“In my opinion the execution of this scheme would give Weston a Town Common of remarkable individuality and in many respects the finest open space of the kind in the Commonwealth,”¹ wrote Arthur A. Shurtleff, Landscape Architect. On February 28, 1912, at a “largely attended public hearing” in Weston, Massachusetts, Shurtleff “explained each of the plans, and with the aid of lantern slides, presented in a masterful manner the pressing necessity of preserving and eventually improving all of the land embraced by what is known as the ‘Town Common Plan.’”²

Counted in the 1906 census, 2,091 residents of Weston, with “number of voters, men... 412 and number of voters, women... 0,” in addition to “horses assessed... 436, cows assessed... 774, fowls assessed... 4,395, and # of Books in Public library...18,847” were recorded in the 1910 Town Report. At that time the “old village square,” or Weston Center, was at the intersection of Central Avenue and Church Street, with the First Parish Church (Fig. 1), the Library, built in 1899, (Fig. 2), and the Jones Tavern (Fig. 3) in their present locations. Across the street were 24 horse sheds owned by First Parish, the Town Hall, which was built in 1847, Cutting's Store (Est. 1833) (Fig. 1), and a harness shop. In addition to being a general store, Cutting's also had a Post Office window, so the Town Square was often crowded with horses, carriages, and

¹ Arthur A. Shurtleff to C. F. Richardson, Chairman Weston Town Committee, March 5, 1912, 1912 Weston Town Report, p. 119.
early automobiles when the mail bag arrived twice a day. Traffic flowed around a central flag pole and the iron watering trough.

Behind Town Hall and Cutting's Store, the land sloped down severely (Fig. 4) and a stream ran from east to west at the lowest elevation (Fig. 5) draining into a pond at the west end of the meadow. The slope of the land allowed access to the basement level of the Town Hall, which served as the fire station. A stable further along Church Street supplied horses, which were hitched to the fire apparatus. Cracks in the walls of the Town Hall, in addition to local lore that the building was not structurally safe when large crowds used the second floor for dances or town meetings, led to discussion of the need for a new Town Hall and Fire Station. A Town Improvement Committee was formed at Town Meeting on March, 1911, “to consider the improvement and development of the centre of the town and securing of proper sites for Town buildings.” With an authorization of $500, that committee hired Landscape Architect Arthur A. Shurtleff to work with them to come up with a plan for an improved Weston Town Center. The choice of Shurtleff as the professional hired by the town was rooted both in Weston history and in the history of the relatively new profession of landscape architecture.

Frederick Law Olmsted, the father of landscape architecture, began a practice in Brookline, Massachusetts, having moved there from New York after designing Central Park. Olmsted, Sr. taught the art of landscape architecture to his young partners at his Brookline home/office for many years before the first structured curricula for professional training in landscape architecture were established at M.I.T. and Harvard in 1900. Olmsted’s stepson, John Charles Olmsted, and Charles Eliot, son of the President of Harvard, were the other partners in the firm when prominent Weston residents became Olmsted clients: in 1893-1894, P. H. Sears, and in 1894, Civil War General C. J. Paine of Highland Avenue.

Arthur A. Shurtleff, an 1894 engineering graduate of Massachusetts Institute of Technology who then did two years of graduate work at Harvard in Architecture, Landscape Architecture, and Civil Engineering, joined the Olmsted firm in 1896. The American Society of Landscape Architects, a professional society founded in January of
1899 by Olmsted and a small nucleus of men and women pioneering in the field, accepted Shurtleff as a member later that year (1899) and granted him honor of becoming a “Fellow” in 1905. Two future members of the Town Improvement Committee and Weston Parks Commission became Olmsted clients at a time when Olmsted, Sr.'s health had deteriorated, Eliot had died, and the work of the firm was being carried out by John Charles Olmsted, F. L. Olmsted, Jr., and Arthur A. Shurtleff. Horace S. Sears, who built 'Haleiwa' on the Boston Post Road, and Weston native, Arthur L. Coburn, who in 1898 married a Weston school teacher and built a house adjacent to the original Weston Golf Club course off of Church Street, hired the Olmsted Brothers firm in 1898. Another Weston resident, C. H. Jones, was a client from 1901-1929. The present Weston Golf Club and all the land comprising the Weston Roads Trust was owned by another future Town Improvement Committee member and Weston Parks Commissioner, Robert Winsor, who built a five story mansion, with a view of Mt. Monadnock, on the present site of the Canadian Consulate and employed Olmsted Brothers from 1904-1928.3

Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. held strong social views about American society, which formed the basis of his vision for the development of the landscape, including parks, for the enjoyment of all people. He believed that pastoral scenery would relieve stress and promote a sense of tranquility. Using the natural terrain of a site as the basis for his design, Olmsted created open greenswards surrounded with scattered groves of trees and relied heavily on native trees, shrubs, groundcovers and vines. Arthur A. Shurtleff's plan for the Town of Weston reflects the influence of Olmsted's design philosophy. Olmsted, Sr. had died in 1903, and after Shurtleff had “completed much of the work left outstanding...in 1905, opened his own offices, carrying on Olmsted's work in the planning and development of Metropolitan Boston.”4 Shurtleff was a natural choice as landscape architect for the Town of Weston when the Town Improvement Committee began its work in 1911.

To C. F. Richardson, Chairman Weston Town Committee, Arthur A. Shurtleff wrote, on March 5, 1912:

“Dear Sir, The plans which I am sending you for the centre of the Town of Weston represent the combined work of your Committee and myself. They are in no sense my own designs merely, but are the expression of the Committee’s feelings and the ideas of many residents who have been present at hearings and who have presented suggestive sketches on the circular of inquiry. I feel that a Town Common of remarkable beauty and dignity can be secured economically as the plans indicate, since the contour of the present streets and the neighboring hillside favors the construction of such an open space and its marginal road. As you know the final scheme for this Town Common or Green was worked out by careful considerations of traffic communication and the contour of the site. The plans were studied on an accurate topographical survey, and were advanced through profiles and cross sections to the final rendered plan.

In my opinion the execution of this scheme would give Weston a Town Common of remarkable individuality and in many respects the finest open space of the kind in the Commonwealth. This plan would also guard the town against congestion at the centre and also avoid further traffic dangers, and at the same time head off the growth of a slum district in the west land behind the present Town-hall.”

The Town Improvement Committee, with whom Shurtleff worked in 1912, consisted of Charles A. Fiske, Jr., Horace S. Sears, Warren P. Adams, Jr., and Robert Winsor, Jr.

Shurtleff’s Plan (Fig. 6), “Town of Weston, Plan Showing Revised Taking Lines Vicinity of New Roadway,” dated January 1913, showed both existing buildings and property lines of the eight different owners whose property (a total of approximately eleven acres) Shurtleff proposed be taken by eminent domain as sites for a new Town Hall, a new Fire Station, a new road, and a common. The existing stream and pond

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5 Arthur A. Shurtleff to C. F. Richardson, March 5, 1912, 1912 Weston Town Report, p. 119.
running the length of the meadow were shown graphically. In that plan Shurtleff also enlarged the turning radius at the corner of School Street and Central Avenue next to the Library, which, as a right-angled intersection, had been the site of numerous accidents.

Shurtleff’s creative vision for the site was enhanced by a practical mind in training in engineering. He planned to move the stream and pond underground in order to create a dry greensward. The new road not only provided an improved circulation pattern for traffic, it also isolated the common as a separate entity. Shurtleff’s 1912 plan (Fig. 7) showed a road between the library and the Jones residence, an alternative solution to the dangerous intersection of the existing School Street on the other side of the library, an idea abandoned in his revised plan of 1913.

“PLAN FOR THE CENTRE OF THE TOWN OF WESTON” SUBMITTED BY THE TOWN IMPROVMENT COMMITTEE, Arthur A. Shurtleff, Landscape Architect, 89 State Street, Boston, Mass., January 1913” (Fig.8) was an artistic rendering of the proposed Town Common, a revision of Shurtleff’s original plan, dated February 1912. Note the design of two paths within the perimeter of the oval bowl of the common, which, because of the topography, would be on different levels. One of Olmsted’s principles was to separate paths used for different purposes, walking and horseback riding, for example. The interior path of Shurtleff’s plan was never constructed.

Incorporated in 1713, the Town of Weston celebrated its bicentennial in the spring of 1913. (Fig. 9 & Fig. 10) Town spirit ran high. At the 1914 Annual Meeting, Weston voters gave the Selectmen and Park Commissioners approval to take eleven acres by eminent domain and also to build the new fire station. “During the summer of 1915 the new highway [now Town House Road] was built, and the meadow land drained and transformed thereby from a swamp to a fine, dry field.”6 Bigelow & Wadsworth, a Boston architectural firm, produced plans for the new Town Hall, and Horace Sears donated $20,000 to add to the $75,000 the town appropriated for the building. (Fig. 11)

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On February 10, 1917, Park Commissioners David W. Lane, Arthur L. Coburn, and Robert Winsor, Jr. reported that they had again employed Shurtleff “to prepare plans and specifications for the necessary grading and general treatment of the Town Common when the old Town Hall and other buildings are removed.” They continued, “A well-built broad path should be made across the meadow and possibly some steps at both the north and south ends.” Further, “Two ways have been suggested for handling the terrace on which the horse-sheds stand:—“

“One method is to throw down the present walls under the horse-sheds and bury them in a fill which would make the terrace more or less like a knoll. The other method is to keep the retaining walls, which are substantially built, and using them as the margin for a terrace, as saving might be effected in this way. They could be made to present an agreeable appearance when properly planted with vines and shrubbery. Considerable work will be required to put the meadow in a presentable condition.”

Shurtleff produced another plan, “Town of Weston, Plan for Arrangement of Vicinity of The Town Common”, dated April, 1917. Consider a line dividing the center of Town Hall as an imaginary cross axis. Shurtleff continued that straight cross axis all the way across the common in his design of the present path. In plan it is perpendicular to the main axis of the Town Hall and serves as a pleasing approach to that building of symmetrical proportions. In the 1917 plan, Shurtleff also designed the rectangular bed for trees directly in front of the Town Hall and the free form island of trees and shrubs as the center of the turnabout to the east of the Town Hall, the Overlook across from the church, and also the triangle in the roadway at the west end of the common, across from the Fire Station.

At the dedication of the new Town Hall on November 27, 1917, His Honor Calvin Coolidge, Lt. Governor of the Commonwealth, spoke,

“So this town has had a long and interesting history, and has done its part in

7 1916 Weston Town Report, p. 133.
8 Calvin Coolidge, Have Faith in Massachusetts, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, 1919, p.98.
building up Massachusetts and giving her strength to take her part in the history of this great Nation. And it is pleasant to see how the work that the fathers have done before us is bearing fruit in these times of ours. It is interesting to see this beautiful building. It is interesting to know that you have a town planning committee who are placing this building in a situation where it will contribute to the physical beauty of historic town. We have not given the time and the attention and the thought that we should have given to things of that kind in Massachusetts. We have been too utilitarian. We have thought that if a building was located in some place where we could have access to it, where it could be used, where it could transact the business of the town that was enough. We are coming to see in these modern days that that is not enough; that we need not only utilitarian motives, but that we need to give some time, some thought and attention to the artistic in life; that we need to concern ourselves not only with the material but give some thought to the spiritual; that we need to pay some attention to the beautiful as well as to that which is merely useful.

These things are appreciated. Weston is doing something along these lines and building her public buildings and laying out her public square or her common (as it was known in the old days) so they will be things of beauty as well as things of use. Let us dedicate this building to these new purposes. Let us dedicate it to the glorious history of the past. Let us dedicate it to sacrifice that is required in these present days. Let us dedicate it to the hope of the future."

At the Town Hall dedication, Benjamin Loring Young explained that Cutting’s Store had been removed, but removal of the old Town-house and the horse sheds had to be postponed because of World War I. “Important as they might be under normal conditions, they must, like all other public and private improvements, which involve labor, material, and expense, and which are not of direct value in the supreme national task of war, be subordinated to those things which are of such value.”

Horace S. Sears, Arthur L. Coburn, and Benjamin Blake submitted the eloquent

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report of the Park Commissioners in December, 1919:

“Much has been accomplished during the past year in the further development of the Town Common, and in realizing the plans and hopes these many years. As the work progressed it assumed larger proportions than we anticipated. To remove the stone walls and fill in the land to a reasonable grade on Central Avenue and Church Street—to blast out the many rocks and boulders on the low land and finish off the surface to a smooth and easing level—to rebuild the wall on the sharp and ungradable pitch by the elm-tree and to save the tree itself in its unprotected location—and to tear down and remove the old Town Hall and adjacent horse-sheds—all combined make a long, expensive, and difficult undertaking, trying alike to our patience and finances.... To strengthen and preserve the beautiful elm whose existence was endangered when the protecting sheds were taken away, we called in the services of Ralph B. True, who, as a tree expert, did all that could be done to save its life and beauty for future years.

It was with a certain tinge of sadness that the citizens of the town watched the demolition of the old Town Hall with all its precious associations and memories—or merrymakings and parties—of the schoolroom which it sheltered long ago, with its happy school life, exhibitions, and graduation exercises—of the pleasant library room when the library was in its small beginnings—and of patriotic and philanthropic meetings when the walls echoed with eloquent and moving appeals. But it is pleasant to remember that its crowning service was during the last year of its honorable existence, when it offered spacious accommodations for the devoted and energetic labors of the workers for the Red Cross and French Wounded during the Great War. And our thoughts cannot but go much further back to the same magnificent work that these walls looked down upon two generations ago when the country was nearly torn asunder by our own Civil War, and the noble patriotic women of this old town worked indefatigably for the comfort and relief of our soldiers whose saving remnant still lives in the Grand Army of the Republic, whom we all venerate and hold in undying gratitude and affectionate regard...

The constructive work on the Town Common is practically completed. It
now remains worthily to maintain this civic development upon which the Town has expended such a liberal amount of money.”

Shurtleff wrote to Horace S. Sears, Chairman of the Board of Park Commissioners, on January 12, 1920:

"My dear Mr. Sears,--Following your request, I send you the following comments upon the work under way at the Weston Common during the past year:--

“At the beginning of the year, the lower portion of the Meadow was in an unsatisfactory condition owing to former construction operations, standing water, and a shabby condition of grass. The footwalk constructed previously lacked a satisfactory terminus at the southerly end. The foundations of Cutting’s store, barn, sheds, also the substructure of the Town Hall, and the long row of carriage sheds were exposed. An unsightly and dangerous condition existed at the retaining walls along the westerly and easterly ends of the Common. The work of improvement has included the removal of these retaining walls, and the obliteration of all exposed foundations. The low ground in the bottom of the Meadow has been filled sufficiently to prevent water from standing, and the high stone retaining wall forming the support of the carriage sheds has been repaired, extended, and provided with a continuous parapet to serve as the margin of the overlook under the great elm tree.

All this work has been thoroughly done by an experienced contractor. Many boulders have been removed from the southerly slope of the Common and have been used either in construction work or in filling. As a whole, the work was arranged for economy to make cuts and fills balance as far as possible, but as a large amount of the material excavated consisted of large stone and boulders, it became necessary to haul in fine material to cover this coarse fill in order to make a proper foundation for the grass areas. Fortunately, this extra filling material was secured near at hand and at very little cost except for hauling. In addition to the above work, the ground around the great elm tree has been graded and a

path has been constructed to form a convenient and useful approach to the overlook. Shrubbery was planted late in the fall at the base of the overlook. Special pains were taken to secure shrubbery of native kinds like those already growing on the northerly side of the Common. The plants used included Common Barberry, Dogwood, Common Hazelnut, Witch Hazel, Viburnums, and Woodbine (Fig. 12). The Common is rapidly approaching completion and the hopes we have had for it will be realized as soon as the bare ground is covered with grass. Throughout the Metropolitan District, this work in and around Weston Common has become widely known on account of its extent, but more especially on account of the systematic planning for the future which carried it steadily to completion during a term of years. Until the present time, few municipalities have attempted farsighted improvements of this nature which could not be realized in a single season. Most of the communities around Boston are now confronted with problems which will require a long term of years for their solution and they have studied with interest the systematic methods adopted by the Town of Weston and the success which has crowned the work there.”

Park Commissioners Sears, Coburn, and Blake stated in their December of 1921 report, “It is our interpretation of the wishes of the Town that it desires a Town Common and not a Public Park, and our work has been based upon that understanding.”

At a time when war memorials and bandstands were erected on many New England town commons, the Selectmen and Park Commissioners of Weston consistently guarded the original design intent of Shurtleff and the Town Improvement Committee. Where many baseball diamonds and basketball courts have encroached on the Olmsted designed Metropolitan Boston open spaces, Weston has retained a Town Common (Green) and not made it a Public Park. Just as the American Chestnut of colonial landscapes had disappeared by the time the Weston Town Common Plan was conceived, the American Elm and now the American Dogwood (*cornus Florida*) are

succumbing to disease. With an understanding of the history of the design and planting whereby “special pains were taken to secure shrubbery of native kinds like those already growing on the northerly side of the Common,” the Parks Commission of today and the future can oversee the replacement of trees, shrubs, groundcovers, and vines with an understanding of the original version of Shurtleff and the Town Improvement Committee for a “Town Common of remarkable individuality and in many respects the finest open of its kind in the Commonwealth.”
After a trip to England in 1929, Shurtleff, long an ardent Anglophile, decided to change the spelling of his name to Shurcliff. It is interesting to note that descendents of William Shurtleff from Yorkshire, England, recorded in Plymouth (Massachusetts) as early as 1634, later included a Mayor of Boston and a well-known landscape painter. Arthur A. Shurtleff, however, decided that ‘Shurcliff’ was a more proper anglicized spelling of the name. His wife, the former Margaret Homer Nichols of Boston and Cornish, N.H., and his six children also legally adopted the surname Shurcliff in 1930.

As a Landscape Architect and Town Planner, Shurcliff is known for his work for the MDC, especially the Quabbin Reservoir, for the Metropolitan Planning Board of Boston, for many towns and villages in the Commonwealth, and for Plymouth Rock. He was the landscape architect for Rockefeller's restoration of Colonial Williamsburg from 1928 - 1941. In addition to working on the private estates of Albert and J. Cheny Wells, Shurcliff was landscape architect for the Wells' restoration of Old Sturbridge Village.

With F.L. Olmsted, Jr., Shurcliff founded the four year course in landscape architecture at Harvard and, in addition to being a member of the Olmsted firm, served as an instructor at Harvard until 1905, when he married and opened his own office. He was a Fellow of the American Society of Landscape Architects (FASLA) and served as President of the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) from 1928-1932, was a Fellow, City Planning Institute, a Fellow of the Boston Society of Landscape Architects (BSLA), and Associate of the Boston Society of Architects.

Shurcliff published two books, New England Journal, (Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1931) and A Man Walks the Earth (Old Corner Book Store, Boston, 1951) in addition to numerous articles in professional journals and periodicals. Not only did
he express his artistic talents through his designs on the land, but he sketched and painted, became an accomplished photographer, and, with his wife, designed and built furniture. After his death in 1957, the work of his firm, Shurcliff and Merrill was continued by his partner Vincent Merrill. The Massachusetts Historical Society is the repository of the Shurcliff papers, including letters, drawings, and reports, as well as his collection of 1500 glass lantern slides.
“The Object of the Club,” states a 1941 bylaw, “shall be to stimulate the knowledge and love of gardening; to aid in the protection of native trees, plants and birds; and to beautify our town and homes.” During World War II the Club's emphasis was on service to patients at the Murphy Army Hospital in Waltham. Club members continued to provide fresh flowers as well as Christmas wreaths for the hospitalized veterans until the hospital closed in 1958.

After the war, in 1946, town beautification projects were conceived and implemented. The Club planted 500 daffodil bulbs on the south slope of the Town Green in front of Town Hall and began the yearly Christmas wreath making for the Library, Town Hall, Fire Station and the Jones House (later called the Josiah Smith Tavern), adding a gift of electric candles for the Tavern in 1961. A town Christmas tree, a Balsam Fir, was planted by the Club on the Town Green in 1951 and was subsequently replaced by a White Fir. On Memorial Day in 1948, the Club started the planting of the old watering trough, and a tradition of seasonal plantings has continued.

In the spring of 1952, the Weston Garden Club planted five climbing hydrangea across the front foundation of the Library and a white wisteria vine and large yew at its front west corner. Fresh flower arrangements for the enjoyment of library patrons are provided regularly, both upstairs and in the Children’s Library, and containers at the entrance to the Library are planted and maintained by Club members.

An earlier bequest of $1000 from the will of a founder and the first president of the Club, Mrs. William C. Conant, was used in 1963 for a new foundation planting for Town Hall, the planting of the flag-pole island, and the area adjacent to the steps to the Town Green. That year marked the 250th Anniversary of the Town of Weston and the commemorative planting by the Weston Garden Club of a shrub border and forty-two white and pink Dogwood trees at
both ends of the Town Hall property.

When the Post Office was built on Colpitts Road in 1965, the Club planned and installed a simple foundation planting, which was updated in the fall of 1990. The Club contributed a 20 foot Pin Oak for the grounds of the new Police Station in 1974. A decade later, in the spring of 1984, the Club contracted for the sandblasting, repainting, and lining of the watering trough with fiberglass. Two benches and trash receptacles were donated by the Club in the spring of 1989 for the Town Green.

Reflecting on the original mission of the Weston Garden Club, "to aid in the protection of native trees, plants, and birds, and to beautify our town...", the Club celebrates its 50th Anniversary in 1991 with an expression of hope that the historic landscape of the Town Green can be maintained as it was originally conceived.
FIGURE 1

Fig. 1 OLD VILLAGE SQUARE: FIRST PARISH CHURCH and CUTTING’S STORE
courtesy: Weston Historical Society

FIGURE 2

Fig. 2 THE WESTON LIBRARY WAS BUILT IN 1899
Courtesy: Weston Historical Society
FIGURE 3

Fig. 3 THE JONES HOUSE IS NOW THE JOSIAH SMITH TAVERN
courtesy: Weston Historical Society

FIGURE 4

Fig 4 REAR VIEW OF HORSE SHEDS, TOWN HALL, CUTTING’S STORE
courtesy: Mass. Historical Society. The Arthur A. Shurtleff Collection
Fig. 5 LAND SLOPED FROM OLD TOWN HALL ON LEFT TO CENTRAL STREAM BED

Fig. 6 1913 SHURTLEFF PLAN FOR TAKING LAND BY EMINENT DOMAIN
1912 Town of Weston Annual Report
FIGURE 7

Fig. 7 1912 SHURTLEFF PLAN FOR THE CENTRE OF THE TOWN OF WESTON

FIGURE 8

Fig. 8 1913 SHURTLEFF REVISED PLAN FOR WESTON TOWN COMMON
1912 Town of Weston Annual Report
FIGURE 9

Fig. 9 TOWN OF WESTON 1913 BICENTENNIAL CELEBRATION
courtesy: Weston Historical Society

FIGURE 10

Fig. 10 THE 1913 BICENTENNIAL PAGENT: REENACTING WESTON’S HISTORY
courtesy: Weston Historical Society
FIGURE 11

Fig. 11 NEW TOWN HALL GLIMPSED THROUGH TREES BORDERING THE COMMON

FIGURE 12

Fig. 12 PLANTING OF NATIVE SHRUBS AND VINES SOFTENS WALL OF OVERLOOK
courtesy: Weston Historical Society