

Middlefield History

A Brief History, compiled by Cathy Roth & Jack Cobb

The town now known as Middlefield was once part of outlying areas of five neighboring towns — Chester, Becket, Washington, Peru, Worthington — plus a large tract of land called Prescott's Grant. Twelve families, many from Hebron, CT, found their way to this high and rugged plateau by 1774. They included the households of Samuel and Elnathan Taylor, David Mack, Josiah Leonard, William Mann and Daniel Meeker. Just ten years later, when the town incorporated in 1783, there were 68 resident families.

One of the first orders of business for this new township was to collect taxes to build roads. Only two "good" roads existed; the rest were dozens of ox cart trails. In what locals refer to as mud season (others call it Spring), there was often no way to get from one part of town to another. Over time, thirteen roads were laid out to connect the settlements scattered throughout the town. The next priority was to "site" a meetinghouse for religious worship, community gatherings and public meetings. Its location was a contentious issue for a town cobbled together from five different settlements with no clearly established geographical, political or social center. It took six years and 30 town meetings to reach agreement among the many strong personalities and opposing opinions. On that same meetinghouse site at the intersection of Skyline Trail and Town Hill Road, the Middlefield Church stands today.

Early Politics

In the run up to the American Revolution, most Middlefielders were pronouncedly "Whigs" – they favored independence from Britain and many fought on the Patriot side in the War of Independence. Middlefield was also strongly Federalist – the town voted to adopt the proposed U.S. Constitution of 1787 and gave its allegiance to the newly formed federal government. The town voted against the War of 1812 with Great Britain, which it viewed as "unnecessary." By the time of the Civil War townspeople considered themselves mostly Republican, members of "the party of Lincoln and anti-slavery." Middlefield supplied 86 men for the Union army.

Early Prosperity

The period of 1775-1830 was an era of great growth and prosperity for Middlefield. Newly built roads linked commerce between Hartford, Springfield and Pittsfield. Farming for one's own household and a little extra for trade was the prominent form of Middlefield agriculture in the colonial period. That changed when sheep and cattle were introduced to Middlefield's plentiful rocky pastures, which were just right for grazing. In the early 1800s, nearly 75% of the town's forestland was cleared for sheep grazing. Saw mills that made boards from the forested wood and tanneries that processed the cow and sheep hides became successful new businesses. Uriah Church established the town's first woolen mill in 1810 by along Factory Brook. Manufacturing of wool cloth flourished in what became known as Factory Village. Saxony and Merino sheep provided fine wool for weaving. In 1840 the human population reached 686 while sheep numbered 9,840. During the Civil War (1861-65) Middlefield wool provided blankets and uniforms for Union soldiers.

By the 1860s Shorthorn Durham cattle became the town's most valuable product and led to the recognition of Middlefield as a leading breeding area by the Massachusetts Agricultural College (today's UMass Amherst). The construction of the Western Railroad provided a commercial link to this isolated highland community. During construction of the railroad bed and tracks alone, 1,000 immigrants were hired and crowded into tents and temporary wooden structures in Bancroft and Chester. While the railroad tracks bypassed the town center itself, the station near Bancroft provided transport for the products of numerous Middlefield mills and for the beef and dairy products that brought wealth to owners, and jobs for workers.

Markets, Floods and Fires

By 1870, Middlefield was a thriving manufacturing town. The woolen industry was threatened, however, by the combination of a slump in the woolen market brought about by new tariffs on American exports; a fire that destroyed the Church woolen mill; and a dam failure in 1874 that brought the full force of water from the town reservoir crashing into Factory Village. The flood critically destroyed or damaged many homes and most mill buildings. These crushing events marked the start of the decline in Middlefield's woolen mill industry, which came to an end by 1915.

Summer Visitors, Culture and Intellectual Life

With the end of the farming economy, tourism became a major source of income for Middlefield's residents. Dr. Amber Starbuck opened the Big House to Smith

College faculty and other summer visitors. There's reason to believe that the house also served as a retreat for respectable young women who found themselves in the compromising position of being pregnant out of wedlock.

Middlefield also developed a strong intellectual relationship to Oberlin College in Ohio, with several residents either serving on the college faculty or attending Oberlin as students. The community also attracted a number of artists and creative talents, and a much more diverse citizenry over the remainder of the twentieth century.

Lasting Riches

The forebears of Middlefield have left a significant legacy including independence, endurance, entrepreneurship, scholarship, and community spirit. Our inheritance is also a natural landscape of breath-taking beauty. The peace of the hills, spectacular highland ridges and river valleys, magnificent mountain vistas and the powerful and shimmering branches of the Westfield River continue to draw and enrich us.

(Compiled by Jack Cobb and Cathy Roth from *A History of Middlefield, Massachusetts* by Edward Church Smith and Phillip Mack Smith (1924), and The National Historic Register report for application (1999) prepared by the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission.)