The Day

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Sports: UConn women fall to Ohio State, 73-61, in the Sweet 16 **Page E1**

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HOUSING SOLUTIONS LAB

New London built its first project only after years of difficulty

The road to public housing

Story By **JOHN RUDDY**
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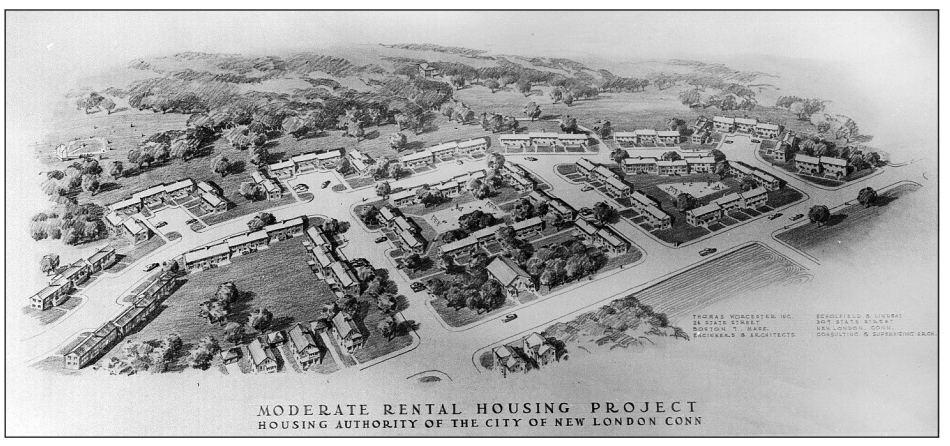
Day Staff

THEOPHILUS JOHNS, AN Army reservist and father of two from New London, was ordered to active duty at a bad time: He had just been served with an eviction notice.

HOUSING LAB
A Look Back



Editor's note: *This story was drawn mostly from the archives of The Day, with additional material from the 1919 Report of the United States Housing Corporation and the Project 157 registration form for the National Register of Historic Places.*

Before he left for his post in Kentucky, Johns gathered his wife and daughters and went to see the chairman of the city housing authority. Once he was gone, he said, the family had no prospects for a new place to live.

The chairman promised to help and kept his word. On Dec. 9, 1950, one day before they would have been out on the street, the Johns family became the first tenant in the first public housing project in New London.

That well-timed moment was years in the making, the result of a long local housing shortage exacerbated by two world wars. Changing needs had posed different problems, and responses varied.

Along the way, New London saw a pleasant neighborhood built by a federal agency; defense workers enduring homelessness; a housing authority nearly disbanded before it had done anything; and clashes over zoning that at one point pitted city against state.

Somehow it all came together in time to keep a roof over the Johns family and more than 100 others.

Here's New London's eventful journey to public housing.

■■■

In 1910 the combined population of New London and Groton was 22,000, but less than a decade later, it had more than doubled.

As the United States entered World War I, thousands arrived to aid the war effort. Most worked either at New London Ship & Engine Co., now Electric Boat; or Groton Iron Works, a nearby shipyard.

Both industries were in Groton, but most employees lived in New London. So many crossed the Thames River each day that dedicated ferry runs were needed. Groton Iron Works had to lease the entire Neptune Building, a large commercial structure on the Parade, as an apartment house. It wasn't enough.

With similar dramas unfolding everywhere, Congress created the United States Housing Corp. to ease shortages in wartime industrial centers. It was the first federally sponsored housing program in the country.

Days after USHC was established in July 1918, New London was chosen for a housing project for war workers. The corporation quickly bought land between Jefferson Avenue and Colman Street.

Though created for an immediate need, USHC had a broader goal of improving housing nationwide. New London would get a neighborhood of mostly Colonial Revival duplexes with lattice-work porches. It would be entered from an

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Top, Elvira Johns, her daughters and mother-in-law stand outside their new apartment at Briarcliff on Dec. 9, 1950, as their furniture is carried in. The Johns family was the first tenant at New London's first public housing project. **Above**, this architectural rendering of the Briarcliff housing project was made public in October 1949, when much of the controversy over zoning was still in the future. DAY FILE PHOTOS

Biden TikTok stance tests young

Gen Z voters could sit out next election

By **JONATHAN J. COOPER**
Associated Press

Tempe, Ariz. — Recent moves by President Joe Biden to pressure TikTok over its Chinese ownership and approve oil drilling in an untapped area of Alaska are testing the loyalty of young voters, a group that's largely been in his corner.

Youth turnout surged in the three elections since Donald Trump was elected president in 2016, helping Biden eke out victories in swing states in 2020, pick up a Democratic Senate seat in the 2022 election and stem potential losses in the House.

But the 80-year-old president has never been the favorite candidate of young liberals itching for a new generation of American leadership. As Biden gears up for an expected reelection campaign, a potential Tik-

SEE BIDEN PAGE A4

Bankers say local institutions are secure after recent failures at national level

By **LEE HOWARD**
Day Staff Writer

Three presidents of local financial institutions said last week they do not expect the surprisingly swift bank failures that caused shock waves nationally this month will be a cause for concern locally.

"We're all very well capitalized," said Tony Joyce, president and chief executive of Groton-based Chelsea Groton Bank, which has well over $1 billion in assets.

"We don't have a concentration of customer types, we didn't get into cryptocurrencies and we don't have a large number of depositors over the insurable limit (of $250,000 per account)."

Joyce, in a Zoom interview, was comparing local banks with two regional banks that were shuttered mid-month by government authorities: Silicon Valley Bank, based in Santa Monica, Calif., and Signature Bank, based in New York City. The March 10 demise of Silicon Valley, now in receivership, was the largest bank failure since the financial crisis of 2008, sparking fears among a

SEE LOCAL PAGE A5

WEATHER

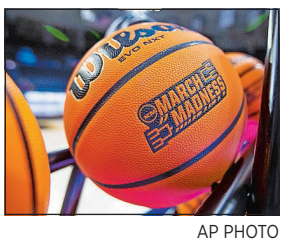
Today, becoming mostly sunny, breezy. High 55. Monday, increased afternoon clouds. High 52. **E6**

INDEX

MARCH MADNESS ROUNDUP

theday.com: Go online for Gavin Keefe's coverage from Las Vegas of the UConn-Gonzaga men's Elite 8 contest.

Sports: Read Vickie Fulkerson's account from Seattle of the UConn women's loss to Ohio State. **E1**



AP PHOTO

Business: Miami twin basketball players Haley and Hanna Cavinder have become the poster children of the Name Image Likeness era of college sports. With more than 4.4 million followers on their shared TikTok account alone, they have become millionaires through NIL deals. **B1**

Perspective: "The NCAAs," "March Madness" — call it what you want. We need this. Just like we need the World Series and the College Football Playoff, the Super Bowl, the Stanley Cup and the Olympics. The plain, simple, true dramas of sport are little factories of the life-affirming endorphins we crave. They connect us to hope. **B3**

2 CUBAN MIGRANTS FLY INTO FLORIDA ON GLIDER

Key West, Fla. — Two Cuban migrants used a motorized hang glider to fly the approximately 90 miles from the communist island to Key West on Saturday, Florida officials said.

The Monroe County Sheriff's Office said the duo landed safely at Key West International Airport about 10:30 a.m. and were turned over to the U.S. Border Patrol.

Overwhelmed by Cubans and other migrants arriving at the Mexican border and into Florida by boat, the Biden administration in early January implemented a policy change that makes them request a permit, or parole, online before arriving with the sponsorship of a relative or acquaintance in the U.S.

— Associated Press

Tornadoes ravage Mississippi

JIM LYTLE/AP PHOTO

Tim Foster stands Saturday outside the safe room where he and his wife took shelter as a tornado struck Amory, Miss., on Friday. See story on A3.

HOUSING SOLUTIONS LAB

‘We’re the luckiest people in New London’

FROM A1

extension of Lincoln Avenue paved in brick with a small oval park. The site’s only name was “Project 157.”

The war’s end in November 1918 halted many USHC efforts, but the work in New London, already well along, was allowed to proceed.

“The government knows how badly New London is in need of more houses,” the construction manager told The Day.

But not all were grateful. The City Council reneged on a nonbinding agreement to pay a share of the cost, and there was dissatisfaction with the buildings.

“There is nothing beautiful about them,” one councilor complained. “I claim they are a detriment to the city. ... I wouldn’t have one of them for a woodshed.”

When the water and sewer commissioners blocked installation of plumbing, USHC threatened to abandon the project, which was 97% finished. The city backed down immediately.

“We have met the enemy and we are his,” one local official said.

By mid-1919 the 64 buildings housing 116 families were leased. They were sold off in 1921, mostly to tenants.

Today the neighborhood is on the National Register of Historic Places.

■■■

Two decades later, as another war began, a community meeting at the Lyman Allyn Museum on Dec. 13, 1939, brought the first stirrings of a movement for public housing. A committee formed to survey conditions.

Six months later it reported a need for 200 family units. EB and the Naval Submarine Base said another 800 would soon be necessary. The first step was to create a local housing authority to apply for federal funds under the New Deal.

That hadn’t happened by mid-1941, when a Connecticut College professor and a city councilor briefed Congress on the local situation. In separate reports, they described an influx of servicemen and defense workers unable to find anything affordable that was fit for human habitation; an epidemic of rent profiteering; and officials unable to agree on whether there was even a problem.

In addition, hundreds of homes had just been razed for the construction of Ocean Beach Park and the Gold Star Memorial Bridge.

As for the city’s small but growing Black population, “many landlords even in the poorer districts will not permit a colored tenant,” one report said. Some who did offered “intolerable conditions.”

Amid demolitions for the bridge, the Rev. A.A. Garvin of Shiloh Baptist Church implored the city to act, “solely on the basis of fair play, justice, righteousness and on the principles of Christian religion.”

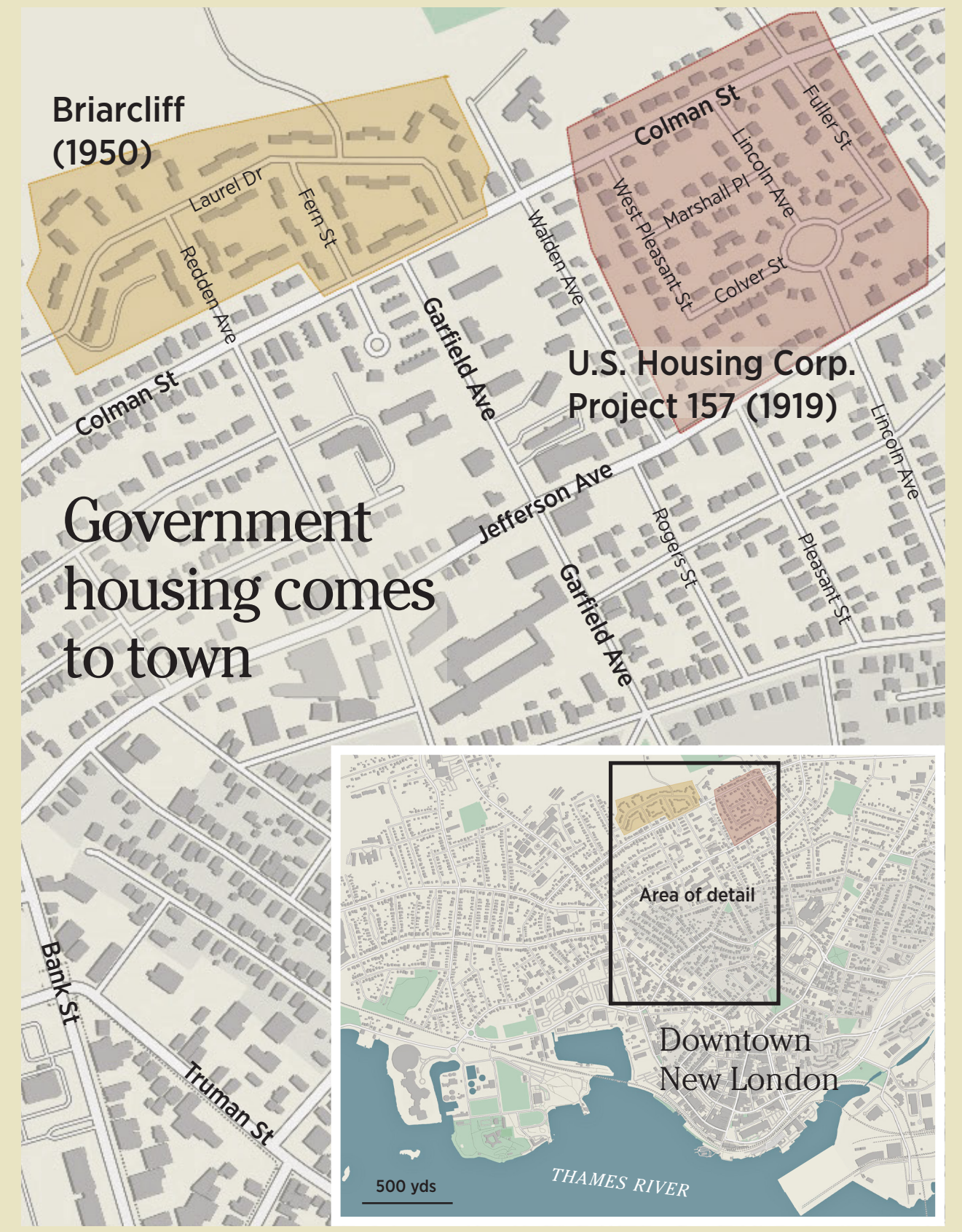
As officials looked in vain for temporary housing for several Black families, the city manager stayed evictions for two facing immediate homelessness. Their furniture was already on the sidewalk.

A year later, 25 to 50 Black war workers were known to be sleeping in cars or walking the streets for lack of shelter despite having jobs and money. This time officials did nothing.

The war stalled efforts to solve a problem it helped create. In 1943, the federal government found New London’s accommodations “sufficient” enough not to justify the use of critical materials for new housing.

The City Council’s welfare committee quietly studied a way to relieve the acute shortage among Black residents and envisioned apartment buildings around Shapley, Hill and Richards streets. But when The Day revealed the plan, it was shelved amid an outcry.

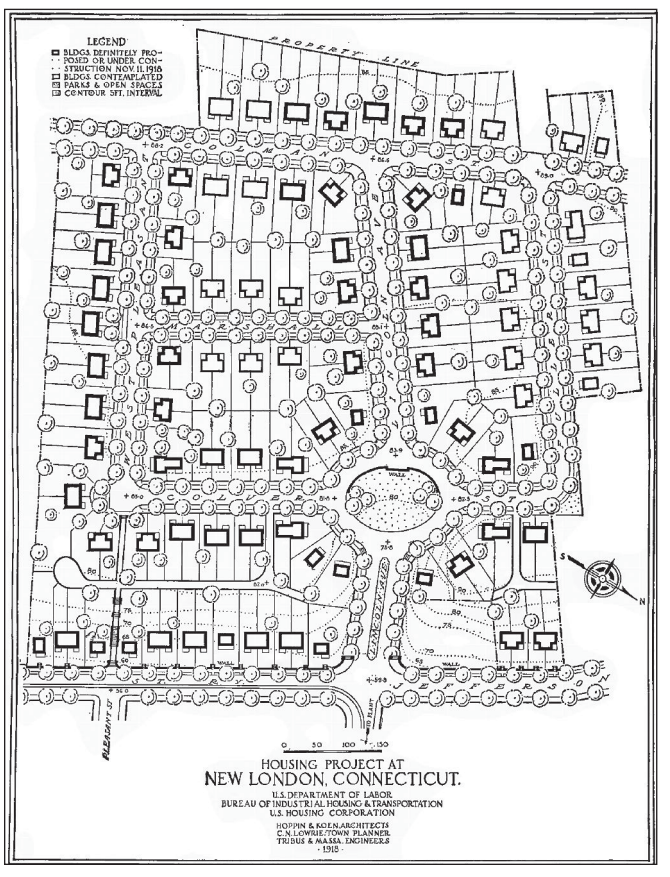
On Aug. 5, 1946, after renewed agitation led by the League of Women Voters, the City Council finally agreed to a local housing authority. From the start, the five-member entity’s mere existence divided the city, which refused to fund it after much debate.



New London’s first two government-sponsored housing projects were built almost next to each other 30 years apart. The U.S. Housing Corp.’s Project 157 was for an influx of defense workers during World War I. The homes were sold off two years after completion. Briarcliff, intended for moderate-income rentals, was the first project of the New London Housing Authority. MAP: SCOTT RITTER AND JOHN RUDDY/THE DAY | SOURCES: OPENSTREETMAP CONTRIBUTORS; CARTODB

Project 157 homes, left, are shown under construction in this photo from 1918 or 1919. JOHN RUDDY

Below, Elvira Johns, right, and her family were a day away from eviction when they moved into Briarcliff as its first tenants on Dec. 9, 1950. DAY FILE PHOTO



Above, the planned layout of the U.S. Housing Corp.’s Project 157 between Jefferson Avenue and Colman Street in New London. REPORT OF THE U.S. HOUSING CORPORATION

Right, Briarcliff, New London’s first public housing project, takes shape on July 8, 1950. Four days after this photo was taken, construction was delayed for a second time by a labor dispute. DAY FILE PHOTO

Meanwhile, Congress delayed legislation to help it function.

Members started to resign in frustration until, after a year, only one remained. For the moment, the authority was all but dead.

■■■

When state funds became available in late 1948, the authority was reactivated. It promptly announced plans for an apartment complex between Alewife Cove and Ocean Avenue, setting up a new battle with the city.

Officials were hesitant to rezone the site and disliked the building type: two-story brick “garden apartments.” The authority said the project would satisfy a need for “moderate” rentals, but a survey to assess demand overwhelmingly favored “low” rentals.

The council offered a different site: nine city-owned acres off Colman Street near Garfield Avenue, which was rezoned by ordinance without opposition. As the authority got state approval and acquired 20 adjacent acres for 144 total units, the pieces all seemed in place.

But someone pointed out that those extra 20 acres hadn’t been rezoned with the original nine. Council support for a second ordinance cooled amid news the authority was planning a separate, 122-unit complex elsewhere. The council offered to complete rezoning for the first project if the second, which it called unnecessary, were abandoned. Authority Chairman Richard H. Pugh refused.

The council reluctantly passed the ordinance anyway, but a taxpayer group petitioned to send the rezoning to referendum. Pugh appealed to the state housing authority, which could override local zoning under a new law. It did so a month before the referendum, making the vote pointless.

“Putting off construction until after the referendum cannot be justified against the pressing need for more decent, safe and sanitary housing,” the state authority’s chairman wrote.

The council, though supporting the project, then sued for an injunction to halt the work. The city contended the law was invalid and promoted a “public be damned” policy. Pugh vowed that only a court order would stop construction.

In February 1950, the swirl of controversy resolved. First, a judge denied the city an injunction. Then voters endorsed the foregone conclusion of rezoning the 20 acres. Finally, the authority abandoned the second project.

As the dust settled, concrete was being poured for foundations. The 28 buildings took shape, and the project got a name, Briarcliff, with Laurel Drive as its main street. But with all obstacles removed, construction was delayed a month as union carpenters twice walked off the job.

With the project nearing completion in November, freak high winds caused widespread damage in New London. But at Briarcliff, all storms had finally passed. A few broken windows were nothing but a last-minute annoyance.

■■■

As movers carried in her furniture on Dec. 9, Elvira Johns looked around.

“I think the apartment is very nice,” she said. When told The Day wanted to take a picture, she replied, “Oh good. I can send it to my husband.” Theophilus Johns had left for the Army the day Richard Pugh promised to help his family.

Amid doubts about the demand for public housing, 500 people applied for Briarcliff’s 144 units. Veterans got preference, as did those facing eviction. All tenants had to be married with at least one child, have good credit and meet an income limit.

The entire complex wasn’t ready immediately, but the authority released the names of the first 19 families to sign leases, all “urgent cases.” Mrs. Johns was at the top of the list.

“I guess we’re the luckiest people in New London,” she said.

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