

# Gales Ferry Design Guidelines Draft

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3		
4	<b>Administrative.....</b>	<b>3</b>
5	1. Purpose and Intent.....	3
6	2. Applicability.....	3
7	What Projects Require Review.....	4
8	Visibility Standard.....	4
9	Admissibility of Alternative Designs and Materials.....	4
10	3. Village Character Description.....	4
11	A. Defining Character of Gales Ferry Historic Village Core.....	5
12	B. Defining Character of Transition Areas.....	7
13	C. Defining Character of Outlying Residential Areas.....	8
14	4. Review Process.....	10
15	5. Review Criteria.....	10
16	6. Submission Requirements.....	11
17		
18	<b>Architectural Design.....</b>	<b>12</b>
19	7. Building Orientation and Placement.....	12
20	Orientation and Entrances.....	12
21	Relationship to the Street.....	12
22	Front setbacks.....	12
23	Corner buildings.....	13
24	8. Building Form and Massing.....	13
25	Height.....	13
26	Massing and Scale.....	13
27	Building Placement and Transitions.....	14
28	Additions and Expansions.....	14
29	Roofs.....	14
30	Chimneys.....	16
31	9. Façade Design.....	16
32	Façade Rhythm and Window Spacing.....	17
33	Façade Articulation.....	17
34	Building Width and Façade Composition.....	18
35	Window Design.....	18
36	Commercial Storefronts and Window Coverage.....	18
37	Entrances and Entry Features.....	19
38	Blank Walls.....	20
39	Building Numbers.....	21

1	Architectural Details.....	21
2	10. Exterior Materials.....	21
3	Siding Materials.....	21
4	Window Materials.....	21
5	Railings and Balustrades.....	22
6	Exterior Structural Elements.....	22
7	Foundations and Wall Bases.....	23
8	Roofing Materials.....	23
9	Gutters and Downspouts.....	23
10	11. Color.....	24
11	Dominant / Secondary / Accent palette.....	24
12	Exterior Walls.....	24
13	Windows, Trim, and Architectural Details.....	25
14	Entry Doors.....	25
15	Roof Colors and Materials.....	25
16	Natural Materials.....	25
17		
18	<b>Site Design.....</b>	<b>25</b>
19	12. Parking and Driveways.....	25
20	Driveways.....	26
21	Garage Location.....	26
22	Parking.....	26
23	13. Landscape.....	28
24	Landscaping.....	28
25	Fencing and Garden Walls.....	29
26	Stormwater Management.....	30
27	14. Streetscape.....	30
28	Street Trees.....	30
29	Street Lighting.....	31
30	Sidewalks and Pedestrian Access.....	31
31	Street Furniture.....	32
32	15. Utilities and Mechanical Equipment.....	33
33	<b>Additional Elements.....</b>	<b>33</b>
34	16. Signs and Lighting.....	34
35	SIGNAGE.....	34
36	SITE LIGHTING.....	35
37	17. Accessory Structures.....	36
38	18. Other Elements.....	37
39		
40	<b>Appendix.....</b>	<b>38</b>
41	Proportion and Classical Precedent (Optional Guidance).....	38

# 1 Administrative

## 1. Purpose and Intent

Consistent with CGS §8-2j, these Design Guidelines are intended to ensure that future development harmonizes with the defining character of the Gales Ferry Village District overlay. These Design Guidelines encourage appropriate growth while guiding change in a thoughtful manner. They support the development of a pedestrian-friendly commercial, civic, and residential center while preserving the qualities that make Gales Ferry distinct.

### The Design Guidelines:

- (a) Protect the Gales Ferry Village character, landscape and historic structures by regulating new construction, substantial reconstruction and rehabilitation of properties within the overlay that are in view from public roadways, including, but not limited to, (1) the design and placement of buildings, (2) the maintenance of public views, (3) the design, paving materials and placement of public roadways, and (4) other elements that the Commission deems appropriate;
- (b) Apply to the design, relationship, and compatibility of structures, plantings, signs, roadways, street hardware, and other objects in public view;
- (c) Establish criteria by which a property owner and the Commission may reasonably determine what is permitted within the overlay;
- (d) Encourage the conversion, conservation, and preservation of existing buildings and sites in a manner that maintains the historic or distinctive character of the Village District; and
- (e) Are consistent with: ~~(A) The “Connecticut Historical Commission—The Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation and Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings”, revised through 1990, as amended; or~~ (B) the distinctive characteristics of the District identified in the current Plan of Conservation and Development.

## Ongoing Refinement

These standards are informed by documented historic patterns and may be refined through additional survey and analysis as adopted by the Commission.

## 2. Applicability

## 1 What Projects Require Review

2 Any proposed new construction, substantial reconstruction, or rehabilitation within the Village  
3 District is subject to review. The review process shall evaluate the compatibility of the proposed  
4 design with the established character of the district.

5 Elements subject to review include, but are not limited to, building scale, height, location, roof  
6 form and treatment, exterior materials, color, landscaping, signage, lighting, and the proportion  
7 and arrangement of windows and doors.

## 8 Visibility Standard

9 These design guidelines apply primarily to building elements and site features clearly visible  
10 from public streets, parks, and other public spaces. All such visible features shall be designed to  
11 reflect and reinforce the distinctive characteristics of the Village District. The intent is to focus on  
12 the public realm while allowing greater flexibility for elements not visible to the public.

## 13 Admissibility of Alternative Designs and Materials

14 Alternative materials or design solutions may be approved where the applicant demonstrates  
15 that the proposed design is consistent with the purpose and intent of the Village District and  
16 maintains compatibility with surrounding structures.

17

## 18 3. Village Character Description

19 The Gales Ferry Village District Overlay encompasses the **historic village core** together with  
20 adjoining **commercial, mixed-use**, and **residential areas** that collectively contribute to the  
21 broader visual, historical, landscape setting and environmental identity of Gales Ferry.

22 The district is not defined by a single architectural style or period of construction. Rather, its  
23 distinctive character arises from the cumulative layering of buildings, landscapes, and  
24 development patterns established over multiple centuries of gradual village evolution.

25 Buildings within the district range from eighteenth-century historic structures to twentieth-century  
26 residential forms, including vernacular cottages, farmhouses, capes, bungalows, ranch homes,  
27 and modest civic buildings. While architectural styles and individual building details vary  
28 considerably, the district retains a recognizable sense of place through recurring patterns of  
29 scale, spacing, landscape setting, and relationship to the surrounding river and topography.

30 The character-defining features below establish the physical patterns, visual relationships, and  
31 development qualities that new construction, substantial reconstruction, and rehabilitation of  
32 properties shall respond to.

1 The **historic village core** (R-20 zone) provides the primary reference for village scale and  
2 development pattern, while adjoining **transition areas** (Development District zone) are  
3 expected to evolve in a manner that reinforces rather than overwhelms the established village  
4 setting. This approach ensures that future development harmonizes with the village's defining  
5 character, allowing change to occur thoughtfully while preserving the qualities that make Gales  
6 Ferry distinct.

*This text box presents a preliminary description of additional residential and distinctive landscape areas currently under study that warrant consideration as part of the broader Gales Ferry Village District overlay. The text is included here to illustrate how the larger village landscape may ultimately be described within the future Village District guidelines.*

**Surrounding residential areas** (R20 and R40 zones) also interspersed with buildings of distinct historic character, while more mid-20th century suburban in layout, contribute to the village's distinctive landscape setting, contextual viewscape, and continuity of scale, and shall be preserved accordingly.

## 7 A. Defining Character of Gales Ferry Historic Village Core

### 8 1. Settlement Pattern and Topography

- 9 ● A compact historic village footprint developed between Clark Cove, Mill Cove, and the  
10 lower slopes of Mt. Decatur.
- 11 ● Development is organized primarily along historic roadways associated with the original  
12 ferry crossing and later village expansion patterns.
- 13 ● Building spacing, setbacks, and orientation vary throughout the district, reflecting  
14 incremental development over multiple historical periods rather than a single planned  
15 pattern.
- 16 ● The village retains a relatively compact and pedestrian-scaled character, with buildings  
17 generally maintaining close visual relationships to roadways and neighboring structures.
- 18 ● The developed village remains visually connected to the surrounding natural landscape,  
19 including wooded slopes, coves, wetlands, streams, and open agricultural land.

### 20 2. Relationship to Landscape and Setting

- 21 ● The visual character of Gales Ferry is strongly shaped by its relationship to the Thames  
22 River, surrounding coves, wooded hillsides, wetlands, and open space.
- 23 ● The village is visually framed by:
  - 24 ○ the Thames River and coves to the west and southwest, Mt. Decatur and  
25 wooded slopes to the north, rocky escarpments and wooded uplands to the east,  
26 and wetlands, streams, ponds, woodland moraines and exposed rock  
27 outcroppings extending southward.
  - 28 ○ Open agricultural land to the landward side of the village, which provides open  
29 vistas currently at risk from large-scale development.

- 1 ● Public river views occur at selective and historically established locations, while many  
2 internal village views are filtered through mature trees, buildings, and topography.
- 3 ● The combination of woodland, mature trees, intermittent river vistas, modest building  
4 scale, and varied development patterns creates an intimate village setting distinct from  
5 more heavily commercialized corridor development.

### 6 3. Building Scale and Massing

- 7 ● Buildings within the historic village vary in age, style, and form, but generally maintain a  
8 modest residential and village scale.
- 9 ● Predominant characteristics include:
  - 10 ○ one- to two-and-a-half-story structures;
  - 11 ○ visually subordinate rooflines;
  - 12 ○ primary building masses accompanied by smaller wings, additions, porches, or  
13 accessory elements;
  - 14 ○ and building footprints that reinforce incremental rather than monumental  
15 development patterns.
- 16 ● Architectural diversity is a defining characteristic of the district; however, visual continuity  
17 is maintained through generally compatible scale, spacing, proportions, and landscape  
18 relationships.
- 19 ● Large uninterrupted building forms, excessive façade length, or visually dominant  
20 structures are inconsistent with the established village character.

### 21 4. Architectural Expression

- 22 ● The district contains a broad range of architectural styles and vernacular building  
23 traditions spanning multiple centuries of development.
- 24 ● Character is derived less from stylistic uniformity than from the cumulative relationship  
25 between:
  - 26 ○ building scale, roof forms, materials, façade proportions, porches and entrances,  
27 landscape setting, and the incremental evolution of structures over time.
- 28 ● Entrances may face streets, side yards, or corner conditions depending on lot  
29 configuration and historical development patterns.
- 30 ● Wood-frame construction, natural materials, porches, articulated façades, and  
31 residentially scaled details are recurring characteristics throughout the district, though  
32 not uniformly applied.
- 33 ● New construction and alterations should reinforce the district's established pattern of  
34 modest scale, incremental growth, and contextual compatibility rather than imitate a  
35 single historic style or period.

36

37

## 1 B. Defining Character of Transition Areas — Adjoining Commercial and Mixed-Use Zones

3 The Village District overlay includes adjoining commercial and mixed-use areas that developed  
4 primarily in the mid-to-late twentieth century, characterized by automobile-oriented site design,  
5 large building footprints, and extensive front-yard parking. These areas are intended to **evolve**  
6 **over time** to better reinforce the historic village rather than visually or functionally dominate it.

### 7 1. Transition in Scale and Massing

- 8 ● New development and substantial reconstruction should reduce perceived building scale  
9 through:
  - 10 ○ Articulated façades;
  - 11 ○ Broken rooflines;
  - 12 ○ Clearly defined primary building volumes.
- 13 ● Applied “Colonial” or historic styling alone shall not be sufficient where overall massing,  
14 height, or footprint remains incompatible with the historic village.

### 15 2. Site Design and Parking

- 16 ● Large uninterrupted parking fields are identified as a primary adverse visual impact on  
17 the Village District.
- 18 ● Future development should:
  - 19 ○ Minimize parking between buildings and public roadways;
  - 20 ○ Break parking areas into smaller landscaped courts;
  - 21 ○ Use buildings, landscape elements, or low walls to visually screen parking from  
22 streets and historic areas.
- 23 ● Pedestrian connections between buildings and to the historic village should be  
24 emphasized over vehicular circulation.

### 25 3. Street and Edge Conditions

- 26 ● Buildings in transition areas should reinforce the street edge and define public space,  
27 rather than recede behind parking.
- 28 ● Reduced mass & scale, roof form & orientation, and façade design & setbacks should be  
29 used to establish a gradual visual transition toward the historic village core.

### 30 4. Views and Visual Relationships

- 31 ● Open views across adjacent agricultural land/ open space toward the historic village are  
32 recognized as character-defining features requiring protection.
- 33 ● New development should avoid blocking or overwhelming existing buildings or vistas.
- 34 ● River views located within and further south of the historic village are recognized as part  
35 of the broader village setting but do not justify large-scale or visually dominant  
36 development within the core village or transition areas.

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The following section represents a preliminary description of additional residential and distinctive landscape areas that warrant consideration as part of the broader Gales Ferry Village District overlay. These areas are under study and included here to illustrate how the larger village landscape and settlement pattern may ultimately be described within the future Village District guidelines.

## 2 **C. Defining Character of Outlying Residential Areas — Wooded** 3 **Neighborhoods and River Landscape**

4 These areas consist of historic properties dispersed along early road corridors, and later  
5 residential neighborhoods extending off these corridors into a distinctive wooded moraine and  
6 river-edge landscape. Together they represent the original southern settlement and successive  
7 early phases of village expansion that contribute to the broader historical setting of Gales Ferry  
8 and its distinctive landscape.

9 Unlike the compact historic village core, these neighborhoods are characterized by a more  
10 sub-urban oriented pattern of development in which residential structures are integrated into the  
11 landscape rather than replacing it.

### 12 **1. Settlement Pattern and Neighborhood Structure**

- 13 ● Development within these areas reflects multiple periods of growth, ranging from  
14 scattered historic settlement along early roadways to mid-twentieth-century suburban  
15 residential neighborhoods.
- 16 ● Streets are generally characterized by loops, short segments, and cul-de-sacs rather  
17 than an interconnected village grid.
- 18 ● Development is organized as discrete neighborhood enclaves embedded within a  
19 wooded moraine landscape.
- 20 ● Despite variations in layout and periods of construction, residential development is of a  
21 modest neighborhood scale compatible with the overall village setting.

### 22 **2. Relationship to Landscape and Natural Features**

- 23 ● A defining characteristic is the integration of development within the natural landscape  
24 rather than the replacement of it.
- 25 ● Residential areas are interspersed with and shaped by natural features, including  
26 wooded slopes, glacial moraines, rocky outcroppings, wetlands, ponds, streams, and  
27 drainage corridors which strongly affect visual character.
- 28 ● These natural features create physical and visual separation between residential  
29 neighborhoods and adjoining commercial areas even where zoning districts abut.
- 30 ● Toward the river edge, the landscape transitions into coves, wooded escarpments, and  
31 intermittent open water vistas providing a broader visual connection to the Thames  
32 River.

- 1 ● The combination of woodland enclosure, varied topography, and selective river views  
2 creates a distinctive balance between intimacy and openness that is central to the  
3 character of these neighborhoods.

### 4 **3. Building Scale and Residential Character**

- 5 ● Predominantly one- to two-story single-family homes of modest scale, including a broad  
6 range of residential forms and periods of construction, including historic houses,  
7 vernacular cottages, capes, ranch homes, bungalows, split-level homes, and other  
8 mid-twentieth-century residential types.  
9 ● Architectural styles are varied, ranging from 18th and 19th century styles and early to  
10 mid-twentieth-century residential construction, with limited formal stylistic cohesion yet  
11 following New England traditions.  
12 ● The overall character is defined by consistency of modest scale, spacing, and landscape  
13 setting rather than architectural uniformity.  
14 ● Buildings are typically situated within landscaped or wooded lots, with less emphasis on  
15 formal street enclosure than within the historic village core.

### 16 **4. Historical and Cultural Associations**

- 17 ● These areas reflect both the original southern settlement of Gales Ferry Village and early  
18 phases of outward expansion followed by twentieth-century residential growth  
19 associated with the evolution of Gales Ferry village.  
20 ● Scattered historic properties, roads, and landscape features retain associations with  
21 early settlement, founding families, maritime activity, military history, and the historic river  
22 corridor.  
23 ● Traditional cultural associations related to the Harvard–Yale Regatta and other  
24 community and recreational activities connected to the Thames River.  
25 ● Development patterns and street naming reflect various historic periods of growth,  
26 contributing to the broader cultural landscape of Gales Ferry.

### 27 **5. Environmental Sensitivity and Open Space**

- 28 ● Wetlands, streams, ponds, and wooded slopes form a continuous ecological and visual  
29 framework that is a defining feature of the district.  
30 ● These landscapes provide habitat, stormwater management, visual buffering and scenic  
31 variation between different parts of the village.  
32 ● The environmental landscape contributes substantially to neighborhood identity,  
33 residential quality of life, and the broader sense of place associated with Gales Ferry.

### 34 **6. Views and Visual Relationships**

- 35 ● Views within these neighborhoods are typically contained and filtered through woodland,  
36 topography, and curving roadway alignments.

- 1 ● Select outward views toward the river and coves provide important visual connection to
- 2 the broader landscape.
- 3 ● These river-oriented vistas and shoreline views contribute to the distinctive character of
- 4 the Village District and should be preserved from obstruction or visual encroachment.

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## 7 **4. Review Process**

- 8 ● **Applicability of Review**
- 9 ● **Role of the Commission**
- 10 ● **Use of Village District Consultant**

## 11 **5. Review Criteria**

12 These guidelines are not intended to require replication of historic styles, but to ensure that new  
13 development is compatible in scale, form, and character. The design guidance is fundamentally  
14 about context and compatibility, not architectural purity.

### 15 **Design Compatibility Standards**

16 All new construction, reconstruction, substantial rehabilitation, and site improvements within the  
17 Village District shall be designed to be **compatible with the district's distinctive architectural**  
18 **and landscape character**. The following standards establish the basis for determining  
19 compatibility and guide interpretation of the more specific design requirements that follow.

20 The Commission shall determine compliance based on these standards.

21 In evaluating proposed development, the Commission shall consider the relationship of the  
22 proposed design to surrounding buildings and spaces, including but not limited to:

- 23 ● Building scale and massing
- 24 ● Orientation and placement
- 25 ● Roof forms
- 26 ● Materials and colors
- 27 ● Window and door patterns
- 28 ● Site features such as landscaping, lighting, signage, and parking

29 Proposed development shall **complement and reinforce the existing character of the**  
30 **district** and avoid designs that would detract from or visually disrupt the established village  
31 streetscape.

32 The design guidelines contained in this document are intended to **inform the Commission's**  
33 **evaluation of design compatibility** and should be considered in the review of all applicable

1 applications. The Commission may require reasonable modifications to a proposed design as  
2 necessary to achieve compatibility with the character of the Village District.

3

## 4 **6. Submission Requirements**

- 5 ● Building elevations and façade drawings
- 6 ● materials samples
- 7 ● color samples
- 8 ● site plans
- 9 ● Photographs of the site and surrounding context

10 Applicants shall submit a lighting plan for all projects subject to site plan or Village District  
11 design review.

12 All new projects shall include a street tree plan as part of the required landscape plan. The plan  
13 shall identify appropriate species, planting conditions, and soil volumes, and shall indicate  
14 whether proposed species are considered invasive by the United States Department of  
15 Agriculture (USDA) or the State of Connecticut.

16 Landscape plans shall:

- 17 ● Identify significant natural resources on the parcel, including existing trees, vegetation,  
18 and topography.
- 19 ● Delineate construction limits to minimize disturbance to existing vegetation and natural  
20 site features.

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