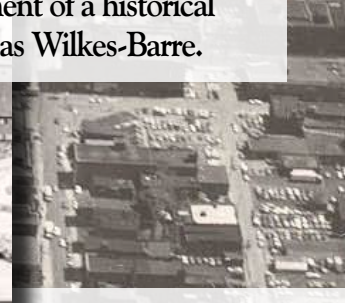
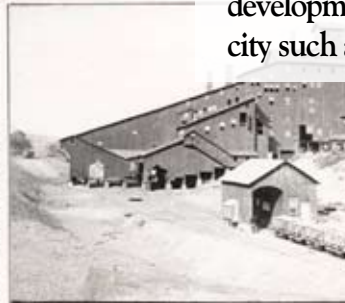


# Public Square

HISTORICAL ERA: COLONIAL TO PRESENT DAY



COURT-HOUSE AND PUBLIC SQUARE.



## Historical Significance:

Students will be introduced to the importance of a town square to the cultural, economic and social development of a historical city such as Wilkes-Barre.

## Related Vocabulary:

- Courthouse
- Acre
- Bisected
- Intersection
- Architecture
- Town Square
- Township
- River Common

Wilkes-Barre is a uniquely beautiful city. Its setting—beside a broad river amid rolling hills and mountains—and its fine architecture are major factors. Its River Common, unmarred by canal bed, railroad tracks, or super highway, is an unusual asset. But the gem of Wilkes-Barre's center city is its Public Square.

Wilkes-Barre and Wyoming Valley's residents owe the Public Square to Major John Durkee and the committee of the Susquehanna Company that assisted him in laying out the five settling townships. The original surveying work, dividing the valley into townships, was done in 1769, and the business of dividing each township into lots began in 1770. Major Durkee placed the two-hundred-acre town plot of Wilkes-Barre on the level stretch of land parallel to the river. Bounded by North and South Streets, by Front Street (now River Street) and Back Street (now Pennsylvania Avenue), it was intersected by Union, Centre (now Market) and Northampton streets and bisected by Main Street. Main Street was also Main Road, continuing north to Pittston and south to Hanover. Washington and Franklin streets were not included in Durkee's original plan. They came into existence more or less spontaneously as buildings accumulated. A diamond-shaped space of four acres and forty-one perches was retained as part of the "common, or public, undivided lands of the township" along with thirty-five acres now known as the River Common.

This diamond-shaped open space became known as Centre Square and later Public Square. After Fort Wyoming, built on the River Common, was torn down in 1774, a new one, Fort Wilkes-Barre was completed in 1778 on the southern half of the

diamond. It was large enough to be used as a town hall and jail. It was burned down in 1778 after the Battle of Wyoming, but two log buildings, serving as jail, court, and meeting place, were repaired sufficiently to serve the community until 1788.

In 1801, Old Ship Zion was begun. This building would serve as a place of worship to the Congregational, Episcopalian, Methodist, and Baptist congregations of the community. In 1808 a new jail was built on the south side of East Market Street near the intersection with Washington Street. The log structure of the first courthouse was turned into the Wilkes-Barre Academy. Other courthouses and buildings would follow until our present courthouse was built on its present site in 1909. After the flood of 1972, the square was redesigned by architect Peter Bohlin and his colleagues to be used as an outdoor community center as well as an informal gathering place. It is now used by the fine Arts Fiesta, Farmer's Market and numerous other events. The above information was taken from *Bridging Change* with the author's permission.





## Suggested Activity:

1. Imagine that the each student's hometown has a public square. Have each student use a sheet of paper to design his or her own square. What would they put in it? Why?
2. Students might also discuss the importance of green space in a city and where to put it.

## CD/DVD References:

1. PA Academic Standards



## Related Themes:

- Architecture
- Community Structure
- Commercial Districts
- Business
- Fine Arts

## Sources:

### Secondary Sources:

*Bridging Change* by Sally Teller Lottick

### Additional Online Sources:

Wilkes-Barre city