

Harlan H. Griswold Award Honors Wauregan Hotel Savivors

Replete with political intrigue, colorful characters, uncounted cliffhangers, and a happy ending that was as far from a sure thing as any happy ending could be, the story of the rescue and restoration of Norwich's Wauregan Hotel kept Connecticut preservationists on the edge of their seats for a decade.

At the Connecticut Trust's annual meeting, held on April 4 at the Old State House in Hartford, the three leads in that story were honored with the Harlan H. Griswold Award, the state's highest award for historic preservation, jointly presented by the Trust and the Connecticut Commission on Culture and Tourism. The award is named for Harlan H. Griswold of Woodbury, long-time chair of the Connecticut Historical Commission and a founder of the Connecticut Trust.

The three awardees were Dale Plummer, Norwich's Municipal Historian; Arthur Lathrop, the city's former Mayor and author of two books on its history; and Bruce Becker, principal of Becker and Becker, an architecture and development firm in Fairfield with a strong interest in historic preservation.

Coming from different backgrounds and representing the public, the private and the nonprofit worlds, these three became critical partners in saving and restoring the Wauregan.

The saga of the Wauregan is compelling, especially, as Art Lathrop notes, because of the back story. He writes, "The ravaged hulk of the Wauregan, abandoned for over a decade to fire, rain damage and intermittent occupation by squatters, drug users and the homeless, had come to epitomize Norwich's view of itself and to feed the

corrosive cynicism that defined its politics. It was Eastern Connecticut's worst eyesore. Its fate seemed certain: teardown followed by another ugly parking lot—at the city's main intersection. Through the alarms sounded by community activist Dale Plummer, reaching the ears of the Connecticut Historic Commission, the building was spared, but the preservation movement in the city and around the state

was blamed for preventing the removal of this deteriorating blight."

With the efforts of Lathrop, who stepped into the position of Mayor in the nick of time, running on a Save the Wauregan ticket that probably felt like a tightening noose around his neck, and of Bruce Becker, who came before an Historic Commission meeting and said, "*This building can be saved* and my firm will invest its

architectural expertise and development skills into its rescue"—with these three very different efforts, there has been a 180-degree turnaround in attitudes. Today, citizens of Norwich are proud of the restored Wauregan and are now, en masse, supportive of historic preservation.

This is not only a tale of three energetic and committed individuals, but also a success story for historic preservation in Norwich and all of Connecticut. 🌿



Bruce Becker, Arthur Lathrop, and Dale Plummer, recipients of the Harlan Griswold Award, pose with Helen Higgins, executive director of the Connecticut Trust, and Karen Senich, acting executive director of the Commission on Culture and Tourism.



The Wauregan Hotel, Norwich