

# 46 Thetford Center Historic District:

Thetford, Vermont

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The Thetford Center Historic District is located on the Connecticut River just west of the town of Thetford. Developed along the falls of the Ompompanoosuc River Valley, it is the former site of a considerable amount of manufacturing starting at the end of the 18th century and continuing until the first half of the 20th century. The Thetford Center Historic District was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1998.

The district boundaries are roughly square and encompass the land and portions of the river historically associated with the built resources and sites. Various small hills in the northern part of the district rise from the eastern bank of the river to the level terrace set below the ridge of Meetinghouse Hill, which forms the eastern boundary. Thetford Center developed at this location precisely because of the broadening of the river valley to form a terrace between the flanking hills.

The existence of the 40 to 50 foot falls over a series of angular rocks at the northern end of the district further insured the development of a village at this location during a time when water power was crucial to homebuilding, commerce and industry. (The Thetford Center Falls are also of note because they are one of the longest and last free-flowing falls in the center of a rural village as well as being one of the few remaining natural waterfalls in Vermont.) Stone walls defining former pasture land preserve the integrity of the original field patterns of the district, which was largely cleared of trees during the 19th century. Although some of these fields have reverted to forest growth, especially on Meetinghouse Hill, the majority of the original open space is preserved.

Like other Vermont and New England communities, Thetford grew with the mills. By the start of the 19th century, water-powered mills on several sites along the Ompompanoosuc had created the villages of Thetford. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, small industries grew and the industrial buildings changed owners many times. The early generations of residents were mostly subsistence farmers, with the majority of settlers' needs provided on the farm. It was during this early time that the dispersed, rural settlement pattern of farms was established.

The majority of the primary buildings of the district were constructed from 1800 to 1880, with building activity concentrated during the first half of the century. Thetford Center is architecturally significant today for its numerous well-preserved examples of the Georgian, Federal, Greek Revival, and Italianate architectural styles. An outstanding example of the Federal style is the 2-1/2 story, brick residence of Hezekiah Porter set on a knoll overlooking the intersection of Vermont Route 113 and Tucker Hill Road from the northwest.

The original wild and scenic nature of the falls was altered by the addition of three dams and numerous industries. One of the three dams is still on site. When mills burned or industries closed, they were rebuilt or replaced by other ventures. The railroad came to Thetford between 1846 and 1849. At first, better transportation assisted the wool industry but after the Civil War, the Vermont wool market ended giving way to the West; however, gristmills, sawmills and the furniture business continued to prosper until the 20th century. A grist mill was in operation at the falls until about 1912 and the electric generating plant operated until about 1920. In Thetford, as elsewhere in the state, vacation cottages or "camps" were erected during the first part of the 20th century to accommodate growing tourism.

In recent years, the Friends of the Ompompanoosuc have defended the Falls area from a hydroelectric dam and have joined other agencies to nominate the river from the covered bridge to the Union Village Dam as an outstanding water resource. This area and the old mill sites are property of the Army Corps of Engineers who protect and care for archaeological, recreational and natural resources.

**Sources:**

Noble, Deborah and Lisa Mausolf,. "Thetford Center Historic District." *Connecticut River Joint Commission, Inc.* Connecticut River Joint Commission, Inc., March 1991. Web. Accessed, February 28, 2013 by S.Mendonca and October 2, 2013 by L.Morrow. <http://www.crtc.org/heritage/V13-59.htm>