

Boxborough History Summary

Boxborough was characterized in 1873 as "...a small farming-town, somewhat hilly and of a passably good soil, lying on the westerly edge of Middlesex County"...inhabited by "nearly all farmers, who earn their living...by the sweat of the face." This description was entirely fitting from the town's founding through to the beginnings of suburbanization in the late 20th century.

Disliking the distance to church services or perhaps just seeking their own identity, a group of town founding families acquired Harvard's old meeting house and transported it to the hilltop intersection of Hill and Middle Roads. In 1775 they petitioned the Colonial legislature to become a separate entity and in 1783 Boxborough was incorporated as a district of about ten square miles, made up of parts of Stow, Harvard, and Littleton. By 1800 a small center village had grown up around the meetinghouse at the top of Hill Road, but at its incorporation as a town in 1835, Boxborough was still an agricultural community of dispersed farms raising grain and livestock.

With the exception of small local industries including gristmills, sawmills, and cooperages as well as some minor boot and shoemaking, comb-making, and a lime quarry and kiln, Boxborough's economy remained almost entirely agricultural through the 19th century. In 1806 the Union Turnpike was extended west from Concord (today's Massachusetts Avenue/Route 111), passing through Boxborough a short distance south of the center easing the local farmers' access to regional markets. The 1829 founding of the Evangelical Congregational Society and its erecting of a meeting house on the Union Turnpike marked the beginning of a shift of the town's center of activity from the old Hill Road Town Common. Growing of hops was a specialty on many Boxborough farms in the early 19th century, when the town had the reputation as the largest hop-growing town of its size in New England. In 1845 the Fitchburg Railroad came through the northeast corner of town with a flag stop at the Littleton border, further speeding the shipment of farm products such as butter and cheese, and setting the stage for agricultural specialization.

Even as late as 1860 the heart of the town was still dominated by an ancient oak wood of perhaps a thousand acres. It was visited in two well documented 1860 visits by Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau characterized Inches Woods as "just the most remarkable and memorable thing in Boxboro....The handsomest thing I saw in Boxboro was this noble stand of oak wood. I doubt if there is a finer one in Massachusetts." The woods were subsequently lumbered as part of the Civil War efforts and became crop and grazing lands. Dairying became increasingly important in the second half of the 19th century, with farmers shipping milk to regional markets in Worcester, Lowell, and Boston. After the Civil War many Boxborough farms also included large orchards of apples, pears, and peaches, and some farmers were doing a brisk business in grapes and berries. By 1900, poultry raising was another important specialty, lasting into the 1940s.

While orcharding, poultry farming, and some dairying continued into the 1970s, farming of all types declined throughout Boxborough after World War II. Commuting to jobs outside of Boxborough increased, spurred by regional highway construction including Interstate 495 which came through the west part of town in the early 1960s. Old farms were divided to make new house lots, and residential growth skyrocketed through the end of the 20th century, dramatically

changing the character of the community. Suburbanization caused the population of the Town to double in the 1960s and to double again in the 1970s. Beginning in the 1960s a number of multi-family buildings, first as apartments and later as condos, were built, particularly to the west of I-495. The 1990s saw an increase in office park construction also mostly on the west side of I-495.

Increased awareness of development pressures coupled with the change in demographics led to a town focus on landscape conservation and on development of recreation resources. The Town began acquiring land for conservation and, notably, a private group secured preservation of the endangered Beaver Brook Esker, which remains under the management of the Boxborough Conservation Trust. Surveys of historical resources were performed resulting in the Boxborough Old Town Common and Steele Farm being placed on the National Register. Steele Farm, a municipal property, was also protected by a conservation/historical preservation restriction. Active recreation resources developed during this period include athletic fields at Ferra Meadows (a mixed use property) and at Liberty Fields.

- Alan Rohwer, Boxborough Historical Commission, August 2015