

Central Square: Keene, New Hampshire



Summary

With a postcard-perfect view from Main Street, Central Square is the iconic and geographic heart of downtown Keene. As the city's soapbox and cultural hub, Central Square has been part of the fabric of life here for more than two centuries. The site comprising the square has served as a common since the city's third meetinghouse opened in 1760. To ensure the square's continued vitality, the city encourages a mix of uses in the area and has regulations to protect the architecture of buildings across from the park and allow new structures consistent with the existing design.

DESIGNATED AREA

Central Square is located in the heart of downtown Keene where the confluence of three streets — Main, Court and Washington — form the shape of a "Y."



Shade trees, benches, and this prominent fountain create a pleasant community 'living room' in the heart of downtown Keene. Photo courtesy of Mikaela Engert.

PLANNING EXCELLENCE

Central Square evolved organically. It wasn't until 1828, when the meetinghouse was removed from the common, that the idea of a square took root.

Beautification efforts, begun in 1844 by the Forest Tree Society, met with resistance from merchants accustomed to unobstructed views of their signs from surrounding roads. The plantings, however, proved popular and by 1855 amenities, such as a bandstand and the present stone-post and iron-rail fence, were being added. Central Square is part of a local historic district and several surrounding buildings — including the much photographed United Church of Christ — are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.



Aerial view of Central Square during Annual Pumpkin Fest 2007. Located at the confluence of three streets, the square also serves as a downtown traffic round-about. Photo courtesy of State of New Hampshire Air National Guard.

DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS, FEATURES

Location and Access

- In heart of downtown, thus provides access from all directions. Three main roadways — from south, northeast and northwest — converge on square; east-west connector crosses Main Street on south edge of Central Square.

- City Express bus service connects square to residential neighborhoods, commercial areas and Keene State College. Regional bus service available two blocks south of square as are two bicycle and pedestrian paths — Cheshire Rail and Keene Industrial Heritage trails
- Three park pathways allow pedestrian access from all sides of the circular-shaped square that is four-tenths of an acre in size

Commitment to Planning and Preservation

- Keene's 2008 Vision for the Future reinforces community's goal to maintain and expand city core and connect open spaces, including Central Square, through trail system
- Part of a locally designated historic district (2003) created to ensure that underlying historic character of buildings not lost in the process of renovation
- Two surrounding properties listed on National Register of Historic Places: United Church of Christ (1788, designated 1982), colloquially known as the "Church at the Head of the Square," and Colony Block (1870, designated 1983), a fine example of a Second Empire Victorian commercial building
- Local zoning encourages a mix of uses in buildings surrounding square, thus providing range of potential park users.
- Recent revitalization efforts include \$2 million facelift to the 1824 Chamberlain Block building across from square; used by Sears until 1993, the 38,000-square-foot building features 12 units of efficiency and one-bedroom affordable housing, offices and shops
- Plan for tree replacement created in 1967 when Dutch elm disease felled all but two trees in square; tree canopy now monitored and maintained by Department of Public Works

Place in History

- Square has been central to Keene's development; third meetinghouse served as spiritual and governmental focal point
- First session of Inferior Court for Cheshire (1771) and Superior Court (1772) held on site in meetinghouse; rallying point for the muster following Lexington Alarm, first Revolutionary War battle (1775)
- Site of numerous political debates and canvassing. Practice of displaying flags with candidates' names stemmed from 1856 nomination of state's Franklin Pierce for U.S. President. Whigs erected flag pole over building across from square with

name of Winfield Scott; Democrats responded in like; Whigs, not to be outdone, cut down 100-foot tree and raised 50-by-30 foot flag



Three pathways traverse the park, providing pedestrian access from all sides of the circular-shaped square. Photo courtesy of City of Keene.

Iconic Community Space

- Image of Central Square, with church steeple rising behind it, defines Keene and is used in marketing materials; United Church of Christ steeple is rumored to be the most frequently photographed steeple after that of Boston's Old North Church
- Amenities include bandstand, fountain, benches, trees, and seasonal plantings
- Civil War monument erected in 1871; two 32-pound cannons flank statue; dedicated by James A. Garfield, who later became 20th U.S. president
- Annual festivals promote year-round use including annual holiday tree lighting, Ice and Snow Festival, Keene Music Festival, and Arts in the Park; fall pumpkin festival has set Guinness Book world record for most carved pumpkins (28,952 in 2003)
- Bandstand integral to history and current uses including press conferences, festivals, readings, and community events. It's location in Central Square, surrounded by businesses, city hall, the court house, and county buildings, make it a popular stop for political campaign