

To the Inhabitants of Watertown:

It gives me concern, at a time when our city speaks often of renewal, opportunity, and growth, to observe that we remain without any place of daily general meeting, wherein citizens might regularly gather to exchange intelligence, confer freely with one another, and cultivate a common understanding of the matters that concern us all. Such a want is not trivial, nor merely social. A place of general meeting has ever been counted among the necessary institutions of a durable and influential city, particularly where learning, commerce, and public ambition are said to reside.

History bears ample witness that enlightenment does not arise by accident, nor does it flourish in isolation. It requires rooms as well as minds; places where ideas may descend from colleges and offices into common circulation, where the work of scholars, tradesmen, soldiers, and citizens may be rendered intelligible to one another, and where intelligence—political, moral, and practical—may be heard, tested, and refined through conversation. Such places do not replace institutions of learning or governance; they bind them to the life of the city.

To answer these and many other good and useful purposes, coffeehouses have long been deemed the most convenient and moderate places of resort. At a small expense of time or money, persons may be found and spoken with, appointments made, current news heard, and matters of consequence discussed without ceremony or exclusion. It was through such houses that cities first learned to think of themselves as more than collections of buildings—as places of influence, exchange, and shared judgment.

In cities and towns that have understood their own importance, sufficient encouragement has always been given to support one or more such houses in a decent and sustainable manner. How comes it then that Watertown—situated at the heart of its region, furnished with colleges, institutions, and history, and rivaling no city so closely as to excuse its own absence—should lack even one place expressly devoted to this purpose? It is not competition that threatens cities such as ours, but quiet irrelevance: the gradual surrender of public life to necessity alone, while influence accrues elsewhere.

Our Public Square, by name and position, ought to serve as the natural seat of such a house. Yet it remains chiefly a place of passage, not resort. Businesses have come and gone, each respectable in its own right, but none charged with the task of sustaining civic encounter. Without a room set aside for conversation, reading, and the exchange of ideas, the Square cannot assume the relevance its position demands, and our city yields, by default, the work of public enlightenment to places no more deserving by geography or character.

Where coffeehouses have failed, it has seldom been for want of purpose, but for want of understanding and support. It has always been accounted reasonable that those who enjoy the benefits of such a house should contribute modestly to its maintenance; for a place that serves the public must nevertheless be sustained by it. Enlightenment, like any durable good, requires stewardship as well as appetite.

If Watertown desires not merely to endure, but to matter—to retain its people, attract their return, and share in the intellectual life of the region—it must ask whether it is willing to encourage the institutions upon which such relevance depends. A city that cannot sustain even one place of daily, informal meeting does not decline suddenly; it thins quietly, until public life is reduced to errands rather than encounters, and influence passes elsewhere by default.

These reflections are offered not in reproach, but in the hope that Watertown might yet claim the advantages proper to its position.

A Friend to Watertown.

The North Country's First Coffee House

The Public House