barn on the house-lot of Robert Parke, in the vicinity of Hempstead and Granite Streets, likely near today's Annunciation Chapel (now part of the Greek Orthodox church complex). In 1655 the first purpose-built meetinghouse was constructed on the highway at the corner of what had been Bruen's homelot – in the area later called Town Square. Generations later, in Caulkins' day, this vicinity became the site of the city's alms-house (109).

Caulkins notes that the site was at a higher elevation in colonial times than it is today. Earth and rock were later removed from the site to provide fill for the pond and marsh that is now Water Street. On the north side of the new meetinghouse was "the lot reserved for purposes of sepulture." The bounds of the burying ground, now known as the "Ancientist," were recorded on 6 June 1653.

At the rear of Meetinghouse Hill was the town pound, used for confining stray farm animals until their owners could pay for their release.[11] This facility was completed in 1663 or 1664. The pound was on the corner of what today is Williams and Vauxhall, and here it remained for 150 years, long known as Pound Corner even after its demise. Also on Town Square was the first jail. In 1724 the first courthouse was built at the southeast corner of Meetinghouse Square. The courthouse continued in use until 1767. At times a gallows was erected at the rear of the meetinghouse, "near the corner of Granite Street (577)."[12] Obviously, the original dimensions of the Town Square were considerably larger than in Caulkins' time.

In 1667, the house-lot south of the meetinghouse, which had belonged to Mr. Bruen, was purchased by the town "for the ministry." There a parsonage was built for the new minister, Simon Bradstreet. This house was eventually given to Bradstreet to be his own property. In 1677-78, the Second Meetinghouse was built alongside the old meetinghouse. The new meetinghouse wasn't finally finished with box pews until about 1690. This became known as the Bradstreet meetinghouse. There was quite an uproar about its location, some people wanting an entirely new location chosen and others wanting the site of the new house to stay put. The latter group won, at least temporarily.

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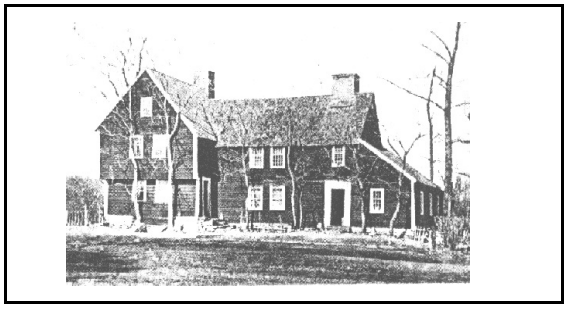
[11] Impounded animals included horses, cows, pigs, sheep – animals who when not confined would naturally help themselves to other people's crops. Stray dogs were not impounded. Sometimes the town voted to let pigs roam freely for the ensuring year because they could be counted on to clean up garbage in the street and other public places.

[12] The execution of 12-year old Hannah Ocuish (1774-1786) took place here. Hannah was found guilty of the murder of the six-year old Eunice Bolles. For more, see https://connecticuthistory.org/a-most-unusual-criminal-execution-in-new-london-2/

Caulkins attempts to answer the question of why anyone would want to build a meetinghouse on the top of a windswept, steep, inconvenient hill. Her answer is that the meetinghouse was not only a place of worship; it was also the place for town meetings. It likewise served as a tower and beacon for miles around, a look-out post. Further, Caulkins thought it was an aesthetic choice. She writes, ". . . . to them [it was] the position of beauty, propriety, and adaptation" (191). Certainly, early New England towns customarily built their meetinghouses at the highest convenient elevation. But judging from the generations' of fights about its location, not everyone thought Meetinghouse Hill a good spot for such an important building.



After the Bradstreet meetinghouse was finished, the old meetinghouse was sold to Captain James Avery of Groton in 1684 for £6. Capt. Avery floated it across the Thames River and then hauled it over to Groton (Poquonnock Road and Long Hill - Rte 1) and incorporated it into a homestead built by his father. It became known as the Hive of the Averys. It burned down from cinders from a passing train in 1894. There's a monument there now, across from a strip mall shopping center.

In 1694, the relatively new Bradstreet meetinghouse burned down. It was supposed that arson was involved. Some blamed the radical Protestant sect known as the Rogerenes. Some of their members were charged with the crime but were found not guilty in court. Caulkins believed that had the Rogerenes actually been involved in the arson, they surely would have been severely punished. Her implication is that the true guilty ones belonged to the party who had wanted another location for the meetinghouse. In any event, the Saltonstall meetinghouse was eventually built at the same location where the Bradstreet meetinghouse had been.

Gurdon Saltonstall (1666-1724) was the next minister until becoming Governor of the colony in 1708. During Saltonstall's tenure, the first bell at the meetinghouse was installed. Saltonstall purchased land and built his own parsonage.

The next minister, from 1710 to 1753, was perhaps New London's most influential as well as longest-serving: The Rev Eliphalet Adams (1677-1753). Adams steered the congregation through the fury of the Great Awakening and the ensuing sectarian rivalry.[13] With other denominations coming into being and outlying villages separating and becoming towns in their own right, church business finally had to be separated from town business and civil affairs. Thus, in 1726 the First Ecclesiastical Society of New London was established. This was the start of the separation of church and state.

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[13] See, Peter S. Onuf, "A Group Portrait of the Separatists," WMQ, vol. 37, No. 4, Oct. 1980. https://www.jstor.org/stable/1919403

In 1735 lighting struck the Saltonstall meetinghouse and did much damage, killing one and injuring many. Discussion on building a new church again involved much controversy as to where the meetinghouse should be located. After much strife, the congregation decided to repair and enlarge the Saltonstall meetinghouse with a new bell, a new belfry, new windows, and an updated facade. Predictably, there was much collective foot-dragging, and it wasn't until 1746 that the remodeled Saltonstall/Adams meetinghouse was finally finished. This building lasted another generation.

The year 1786 is given as the date of the last sermon preached in the Saltonstall/Adams meetinghouse, but by then it was being used only occasionally. The pulpit and pews had already been sold to the church at Stonington Point. It was in that year that a new Congregational Church was built down the hill at State and Union Street, atop a granite outcropping known as Zion Hill. This church was named the Channing meetinghouse. It was damaged by fire in 1849, and a new Gothic edifice, designed by Leopold Eidlitz, took its place. It remains to this day though the congregation is gone.

In 1794 the area that had formerly been the location of both the meetinghouse and the courthouse was laid out for a road and a green space, known as "Old Meetinghouse Green" (later part of Bulkeley Place). In 1800 an almshouse was constructed on or near this Green. Before this time, the poor had been farmed out to families, supported by contract with the town. But before the Revolution, a small house at the corner of Truman and Blinman (believed to be 77 Truman, the former "Shepherd's Tent"), had served as the almshouse. By the close of the 18th century, there had been a considerable increase in the numbers of poor infirm and homeless, and so a brick building, measuring 36 feet x 44 feet, was constructed near where the meetinghouses had been.

According to town minutes, the almshouse was to be known as the "Poor and Bettering House" and was to serve as "a home for the poor, and also a work-house and place of detention for rogues, vagabonds, sturdy beggars, idle, dissolute, and disorderly persons, runaways, stubborn children, and servants, common drunkards, night-walkers, pilferers, and all persons who neglect their callings . . . . also all persons under distraction [insane] whose friends of relations do not confine them."

A new almshouse or "town farm" was established on the outskirts of town at Garfield Avenue about 1867. This was later incorporated into a complex that included the Memorial Hospital in 1917.

In May 1896, at the city's 250th anniversary celebrations, the cornerstone of a new statue was commemorated in Bulkeley Place. The statue, created by celebrated sculptor, Bela Lyon Pratt, was of New London's founder, John Winthrop Jr. (Pratt was an Avery descendant and Norwich native.) Unveiled in 1906, today the statue is within a kind of traffic island, surrounded by gardens maintained by the city's Beautification Committee. Another major change in the vicinity was the elimination of Richards Street.

1868 Map of New London. The map for some reason fails to show the "Poor & Bettering House" within the Town Square, though an earlier map contained in the title report does show it in that location.

The narrative above starts with the title chain researched by Thomas Couser. From there we looked at primary and secondary sources, including census records, city directories, newspaper accounts, maps, local and family histories, cemetery and military service records. This is by no means an exhaustive search but is meant to give an idea of the history of the building and of a site central in New London's history.

– Mary Beth Baker for New London Landmarks, January 4, 2023