



A History of Queen Anne Square and the NRF

By the early 1970s, the area now known as Queen Anne Square was a downtown urban space filled with a wide variety of buildings which were mostly commercial, and many of which were of little note. Some of these structures were largely abandoned. Within the boundaries of the block lay historic Trinity Church, almost completely hidden by the surrounding commercial development. In essence the area had always been a dense urban place even as early as the mid-18th century. Its appearance by the 70's was oddly disused compared with its long history of commercial vitality in the heart of the city.

In 1973, a fire gutted the Walsh Brothers Furniture Store, which anchored much of the Thames Street frontage. The fire left a major hole in the block. A variety of forces within the city started to consider what to do with the area. Newport's Redevelopment Agency developed a plan to redo the commercial area of Thames Street between Mill and Church Streets. The scheme called for adding some period residential buildings, parking and possibly a small park. Another contingent saw an opportunity to take a different and more aesthetic tack. Mostly at the urging of Trinity Church with support from other quarters, Doris Duke and the NRF first became interested in the concept of a park surrounded by 18th century buildings. Between 1974 and completion of the project in 1978, the NRF design staff, strongly influenced by Miss Duke, created the final plan for the square.

Unaccustomed to spending time dealing with bureaucratic red tape, Doris Duke was on the verge of walking away from the project several times until it became clear that she wanted complete control of the project – planning, construction, aesthetic decisions, and, most importantly, financial responsibility. Trinity Church helped with support and negotiations throughout the long process.

In the end, the Redevelopment Agency facilitated negotiating title to all the property in the area bounded by Mill, Thames, and Church Streets up to the existing church property. Land was also acquired on the north side of Church Street as was a lot on the south side of Mill Street. Five 18th and early 19th century buildings were moved to lots adjoining the park. Trinity Church also built a new multi-purpose building designed to blend with the period buildings in the area.

Doris Duke was on site much of the time as the park took shape. Trees of all sizes came in by the flat-bed truck loads, and she directed the placement of each one. According to back-hoe operators at the job, they would be held to near dark, changing locations and orientation two and three times. Boulders were craned into place, and if something about them did not meet her standards, they were taken away. By all accounts, she was thrilled by the completion of the park and took great pride in it. At two other junctures in the park's history, Doris Duke took a direct interest in the park and provided equipment and care for its maintenance.

Since the completion of Queen Anne Square, it has been a visual center of the city – it celebrates the architectural heritage of Newport and gives residents and visitors alike an open space in which to share an experience of the past.