

A Brief History of Wilbraham

(from Bicentennial Program 1963)

About 1675 the people of Springfield, who had come from the Massachusetts Bay settlement in the Boston area to the Connecticut Valley in 1636, bought from the Indians the hilly area to the east, and called it the Outward Commons. Some ten years later they divided the land among the "landed proprietors" of Springfield, but regarded it as common wilderness until 1731, when Nathaniel Hitchcock and his family came to settle on our present Main Street south of the center village.

By 1741 the population numbered some 30 families, and the area now Wilbraham and Hampden (approximately) was established as the Fourth Precinct of Springfield. The first business after organizing the precinct was the hiring and settlement of the Reverend Noah Merrick as the first minister, which was accomplished on June 14, 1741, the same day the church was organized. On June 15, 1763, the Fourth Precinct, plus a little more land from Springfield, was "erected into a separate town by the name of Wilbraham", with a population of about 400.

The southern part of the town soon developed a desire for its own church in the vicinity of the Scantic river, with the result that on June 11, 1782, the town was divided into two parishes, and present Hampden became the South Parish of Wilbraham. Nearly a hundred years later, on March 28, 1878, the final step in the division of the town was taken by the legislature, and the South Parish became the town of Hampden.

Discarding the practice of their Boston forebears, the settlers of Wilbraham laid out their highways to provide means of conveniently going between objectives, rather than following cowpaths, although this town was essentially agricultural until World War II. Sheep, cattle, fruit and grain were the principal products until poultry, including turkeys, assumed importance about 1930.

Following the close of the second World War, agriculture has rapidly disappeared and housing developments have taken its place. Now the town is essentially residential, with farming limited to a dozen or so specialized farms. This trend to residential predominance led inevitably to a serious-minded fire department about 1920, a water system in 1926, a zoning system and planning board beginning in 1928 and maturing in 1946, and a police department about 1954.

Industry was limited principally to textiles in the early days, located on the Scantic river and on Twelve Mile brook. Later came the Collins Manufacturing Company (paper) and the Cutler Company (grain processing, driers and gristmills) on the Chicopee river. The Collins paper mill was the largest employer.

Education has always been considered seriously in Wilbraham. The meager private schools and frugal public schools were given great impetus by the location of Wesleyan Academy here in 1825. The town has passed through the district school system, and the sending of advanced pupils to the academy and to out-of-town high schools, to a system of larger schools in which pupils are prepared for the Hampden-Wilbraham Regional High School.

Today, Wilbraham remains located between the country town and big municipal business.