

10 Westminster Village Historic District

Westminster, Vermont

As one of the first village settlements in Vermont, the Westminster Village Historic District is probably the oldest town plan still in use today. Of the 29 six-mile square townships laid out by Massachusetts officials after a land survey in January 1735, only "Township No. 1," as Westminster was originally called, was located in the great wilderness west of the Connecticut River.

The grantees of Township No. 1 held their first meeting in Taunton, Massachusetts on January 14, 1736 and appointed a committee to lay out house lots in the township and to begin satisfying other conditions of the grant, such as laying out roads, and choosing sites for a meeting house, training field, cemetery, saw mill and grist mill.

In addition to its original town plan, the Westminster Village Historic District would become significant for the events that occurred involving resistance to New York, and ultimately, British authority, that helped bring on the American Revolution. The Westminster Massacre, which occurred in the district on March 15, 1775, was one of the steps leading not only to the American Revolution, but to the formation of the independent republic of New Connecticut, later called Vermont, the independence of which was formally declared in Westminster on July 2, 1777.

Westminster served as the unofficial capitol of the new republic in its early years, as well as the location for Vermont's first printing office, established by Judah Paddock Spooner and Timothy Green. The two men were appointed state printers in October of the same year by an act of the legislature, and in February 1781, they started the first newspaper ever printed in Vermont, The Vermont Gazette, also entitled Green Mountain Post Boy.

A number of commodities supported the economy of this small town in the late nineteenth century, including tobacco cultivation, sheep grazing, dairy production, and a variety of small industries on Morse Brook. Merino sheep continued to be raised widely, until the late 1880's, when the dairy industry replaced it.

During the next 200 years following its birth, Westminster lived in the shadow of its early significance, revered for its history, but undergoing only very modest economic development, except for a short lived resurgence immediately following the completion of the Vermont Valley Railroad in 1850. Even the 1889 Town Hall, built after fire destroyed the original one, harks back to the previous century by its cubic, hip-roofed form that looks much like the court house, which was destroyed around 1806. Today, Westminster is characterized mainly by numerous architectural styles built during this early period of prosperity, including one Georgian style and several examples of the Federal style.

Though few, if any, buildings survived from the time of the Westminster Massacre, people associated with that period later built houses in Westminster which survive today. Stephen Row Bradley, who represented Westminster in the General Assembly, and presented to the U.S. Congress the views of the republic of Vermont regarding its unique political situation in a document entitled "Vermont's Appeal," built the Federal style house, across from May's house and store around the turn of the eighteenth century. Joel Holton, one of Westminster's earliest settlers, who arrived in the 1760's, built a Federal style home still in

existence today. In the early 20th century, the pristine, historical town was discovered by wealthy outsiders in search of seasonal homes. In total they characterize the district today, and indicate the importance of this period relative to later ones. Westminster Village Historic District was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in July 1988.

Sources:

<http://accd.vermont.gov/sites/accd/files/images/strongcommunities/historic/WestminsterVillageHD.pdf>

http://www.crijc.org/heritage/V05-13.htm/National_Register_of_Historic_Places_listings_in_Windham_County,_Vermont