

Chapter 2: Community History

There has been a Native American presence in the area now known as Vermont for at least the past 11,500 years. Early permanent settlements included the Iroquois and Western Abenaki tribes in the Champlain Basin. Eventually, the Abenaki expanded their presence up the larger river valleys flowing into the eastern shores of Lake Champlain including the river now called the Winooski. The pre-Middlesex area along the Winooski witnessed early Indian habitation primarily in the form of seasonal hunting and fishing gathering camps.



The remains of early historic sites have been found along the river near and in Middlesex. One site on the town's eastern boundary contained, "evidence of an Indian village including a cornfield and burial place where Indian weapons were found". Native Americans lived in the area from 1750-60 before the arrival of explorers and settlers of European descent.

The township of Middlesex was chartered in the name of English King George III on June 8, 1763. Vermont declared itself an independent republic in 1777 and became the 14th state of the United States in 1791.

Middlesex was the first town settled in Washington County. The first settler was Thomas Mead who arrived in 1783 from Westfield, Massachusetts and staked his claim on the river near the present day Settlement Farm. By 1796, 60 more settlers had arrived and the 1800 census listed 262 Middlesex inhabitants. By 1810, the population had almost doubled to 401 and by 1830, to 1156. As the population of the town grew, Middlesex Village emerged as a thriving community and commercial center.

Grist and sawmills were constructed along the river beginning around 1800 just upstream from the Middlesex Narrows. Additional mills soon followed, including linseed oil, clothing-dressing, woolen and wood shingle. However, the river proved an unfriendly host for commerce as the mills were destroyed by floods in 1818, 1828, and 1830. There also was a fire in 1821. The mills were quickly rebuilt following each catastrophic event. These industries and the town's emerging farming community led to a growing local economy of craftsmen and merchants along with an active civic life centered in the village. The first record of a postmaster in town was 1826. By 1871, two large hotels had opened in the village.

The Central Vermont Railroad completed its rail line from Windsor, Vermont to Burlington in 1849. The new line included an important station in Middlesex Village. The station depot supported not only local commerce but an active stagecoach route that extended from the village

up into the Mad River Valley. Water to the village was supplied from a spring located across the river in Moretown with a pipe that ran under the covered wooden bridge spanning the Narrows. At the height of its development in the late 1800's, the village supported a church, schoolhouse, three stores, three blacksmith shops, a public house and about 200 inhabitants. The majesty of Middlesex Narrows was tamed in 1895 by the construction of a wooden crib power dam for electricity generation. The bulk of the electricity was transported by poles and wires not to the town or village but upstream to the capitol city of Montpelier and to a rapidly growing granite industry. Much of Middlesex had to wait until the early 1940's and the assistance of the U. S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Electrification Agency before becoming electrified.

Flooding of the Winooski continued to be a frequent occurrence culminating in the Great Flood of 1927. The rampaging waters severely damaged the power dam and took out the High Bridge across the Narrows and the Buck Bridge, a 214' covered doubleway over the river west of the village into Moretown. In his book, *Vermont in Floodtime*, Luther Johnson describes the wet summer and fall of 1927. Then, "On November 3, there was a downpour of eight or nine inches over 24 hours causing the river to rise beyond all expectation and with great rapidity. A huge volume of water rose and bypassed the upstream bend and flowed directly into the lower level of the village, removing structures and excavating the north bank until it scoured the bedrock clean nearly around to the Narrows High Bridge."

The bridges were later replaced and the power dam repaired but most of the village's commercial facilities lost in the flood were not rebuilt. In addition, the calamity heralded a decline of rail service to and through Middlesex. The decline was hastened in later years by an improving highway system and a growing emphasis on highway travel throughout the state.

Then, in the 1950's, the new Federal Interstate System came to Middlesex in the name of Interstate 89. Although the new divided highway bypasses the village to the north, its arrival has had a profound impact on the village and the town. The construction of the road bisected several large farms and replaced U. S. Route 2 as the primary east-west route between Montpelier and Burlington. Much of the tremendous amount of sand and gravel required was mined from local sources. The extensive removal of this material is still evident on the local landscape. An interchange, Exit 9, was constructed just outside the village where I-89 crosses Center Road. The interchange has proven to be a catalyst for the Middlesex economy prompting construction of a State Highway maintenance facility, barracks for the Vermont State Police, a State Records facility and a florist distribution center.

The Welch Park Development was created near Exit 9 in 1993, an eight-lot subdivision initially intended for a mix of commercial and residential uses. Eventually, it became exclusively an industrial park. Bell Atlantic (now Verizon) constructed a 52,650 square foot regional garage and administrative facility in the park becoming the largest commercial enterprise in town. Two more commercial businesses are now planning to move in. A lot bordering the river was deeded to the town to be used for public recreation and conservation purposes.

Middlesex adopted zoning regulations in 1987 with Commercial Zoning mainly confined to lands lying between U.S. Route 2 and the Winooski River both to the west and east of the village. Welch Park takes up most of the Commercial Zone to the west. Another section of

commercial development emerged in the east section of the Zone between Cross Road and the Middlesex Town Line mainly in response to property tax incentives issued by the town around 1990. Commercial activity here intermingles with residential uses and currently includes construction, propane storage, trucking, metal and plastic milling and public self-storage. Because of the rich bottomland along the river, the area of Commercial Zoning between this eastern section and the village has remained primarily in agriculture.

Sites of historical significance in town include the following:

- three large cemeteries and many private small burial grounds;
- three church buildings (including the present Town Hall);
- the cluster of homes in Middlesex Village and Putnamville;
- seven former one-room schoolhouses that have become private homes,
- old farmhouses, barns, and cellar holes scattered throughout the rural sections of Middlesex; and
- stone walls and old trees lining the town's roads.



Above, a quilting bee, circa 1900, at the Densmore Farm in Middlesex Center.
Photo courtesy Middlesex Historical Society.

Goals, Objectives, & Implementation Strategies

Community History Goals:

1. Significant sites will be preserved in cooperation with property owners.
2. Ongoing preservation efforts will not place a burden on taxpayers.
3. Children will learn about the town's past while they are in elementary school.
4. Historical information will be readily available and centralized so that people can easily find what they are looking for, and so that historical artifacts are preserved.
5. Both new and old residents will possess an increased sense of belonging to a community, based on knowledge of the rich traditions and contributions made by those who came before them.

Objective 1: To preserve significant historic sites in cooperation with property owners.

Implementation Strategy:

- The owners of the sites of historical significance as listed above will be encouraged to preserve their property; assistance may be obtained from the Middlesex Historical Society, and/or state and federal agencies.

Policy:

- The town will work closely with state and federal agencies for assistance with preservation and community education projects.

Objective 2: To educate residents about the town's history.

Implementation Strategies:

- The Middlesex Historical Society will be encouraged to complete a comprehensive historical map of Middlesex so that residents can easily learn the locations of old homes, schoolhouses, cemeteries, agricultural buildings, and businesses in town.
- Existing written history about Middlesex, such as old maps, books, letters and articles, as well as oral history tapes have already been recorded. The Middlesex Historical Society will continue to collect and centralize (as their volunteer staffing and funding allow), to make this information more easily accessible. Collecting additional oral history will become an ongoing project, to be completed by interested town volunteers and school children.

Policies:

- The Historical Society will continue to be available to assist teachers, staff and volunteers at Rumney School to incorporate community history into the Rumney School programs.
- Rumney School and the Middlesex Historical Society (as its volunteer staffing will allow) will continue to educate residents about the history of our town through efforts such as public events, the published Town History, and continued research into specific historic sites in town and people important to Middlesex history.