

communityprofile



Hartford's skyline rises behind Bushnell Park. On the far right is the Travelers Tower, built in the 1920s and for many years the tallest building in New England.

Insuring the Future Hartford, Connecticut revisits a chapter of its history this summer with a replica of the schooner *Amistad*, but the ship's visit also hails dynamic plans for the 400-year-old city's future.

By Pamela Prescott

A REPLICA OF THE *AMISTAD* SCHOONER will moor for two weeks this summer at Hartford's newly constructed State Street Landing on the Connecticut River. In its first season out of Mystic Seaport's shipyard in southeast Connecticut, the floating museum explores race relations and the history of slavery.

The story began in Cuba in 1839 aboard a schooner named the *Amistad*,

which carried 53 Africans who had been illegally captured in Sierra Leone and sold in the Cuban slave market. Connecticut became part of the tale when the ship, which had been commandeered by the captives, drifted northward from Cuba. The legal battle over the Africans' destiny brought them to the U.S. Circuit Court at Hartford. (See the sidebar, "The Story of the *Amistad*," page 50.) The event captured the imaginations of Americans, and the ensuing court battle was a stage for the

debate over the issue of slavery.

City officials hope the new *Amistad* will be a stage for Hartford's riverfront and economic renewal.

"*Amistad* is attracting people from all over the country, and they'll see our region has an awful lot to offer," says John Bazzano, the chief of staff for Hartford's mayor, Michael P. Peters.

Officials are estimating more than 50,000 people will visit the exhibit, which will encourage visitors to retrace the footsteps of the 43 surviving shack-

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The Story of the *Amistad*

How a Cuban ship carrying Africans came to Connecticut.

The trial of 43 Africans in Hartford was part of a three-year story that began in Africa in 1839.

After being kidnapped in Sierra Leone, a shipload of Africans was brought to the Cuban slave market in Havana, even though importing Africans was illegal in Cuba. Forty-nine of the captives, all men, were sold to a sugar planter named Jose Ruiz. Ruiz and a companion, Pedro Montes, who had purchased three young girls and a boy from another slave ship, chartered passage for themselves and the Africans to their plantations in Puerto Principe aboard the *Amistad*. By now the captives had been registered as legal, Cuban-born slaves.

Three days into that journey, the captives seized control of the *Amistad*, killing the captain and a crew member.

For two months, Ruiz and Montes followed the mutineers' instructions to sail east, toward Africa, by day, but redirected *Amistad* north by night through the Bahamas and up the North American coastline. During the revolt and the voyage, 10 of the Africans died. Eventually, the schooner was taken into custody off Long Island by the American naval brig, the *U.S.S. Washington*, commanded by Lt. Richard W. Meade.

The 43 surviving Africans were jailed near New Haven,



The Freedom Schooner Amistad, a replica of the 19th Century schooner, built at Mystic Seaport.

where the legal battle over them began. The case moved to the U.S. Circuit Court at Hartford where, in the courtroom of Hartford's Old Statehouse, the same building where the first U.S. Constitution was written in 1818, abolitionist lawyers representing the Africans successfully argued for their humanity and their freedom.

While the Spanish embassy issued formal demands that the Africans be returned to Cuba to be tried for mutiny and murder, the American lawyers successfully argued that the Africans had been kidnapped contrary to international treaties, and therefore had the right to escape in any way they could. More important, they were not the property of anyone, but human beings possessing the right to return to their homeland.

The Africans eventually were moved to a temporary home in Farmington, a town southwest of Hartford, while money was raised to pay for their return to Sierra Leone. They were returned to their homeland in 1842, but only after two appeals to the original court ruling, including one to the U.S. Supreme Court by then President Martin Van Buren. Among the Africans' legal advocates was former President and U.S. Representative John Quincy Adams, who argued their case before the Supreme Court. ■

led Africans as they walked from the river's edge to the Old Statehouse for their trial.

The *Amistad* replica, which took two years to construct, will return every summer to Hartford because of the city's and the region's role in supporting the cause for the return of the captives to their homeland.

Riverfront leads renewal

Amistad's annual visit signals bigger things for Hartford's riverfront revital-

ization efforts. Altogether, more than a billion dollars in residential, retail, business, educational, and entertainment developments have been proposed along the Connecticut River and downtown. As those projects begin to take shape, officials are hoping *Amistad* will be the first of many ships to come in for Connecticut's capital city.

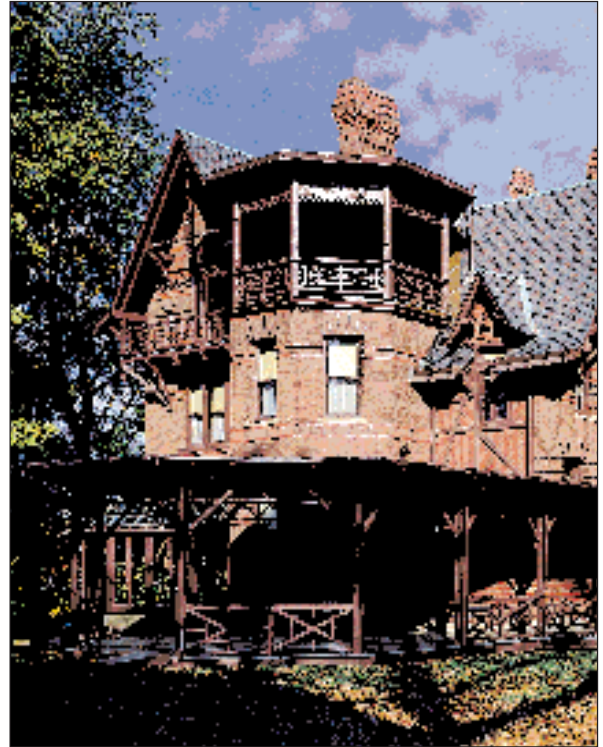
"We want people to be in downtown Hartford 24 hours a day, living there, spending money," says Marc

Nicol, the director of park planning and development for Riverfront Recapture, Inc., a nonprofit organization guiding the way to restoring Metro Hartford's river access.

On Labor Day last year, Riverfront Recapture dedicated its \$22 million Downtown Plaza that takes pedestrians over the triple obstacles of Interstate 91, Hartford's dike wall and the Connecticut Southern Railroad's track down to the river's edge and the State Street Landing. One final hurdle

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*LEFT, The Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Arch in Bushnell Park. A band shell was recently built for concerts in the park, which is a popular gathering place in downtown. ABOVE, The house where Mark Twain lived from 1874 to 1891. While living here he wrote *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. BELOW, Rowers on the Connecticut River.*



for the Downtown Plaza is being surmounted as a \$4.1 million walkway is under construction to bring pedestrians safely over the busiest intersection in all of Connecticut. The walkway will cross Columbus Boulevard to connect the new plaza with Hartford's historic downtown. It's scheduled for completion next April.

Described as "one of the most heroic waterfront projects in the United States," Riverfront Recapture's plan won the 1997 Waterfront Project of the Year Award from the Waterfront Center, a national organization that encourages such redevelopment. Hartford's efforts also have included reestablishing access to the 61-acre Riverside Park, designed in the 1880s by America's legendary landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted

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as “an outdoor living room” for downtown tenement dwellers.

This summer, Riverfront Recapture staff members have been organizing “the biggest fireworks display ever” at the new Downtown Plaza for July 1, and the wacky Mark Twain Days, complete with frog-jumping races, for the first weekend in August. The Twain festival annually attracts 100,000 people and this year will overlap with *Amistad*’s visit. Nicol muses on his nonprofit organization’s success. “We had 650,000 people in the riverfront parks last year. That’s a 10-fold increase over 10 years ago. We think we’re doing the right thing for downtown.”

Attracting tourists and other entertainment seekers is one part of the formula for Hartford’s economic rejuvenation. “Bringing people into the city, into the downtown, is all part of economic development,” says Bazzano.

Tourists, he says, have the possibility of becoming part of the future “employment mix” because they are already familiar with some of the area’s amenities.

An unemployment rate of 2.6 percent forces Hartford area employers to rely on workers’ willingness to come to them from the region and other parts of the country. About 1.2 million people live within a 30-minute drive of downtown Hartford.

Hartford is emerging from the recession of the early 1990s that drained away six percent of its population due to job losses, according to the Connecticut Policy and Economic Council (CPEC). The only other out-migration from Hartford that compares in this century was during the 1970s manufacturing recession.

“Insurance companies, banks, and other financial institutions were downsizing and right-sizing,” Bazzano says. “The whole Northeast was hit pretty

hard by that in the early 1990s.”

Hartford also struggles with a phenomenon affecting all urban centers—employers moving in concentric rings away from the city. While Hartford and nearby cities of East Hartford and New Britain collectively lost 31,000 jobs in the past 30 years, some smaller, outlying suburbs on good transportation routes saw job growth of more than 500 percent, according to CPEC.

Pauline Olsen, MD recalls a much busier downtown when she came to Hartford in 1977 to work as a staff ob/gyn at St. Francis Hospital.

“When I came to Hartford, there were far more businesses downtown and many more stores for shopping. Then the nationwide developments that led to the decline in urban living affected Hartford’s downtown as well. There really was an exodus,” says Olsen, 64, a native of Dublin, Ireland.

Olsen cited the roof collapse on the Hartford Civic Center’s sports arena in 1978, just three years after the complex had been built, as a symptom of the city’s earlier decline. Hartford’s National Hockey League team, the Whalers, had to relocate to Springfield, Massachusetts until repairs were finished in 1980. It’s not surprising then that the Whalers left Hartford again in 1997 in the midst of recession—this time for North Carolina, and this time for good.

That was about the time of an awakening in the community’s leadership to save Hartford, Bazzano says. “We’ve had a coming together of a lot of people to make things happen here. We were pretty low, and people were saying “The city has too much to offer to have it fall on its face. There are too many talented people here to let that happen.”

In late 1997, the CEO of Phoenix Home Life Mutual Insurance Company, Robert Fiondella, introduced a grand

POPULATION:

Hartford: 131,640, Hartford County: 844,980

CLIMATE:

Annual rainfall: 43 in., Annual snowfall: 53 in.

AVERAGE HIGH/LOW TEMPERATURES:

January 33°/16°, July 85°/62°

Days of sunshine: 188

TRANSPORTATION:

AIRPORTS — Bradley International Airport, 20 minutes north in Windsor Locks

RAIL — Amtrak

BUS — Greyhound, Bonanza, and Peter Pan/Trailways

INTERSTATES — Interstate 91 south to New Haven (36 miles) and New York City (113 miles)

and north to Springfield, MA, (28 miles);

Interstate 84 northeast to Boston (102 miles)

and southeast to Danbury (58 miles)

COST OF LIVING:

Indexed at 123 (100 is average)

Median home price: \$146,640

Per capita income: Hartford — \$16,821

Hartford County — \$28,698

development project for the Hartford waterfront. Concurrently, a task force of community, business, and government leaders put together a MetroHartford Millennium Project with comprehensive strategies for job growth, economic health, and enhanced quality of life in the greater Hartford area.

Fiondella’s plan was adopted by Connecticut Governor John G. Rowland as the state’s contribution to revitalizing Hartford. It is called Adriaen’s Landing, named after Dutch explorer Adriaen Block, who in 1614 was the first European to reach Hartford. The \$775 million development plan includes a \$190 million convention center, retail, housing, parking facilities, and a new Downtown Higher Education Center in an old downtown department store, plus a new stadium two miles away in East Hartford for the University of Connecticut. To fund the project, the state has pledged \$455 million, the federal government \$15 million, and Hartford’s private sector has ponied up

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\$210 million.

Construction of the convention center, to be the largest in the region outside Boston and New York, is scheduled to begin in February 2001, and targeted for completion in 2003, says Bazzano.

The package includes \$60 million for new housing in the city's neighborhoods and downtown, says Brendan Fox, the executive director of the Capitol City Economic Development Authority, which oversees the state's downtown redevelopment efforts.

The agency also has been working in job skills training and in attracting new businesses to Hartford. For example, Hartford will be the global headquarters for the Internet start-up firm eCharity.com, a development expected to bring 100 to 150 new jobs to the city by the end of the year and possibly up to 1,000 jobs within eight years. The new firm offers charities electronic payment services so donors can make contributions via the Web. It announced its decision to come to Hartford in May.

"We've just started to attract the new wave of computer-based jobs, and we've got more work to do in that area," Fox says. "With Hartford's proximity to New York and Boston and some of the best technology infrastructure around, it's a growth area for us."

Olsen agrees "there's a sense of renewal" in downtown Hartford because of the Adriaen's Landing plan as well as more modest endeavors on the part of individuals. "Vacant buildings are being remodeled, and people are buying older homes in downtown," she says.

Insurance leaders

Even as she has watched the city's economy wane and wax, Olsen's career in Hartford has steadily expanded.

After three years on the St. Francis staff, Olsen left to join a small group

practice. A year later, she went solo, then took on a partner. Gradually, her group grew to five ob/gyns, until January 1999, when it consolidated with a group of six others.

Her group also has allied with Women's Health of Connecticut, a management group for about 140 ob/gyns in the state. Late last year, it set up a Web site for women to contact their physicians.

"The response to that has been very positive, especially for questions about prenatal care," she says.

Propelling Olsen's practice to ever wider associations is the need for bargaining power. Managed care dominates Connecticut, due to the many insurance companies located here. Hartford's reputation as the Insurance Capital of the World, as the MetroHartford Chamber of Commerce boasts, comes from the seven major firms which call Hartford home: Aetna Inc., Travelers Property Casualty Corp., MassMutual, The Hartford Financial Services Group, CIGNA, Phoenix Home Life Mutual Insurance Company, LincolnLife, and The United Health Care Company.

Gary Cohen, MD, the president of a 27-physician primary care group in Hartford, says having so many insurance companies in town makes them "more annoying to deal with," yet there's also an advantage.

"They tend to look here for local opinion, and often what we say becomes national policy for them. They're making all sorts of medical policy decisions, and we do have some input," says Cohen, an internist.

Cohen, a New Jersey native who came to Hartford 20 years ago, looks with some skepticism at all the plans for Hartford's redevelopment.

"There's a big future for this area, I

just don't think it's downtown," Cohen says of greater Hartford. "The surrounding area is growing by leaps and bounds. The suburbs are very nice, they offer a nice way to live."

The area also is attractive as a midway point between Boston and New York. Since he has a daughter working in New York City and in-laws in France, Cohen visits those major cities often. "For people who go to Europe a lot like I do, it's easy to get there from here," he says.

Nonetheless, Cohen enjoys the music and sports events that come to downtown Hartford.

"I've got tickets this summer for Steely Dan and Britney Spears. Britney is predominantly for my kids and Steely Dan is predominantly for me," Cohen says, adding, "We get everything here: Bruce Springsteen, Elton John, Sting, Eric Clapton. I've seen all of them."

Cohen balances the popular culture with some of the more traditional cultural offerings in Hartford. "The Hartford Symphony is a really class orchestra, and at The Bushnell, they have Broadway performances and other world-class series. Hartford Stage is a Tony-Award winning company, and there's TheaterWorks, another professional theater that does less-known plays. I have season tickets to them."

"Intellectually, there's plenty to do here," Cohen says, and adds that there are some fine sports events as well.

A tennis fan, he's enthusiastic about Hartford getting the FoxForce, a World Team Tennis franchise that begins its season in July at the State Armory.

"Collegewise, it's pretty amazing that we've had two championship teams in two years at the University of Connecticut with the women winning the WNCAA championship this year,

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and the men won last year. This is a major area for college sports.”

Training ground

Hartford is a major area for graduate medical education with two regional tertiary hospitals, St. Francis and Hartford Hospital, serving as teaching hospitals for the University of Connecticut's medical school.

“We do a significant amount of training,” says Jose Missri, MD, the vice president of medical affairs at St. Francis. Many of the students are international, and some decide to stay in Hartford once they've completed their training, says Missri, a cardiologist.

“A lot of our trainees do go back home to fulfill their requirements, but then they can find an ‘underserved area’ here in the community clinics in some areas of Hartford so they can qualify for permanent residency status,” he says.

Of 30 cities in the Hartford region, the capital city has the lowest per capita income at \$19,210, compared with a regional average of \$34,749, based on 1998 U.S. Census figures as reported by CPEC. Its median age, 29.4, was also the lowest in the region, another indicator of low-income populations which are typically underserved.

Thanks to what Cohen calls the “graying of Hartford medicine,” as middle-aged physicians move into retirement age, there are opportunities in private practices as well.

“There's going to be a lot of doors opening up as people approach retirement,” Missri says, “and even now there are some good opportunities because many practices are adding people.”

At 36, James Flaherty, MD is the youngest partner in a three-surgeon group. He specializes in laparoscopic esophageal surgery, having received his specialized training in Olsen's home town

of Dublin.

A native of West Hartford, he chose to return to Hartford to be near his parents. He attributes the warm welcome he's received from the surgical community to the fact that he brought new, minimally invasive techniques to his hometown.

“New Englanders are supposed to be pretty cold to outsiders,” Flaherty says, “but people seem pretty open to newcomers, especially in the community of surgeons. In fact, it welcomes new, legitimate technologies and the people who use them.”

Historic foundation

While he's enjoying professional success with his new surgical technique, Flaherty also enjoys the historic culture of his hometown.

“When my professor from Ireland came to visit, we took him around to all the historic places like the Old State House, the Harriet Beecher Stowe House and the Mark Twain House. He was fascinated.”

Events surrounding these sites as well as the *Amistad* are just a few of the many chapters in Hartford's nearly four centuries of history since the arrival of European settlers.

“The history of Hartford is quite amazing for a city its size,” says Bazzano.

Besides being the venue for the 1818 Constitutional Convention and the *Amistad* trial, Hartford's Old Statehouse, designed by Boston architect Charles Bulfinch, was the first statehouse in the nation.

Mark Twain and Harriet Beecher Stowe were neighbors and members of Hartford's artistic and socially conscious society in the late 1800s. After 1852, Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* fed the abolitionist movement. While living in his Victorian mansion here from 1874 to 1891, Twain penned his legendary

Adventures of Tom Sawyer, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. Other neighbors were Harriet's sister Isabella Beecher Hooker, a suffragist and women's rights activist, Isabella's husband John Hooker, a lawyer and an abolitionist, and William Gillette, a playwright and actor famous for his portrayal of Sherlock Holmes.

Hartford's founding dates to the mid-1600s, when the Rev. Thomas Hooker and other settlers trekked west from the Massachusetts Bay area to the fertile Connecticut River valley. The parson's preaching inspired a colonial government that functioned quite autonomously from England as a Puritan experiment.

In the early 18th century, Connecticut's self-sufficient spirit fostered early American industrialization. Manufacturers of textiles, clocks, firearms, and tinware flourished here.

Connecticut's long history produces rich resources for antique hunters, and antiquing is a popular pastime throughout New England. Cardiologist Missri says he sometimes accompanies his wife on her quests. “We have stuff that is really old. It's not just junk, but you've still got to hunt for the good things at a good price.”

This spring, Pauline Olsen actually moved into an antique house. Built in 1769 on Main Street in Farmington, nine miles southwest of Hartford, her home is older than the nation. “It has lots of creaky floors, wonderful foundations and thick, thick walls,” she says.

Olsen attributes her affinity for history to her native Ireland, where “everything is old,” she says. “I've always liked the idea of living in an older home.”

Hartford is a mosaic of long local history, a challenging future for its urban center, and proximity to the Boston-New York megalopolis. For physicians, cultur-

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al diversity and medical developments are always enhancing the community, even as civic leaders scan the horizons for new economic developments.

“The quality of medicine is very good here,” says Internist Cohen. “From cardiology to neurology, bone marrow transplants to organ transplants, there’s not much of anything that isn’t being done right here.” ■

Pam Prescott is a Roscoe, Illinois-based free-lance writer.