

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The Town of Canterbury, Connecticut, is situated in the eastern half of the state, about 40 miles from Hartford and 65 miles from New Haven. Canterbury is bounded on the north by Brooklyn, on the east by Plainfield (and the Quinebaug River), on the south by Lisbon, and on the west by Scotland and Hampton. The town extends eight miles from north to south and five miles from east to west and covers an area of approximately 40 square miles. The northern portions of the town are decidedly hilly, while considerable wetlands can be found in the south.

Initial settlement in this area commenced c. 1690. Early inhabitants included Rowland Jones, Thomas Brooks, and Obadiah and William Johnson. In 1697 Major James Fitch and his family took up residence, claiming a large tract of land on the west side of the Quinebaug River. At the time Fitch was one of Connecticut's most prominent citizens, a leader in both military and civil affairs. He served as a colonial assistant in 1690 and sergeant major of New London County in 1696. His claims to land in this region extended back several decades (to 1653), though challenged by Fitzjohn Winthrop. Other early settlers included Tixhall Ensworth, Samuel Adams, Robert Green, Elisha Paine, Samuel and Joseph Cleaveland, David Tracy, and Jabez Utter. ^{Solomon}

In 1699 local residents incorporated the Town of Plainfield (including present Canterbury), straddling the Quinebaug River, with the meetinghouse situated on the east side of the stream. The difficulty of getting to weekly meetings (there was no bridge until 1728), as well as the political divisions engendered by the Fitch/Winthrop controversy (settlers on the east side tended to support Winthrop, those on the west Fitch) caused Canterbury to be set off in October 1703 as Connecticut's 38th town.

The initial settlement process advanced fairly slowly, with land titles obtained from indigenous tribes often in dispute, while boundary controversies, especially with Plainfield and Windham, dragged on for decades. Questions of land tenure and the fact that the very first

settlers appropriated much of the best acreage for themselves also slowed development. In 1723 townsmen reached a new agreement on rights to the undivided common lands based on earlier contributions to construction of the meetinghouse and the minister's house. A total of 68 settlers received shares of varying value.

Tasks undertaken by those initial residents proved daunting. Dense forests which covered nearly the entire extent of the town needed to be cleared and land prepared for planting. Houses and barns had to be built, roads and lanes laid out, fences and stone walls erected. Bounties placed on wolves and rattlesnakes testified to the dangers which lurked just out of sight. An agricultural system defined by simple tools, small fields, home consumption, subsistence yields, and unpredictable weather occasionally teetered on the edge of disaster. In 1726 the General Assembly received information that many eastern towns had experienced severe frost in the year past which greatly reduced harvests, leading to widespread food shortages. Lawmakers responded by appropriating funds to supply emergency provisions to those affected.

In addition to intense labors necessary to sustain life, Canterbury's early settlers also devoted considerable time and energy to establishing community institutions which defined rural New England in the eighteenth century: church, town government, militia. Though the earliest municipal records have not survived, it seems likely that Elisha Paine served as the first town clerk, while William Johnson, Samuel Adams, and Eleazar Brown became the first selectmen. By 1717 the town had grown considerably and the body of local office holders had expanded to include town meeting moderator, constable, clerk, selectman, grand juror, fence viewer, lister, surveyor, poundkeeper, and collector. Canterbury became part of Windham County in 1726.

Connecticut law required that new towns establish a community church and settle a gospel minister before obtaining full corporate status. Given both the municipal and religious needs, construction of a suitable meetinghouse constituted an urgent priority. In 1705 Robert

Green sold 3.5 acres of land (for 30 shillings) to the town for the purpose of erecting a meetinghouse and providing a training ground. In 1708 the General Assembly forgave the town its annual "County Rate" (tax) so that the money might be used to hasten the building of a meetinghouse. Construction began in 1711 on the site of the present Congregational church. That same year the town received permission from colonial authorities to gather a church.

The Reverend Samuel Estabrook, who had already been preaching for some time, served as the town's first minister (there were 25 members at the time), a position he held until his death in 1727. A religious revival in 1721 doubled the number of church members. John Wadsworth succeeded Estabrook in 1729, and during his incumbency villagers erected a second, larger meetinghouse measuring 50' x 45' near the site of the previous building.

In 1741 townsmen removed Wadsworth from his position because of a scandal involving a female parishioner. At the same time, Canterbury churchgoers experienced the "Great Awakening," the explosive revival which rent New England's religious establishment in the mid-eighteenth century. Itinerant preachers generated a confrontational message and spiritual intensity that earlier structures, customs, and attitudes could not accommodate. Local historians noted that the "New Light" enthusiasm pervaded the whole community, attracting many converts. The more conservative parishioners found the revivalists "noisy" and "boisterous" at best.

After the ordination of James Cogswell in 1744, revivalists abandoned the Canterbury church, first gathering in private homes, and later erecting their own meetinghouse just west of the town green. Initially, the splinter denomination attracted considerable support, perhaps as many as 120 members, but eventually enthusiasm waned, while dismissions and self-criticism reduced the number of adherents. A few emigrated to new communities and others returned to the old church. At the end of the 1780s the surviving members removed to north Canterbury. By the early 1800s the movement had grown moribund and by mid-century the meetinghouse stood in ruins.

Canterbury's original church also faced challenges from rapid population growth which occurred in the mid-eighteenth century. As the number of outlying families in the western districts multiplied, they came to resent the burden of travelling to weekly meetings in the eastern portion of town. In 1769 they organized a second Congregational church, the Westminster Society. That same year area resident John Parks donated land to the society to serve as a community green, and provide a site for a church and cemetery. Shortly thereafter construction commenced on the Westminster meetinghouse. John Staples served as the first minister from 1772 until 1804, followed by Erastus Learned (1805-1824). Residents in the northern portion of Canterbury followed a similar secessionist path, first creating Mortlake Parish, and in 1786 departing to form the Town of Brooklyn.

The combination of geographical divisions and religious controversy greatly impacted the center church, and in the 1770s parishioners reluctantly dismissed minister James Cogswell due to a lack of funds. Not until the 1780s did they secure a new minister. In the 1790s, however, with the village center growing again and the community generally prospering, the town voted to build a new meetinghouse with a steeple, the funds to be raised by lottery and public subscription. The fine new edifice, third in the community's history, opened its doors in 1805.

A third institution, the colonial militia, also played an important role in local affairs, providing a military force to repel possible Native American attacks or campaign against external enemies such as the French, while also reinforcing the deeply held belief in a citizen soldiery available to defend local prerogatives. Canterbury first organized its citizens for military purposes in 1707 and supported a full militia company by 1720. Thereafter annual training days became important community events. The militia played its most important role in events surrounding the American Revolution.

The Canterbury community experienced considerable growth in the eighteenth century, fueled by both large numbers of children born to resident families and substantial in-migration from other New England towns. In fact, population soared from 35 male inhabitants in 1709

(perhaps 150 total) to 1,260 in 1756, and 2,450 in 1775. (Secession of Mortlake reduced this number.) New communities in the eighteenth century typically experienced extremely high birthrates in the first and second generations and Canterbury certainly adhered to the pattern, with most families producing eight or more offspring

Substantial in-migration further fueled local population growth. A general shortage of arable land in eastern New England led farmers from throughout the region to abandon their ancestral communities and seek farms elsewhere. Canterbury provided a destination for many such individuals, including Josiah Cleaveland and Samuel Adams (Chelmsford), Charles Davenport and Samuel Butts (Dorchester), Elisha Payne (Eastham), Edward Raynsford (Cambridge), and James Bradford (Norwich).

The dispersed nature of settlement and the traditional commitment to some form of education for local youth led Canterbury residents to authorize a number of school districts throughout the community. In 1718 the town ordered that a school be kept for six months each year, two months in the north, two months in the south, and two months in the west. In 1726 voters divided the town into three separate "squadrons" (school districts), with the first schoolhouses likely erected c. 1730. By 1770 there were seven squadrons in town, the number eventually rising to 23 in the early nineteenth century. In 1796 John Adams established his Canterbury Academy, though he removed to Plainfield in 1801. Three decades later Prudence Crandall operated her famous girls' boarding school in the village center. Several district schools, constructed after 1800, survive in various states of repair and alteration.

Throughout the eighteenth century Canterbury's economy revolved generally around the numerous family farms established across the landscape, farms that produced largely, but not exclusively, for home consumption. Farmers typically raised a variety of crops, with small surpluses of grain, meat, and dairy products exchanged for imported and manufactured goods, or used to satisfy tax assessments. Domestic industry, especially production of cloth, ensured family well-being. Herds of animals remained small. With limited surpluses, very few animals

could be kept through the winter. Plowing fields and meadows were small by modern standards, and teams of oxen provided the bulk of motive power.

The rural economy also depended on local waterpowered mills constructed beside the town's many small rivers and streams---gristmills, sawmills, and fulling mills which ground grain for flour, sawed timber for lumber, and prepared homespun cloth for fabrication into clothing. Millers selected their sites with care, looking to combine a steady flow of water, sufficient head (drop) to provide adequate power, a narrowing in the stream to ease dam construction, and a broad shallow area above the dam to allow for the impounding of substantial quantities of water. Samuel Adams established Canterbury's first gristmill on Rowlands Brook in 1703. In the next two centuries local residents constructed many additional mills along area streams, with sawmills and gristmills of primary importance. Tanneries, potash works, and coopers' shops also played key roles in the local economy.

Like so many other New England communities, Canterbury early and vigorously supported the colonial challenge to British authority, and experienced severe deprivation during the conflict which followed. In June 1774, voters endorsed the call for a Continental Congress, created a Committee of Correspondence, and collected supplies for the relief of beleaguered Boston. In March 1777, with the conflict well-underway, inhabitants agreed to supply various provisions to the families of soldiers in the army. At least 30 area men served with the Continental forces.

High taxes and shortages of trade goods affected the entire citizenry. On several occasions local committees attempted to restrain high prices of goods, but could do little in the face of widespread inflation and currency depreciation. When enthusiasm for the war flagged, residents offered bounties to those who would enlist and fulfill the town's manpower quota. In August 1780 inhabitants collected "small clothing" for the soldiers. The following year portions of the French Army passed through town on their way from Newport to Yorktown.

The post-war era brought great changes to Canterbury. With the establishment of a new

national government in the 1780s and a rising tide of prosperity in the 1790s, both municipalities and private investors began to upgrade the regional road network through the construction of turnpikes and improvement of area roads. Despite some local opposition, the main route to Windham (roughly parallel to current Route 14) became a turnpike in 1799. Two years later investors incorporated the Norwich and Worcester turnpike. The Hartford-Providence stage passed through town twice each day, bringing both visitors and trade.

The outbreak of war in Europe following the French Revolution generated an enormous demand for agricultural commodities, and the United States, as the world's leading maritime neutral nation, fell heir to a great carrying trade. Merchants marketed New England farm surpluses and lumber products widely, greatly invigorating area agriculture. The simultaneous expansion of urban centers such as Boston, Providence, Hartford, Norwich, New London, and New Haven also increased demand for farm produce, hastening a shift to commercial production of grains and dairy products.

The early stages of America's industrial revolution unfolded in New England and local mill sites soon began manufacturing a wide range of products for regional sale. George Justin produced scythes and axes in South Canterbury c. 1800. A blacksmith shop with waterpowered triphammer stood on Baldwin Brook. Two carding machines operated on the Little River in the period 1805-1825. A small cotton spinning mill on Rowlands Brook flourished c. 1812. From the 1820s onward the Backus & Allen foundry operated in the northwestern portion of town. All told, an 1819 gazetteer listed seven gristmills, nine sawmills, two tanneries, a pottery, two carding mills, two fulling mills, two cotton factories, and one woolen factory.

The 1807-09 Embargo and other international trade disruptions proved a boon for area factory owners, and large-scale manufacturing to take advantage of rising demand for American-made goods commenced in 1811 at what would become "Packerville." A group of Canterbury and Plainfield investors led by Abel Andrus purchased a waterpower site from the Farnham family which had previously been utilized to operate a sawmill and blacksmith shop

and quickly erected a three-story wooden cotton mill there. Following the War of 1812, Daniel Packer of North Stonington assumed control of the operation, and under his leadership the site experienced considerable growth, including construction of tenements, stores, shops, and other worker housing. In 1832 the company erected a larger stone mill.

Improved transportation, rising living standards, and profitable commercial enterprises all exercised their mark on the local community. In the town center a series of elegant and substantial homes and public buildings reflected greater prosperity and a cosmopolitan outlook. The village quickly attracted several merchants, doctors, lawyers, and artisans such as clockmaker Walter Brewster, traders Jacob Bacon and William Moore, lawyer Asa Bacon, and doctor Andrew Harris. The Mariah Masonic Lodge opened in 1790, quickly becoming an important factor in the community's social life and counting many prominent citizens as members. The community also supported as many as six-to-eight stores in the early nineteenth century. In the town's rural sections new homes executed in the stylish Federal and then Greek Revival modes reflected this greater prosperity.

Despite propitious beginnings in the period 1790-1820, later decades proved less kind to Canterbury. In the second quarter of the nineteenth century railroad construction brought further prosperity to many New England communities, facilitating both industry and commercial agriculture. This phenomenon, however, largely bypassed Canterbury. The Norwich & Worcester Railroad passed through Plainfield across river in the 1830s. An east/west route constructed in the 1850s similarly avoided the area. Only in the far southeastern corner of town could one find the small station at South Canterbury and a station/grain depot in Packerville. Construction of the railroad also caused the demise of local stage routes, which exercised a chilling effect on many area businesses. One commentator observed that when the railroad bypassed Canterbury, "it caused the removal of many Westminster people."

Canterbury also failed to participate in the next stage of New England industrialization as large integrated mills replaced earlier, more modest enterprises. Though small local factories

producing twine, yarn, rakes, shingles, cotton batts, candle wicking, carpet yarn, and mast hoops often found niches in the regional economy, larger enterprises did not prove so successful. The Packerville textile mills suffered severely in the Depression of 1837-1843, and thereafter a series of new owners or lessees operated the site. With limited waterpower potential (approximately 100 horsepower), operations could not be expanded in line with activities at more attractive sites throughout the state and the rest of New England. Other local industries also failed or relocated. The Isaac Backus foundry departed Canterbury in 1871, relocating to Willimantic. Similarly, the Robinson, Fowler & Co. foundry moved to Plainfield in 1872, "rebuilding near the railroad."

For most of the nineteenth century Canterbury's demographic patterns ran exactly counter to the exuberant growth experienced in the previous century. Population peaked at approximately 2,000 in 1820 and then slid rapidly downward. Smaller families and extensive outmigration combined to create this phenomenon. Farmers abandoned tired fields for new lands in Vermont, New York, and the recently opened Midwest. Moses Cleaveland, descendent of an early Canterbury family and the founder of Cleveland, Ohio, was the most famous example of local citizens who comprised the western exodus. In many quarters the massive movement of population became known as "Ohio Fever." By 1840 local population had fallen to 1,791, by 1870 1,552, and by 1880 1,272. Examination of the local school district reports reveals a similar picture. Nearly 450 youngsters enrolled in town schools in 1858, but only 209 in 1887. A contemporary observer noted, "The importance of Canterbury seems to lie mainly in the past and in the future." In fact, the population slide continued into the twentieth century. The 1910 census counted only 868 residents.

In the nineteenth century local agriculture also experienced tremendous change. Early on, farmers had increased production of grains, meat, wool, and dairy products (cheese, butter) to meet growing urban demand. In time, each fell victim to a combination of forces, including canals and railroads which tapped the nation's fertile Midwestern regions. Various blights,

insects, and Western competition largely ended wheat production in New England by 1850. The country's meat-producing region shifted westward to the Ohio River Valley. After the Depression of 1837 cooled a surge of interest known as "Merino Fever," wool production also shifted westward. Even locally made butter and cheese experienced fatal competition from cheese factories and creameries established in New York State and elsewhere in the mid-nineteenth century. These pressures caused several adjustments. Some farmers simply abandoned their holdings. Others refocused their efforts on dairy (liquid milk) and orchard products, and in the twentieth century eggs and vegetables.

Despite the relative decline, agriculture remained an important part of the local scene. In 1887 area farmers organized Canterbury Grange #70, part of the national Patrons of Husbandry movement. The present hall dates from 1915. The arrival of numerous Finnish immigrants after 1900 also helped sustain marginal farms. They purchased many declining homesteads and vigorously produced vegetables, milk, and chickens for market. In fact, well into the twentieth century small-scale, family-oriented agriculture constituted the primary economic focus of many town residents.

The introduction of automobiles and paved roads in the early decades of the twentieth century at first brought only limited changes to Canterbury. Horses survived as a staple of transportation for decades. Many roads, in fact, remained unpaved until after 1945, and numerous one-room schoolhouses scattered throughout the town continued to provide basic education. Overall population stagnated, hitting a low of 868 residents in 1910, and rising to just 992 by 1940.

After the Second World War, however, the pace of change accelerated dramatically, with many more cars and more miles of paved highways. The town closed its rural schoolhouses in 1947 in favor of a consolidated school near the village center. With greater access to outside employment in places like Norwich, Groton, New London, Danielson, and elsewhere, population began rising sharply for the first time in 150 years. The town grew by over 30

percent in the 1940s, 40 percent in the 1950s, nearly 50 percent in the 1960s, another 30 percent in the 1970s, and a further 30 percent in the 1980s, reaching a current level of approximately 4,500 residents. The construction of Interstate 395 only strengthened the trend, providing rapid access to all points north and south. At the same time, however, the number of local farms dropped sharply throughout the postwar era as dairymen and poultry producers struggled to meet rising costs and heightened competition. Today, barely 20 farms or large nurseries survive, a dramatic shift from the situation just a few generations ago.

The rapidly expanding population necessitated considerable new residential construction, the most Canterbury had experienced since the early nineteenth century. Many small subdivisions appeared, while the development of single sites in rural areas proceeded briskly. The hundreds of new homes added to the town's historic building stock in recent decades created a blend of old and new apparent everywhere in the community. While some early homes are still surrounded by a nineteenth-century landscape of fields and woods, others sit cheek-by-jowl with their modern neighbors. In either case, they eloquently document and reinforce Canterbury's connection with its own long history, thus strengthening its sense of place and continuity, no small achievement in the modern world.