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NEWS

# Norfolk's iconic Joseph Battell Fountain returning to 'its beauty and function'

John Torsiello

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The Joseph Battell Fountain, designed by Stanford White in 1889 and located at the southern tip of the village Green at Litchfield Road and Village Green in Norfolk, is one of the town's most prized possessions. It is now being restored and is expected to be completed in October.

John Torsiello / For Hearst Connecticut Media

NORFOLK — The Joseph Battell Fountain, designed by Stanford White in 1889 and located at the southern tip of the village Green in Norfolk, is one of the town's most prized possessions.

The unique fountain honors Joseph Battell (1806-1874) a businessman and benefactor of Yale University.

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About 12 years ago, the fountain was knocked over when a tractor trailer truck was attempting to make a left turn and hooked onto the winter covering or wooden boxes, which toppled the column. Francis Miller of Conserve Art was hired by the Norfolk Historical Society to make a proper assessment of the damage.

In 2018, member Doreen Kelly and Barry Webber, executive director of the historical society, became co-chairs of the Norfolk Community Association. They wanted to take on some larger projects in town that had been on the back burner.

“Bruce Webber and myself first identified the need to address the failing functioning of the fountain and its many intricate mechanisms that needed updating from the original 132-year-old structure,” said Kelly.

The project, with a price tag of around \$80,000, moved forward from there and is expected to be completed sometime in October, according to the society.

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The fountain is made of pink granite with a bronze sphere by Augustus St. Gaudens on top. The sphere has three fish, each of which spouts water from its mouth into a basin below. A lion head on the column also provides water for the basin.

Below and on the sides, two additional animal heads spurt water into shallow basins at ground level for small animals. The column has a pair of bronze lamp fixtures on either side. In the rear is a marble bench.

According to [www.Britannica.com](http://www.Britannica.com), White was born on Nov. 9, 1853 in New York and died June 25 in 1906 in New York. He was dubbed “the most imaginative” partner in the architectural firm McKim, Mean and White. In 1880, he joined Charles Follen McKim and William Rutherford Mead in founding a new architectural firm that soon became the “most popular and prolific one in the country.”

White excelled at designing gracefully proportioned structures, according to Britannica.com, offset by Italian Renaissance ornamentation. Among his more important commissions in New York City were Madison Square Garden in 1891, the Washington Memorial Arch, also 1891; the New York Herald Building in 1892, and Madison Square Presbyterian Church in 1906. White was a versatile artist who designed jewelry, furniture, and a wide range of interior decorations as well as the fountain in Norfolk.

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When the historical society appealed to the community for donations to restore the fountain, the response was immediate.

“The significance of the fountain is a major part of the identity of the town,” said Kelly. “It is a Norfolk treasure.”

In April 2021, a mass mailing to every town resident produced an overwhelmingly positive response, with donations coming from residents of all backgrounds and income levels because the fountain had a special meaning to many.

“A few local foundations were very generous and individual donors as mentioned above, but we have still a gap in meeting our needs to fund the completed project,” Kelly said.

Far from being simply an ornamental piece, which it certainly is, the fountain serves practical purposes, said Kelly, since it has separate drinking areas for people, dogs and horses.

“The historic Village Green is the centerpiece of Norfolk,” Webber said. “Everyone knows this iconic structure at the tip of the Green, so giving it the tender loving care it needed will be a benefit to all, although many folks won’t even realize it has been completely restored.”

Webber said all members of the NCA were on board with the project, as well as members of the Norfolk Board of Selectmen.

“The fountain was erected by Mary Eldridge as a gift to the town in memory of her uncle Joseph Battell, and has beauty and function,” Webber said. “A large basin in front was a watering trough for horses, the back of the column

has a drinking spout for (people). And below the front basin are two ground level pools for cats and dogs. I have a wonderful Marie Kendall photograph from the 1890s of horses drinking from the fountain in the museum collection.”

Webber said Francis Miller and Christoph Henning, a stone sculptor who restored a broken jaw on the lion head from matching Massachusetts granite, are doing a magnificent job.

“The fountain is once again gleaming after decades of soot have been removed and soon the completely restored Gothic bronze lanterns will be casting a beautiful light and highlighting the pinkish granite welcoming all who pass by,” Webber said.

“We are overwhelmed by the work. It has surpassed our every expectation,” Kelly said.

For more information , or to make a donation to the restoration project, visit [nca-ct.org/](http://nca-ct.org/)

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Written By  
**John Torsiello**

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