

DRINKS WITH DEAD PEOPLE

QUARANTINE EDITION

APRIL 13, 2020:
[THE PROPRIETORS](#)

This week's theme: Connecticut history, because it's my home and I'm sheltering in it. Today's question: why doesn't the City of New Haven own its town green?

THE STORY

The New Haven Green, a city [park and green space](#) in the downtown center of New Haven, Connecticut, is unusual among public urban spaces in that it is privately owned: the 16-acre park, famous as the site of a handful of historic churches, centuries of military drills, [civil protest](#), [historic jurisprudence](#) and [Benedict Arnold throwing a hissy fit](#), is not actually city property.

For centuries the Green has been the property and responsibility of a self-perpetuating group of five individuals known as the Committee of the Proprietors of Common and Undivided Lands at New Haven (the Proprietors, for short). The earliest colonial administrations in Connecticut generally empowered the descendants of original settlers with the right to administer public lands, and in New Haven this meant that from the 17th century on, a sort of hereditary zoning committee regularly met to delight themselves with committee decisions about one parcel or another for the self-determined good of the town.

In 1805, the proprietors made the decision to restructure themselves as an evergreen committee of five individuals, with the existing members choosing replacements when one of their number should opt out or pass on. The committee works with city and state government to police and care for the property and maintains authority over how the Green may be used. That means keeping the space open for community activity ([Occupy protests](#), historic churches, [Ray Charles](#)) and free of interference ([Occupy protests](#), sales activity, [parking garages](#)).

Read on [at the blog](#) for more detail and resources.

DISCUSS:

Does a private-public partnership to manage public urban land strike you as acceptable or strange?

If you were one of the Proprietors: what would you permit and not permit on the town green?

Back to basics: what are property rights? Where do they come from?

What role should green spaces serve in cities?

Hi, I'm Betsy. Stuck at home? Let's learn history together, because the past helps us to understand that we are not alone. Weekday updates during #COVID19.

Questions? Comments? Say hello.

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READ MORE:

Bill Ryan, "[This Green Is Their Green, Make No Mistake.](#)" *New York Times*, November 29, 1998

David Holahan, "[The New Haven Green: City's Center of Public Life on Private Property.](#)" *Hartford Courant*, April 21, 2016