

WINDHAM, WINDHAM COUNTY, CONNECTICUT HISTORY

The town of Windham, one of the smallest in geographical size, but the largest in population, wealth and business importance, occupies the extreme southwest corner of Wind ham county. Its area is about two and three-fourths square miles. The beautiful valley of the Willimantic river extends along the southern part, entering at the extreme western point and leaving at the southeastern corner. This river affords abundant water power for many factories, and to this circumstance is due the building up and prosperity of the town. The Natchaug, a considerable stream, joins it a short distance east of the borough limits of Willimantic. Back from the river the town is broken into successive ridges of hills, rising about two hundred feet above the general level of the intervening valleys. Besides the borough of Willimantic, in the southwest part, the smaller villages of North Windham in the northern part, South Windham in the southern part and Windham in the central part, are in this town. Otherwise the surface of the town is mostly covered with forest growth which affords some valuable timber. The agricultural interests of the town are not prominent. The New York & New England railroad extends through the western and northern parts and the Providence Division and the New London Northern run along the Willimantic valley in the southern part. The geographical size of the original town of Windham has been greatly diminished by the formation of the towns of Scotland, Hampton and Chaplin.

The acquisition of the Indian title to the territory occupied by Windham has been set forth in a previous chapter so fully that it will only be necessary here to repeat that the territory in question was a gift by will of the Indian Joshua to sixteen gentlemen of Norwich, who were intrusted with the business of settling a plantation upon it. The first settlement upon it is said to have been made by one John Cates, an English refugee, in the autumn of 1688. From that, settlement progressed slowly for three years, when there were upon the tract about thirty settlers. None of the men named in the

bequest, however, became actual settlers. In the autumn of 1691 application was made for a town charter, but the grant was not immediately made. In the following spring, however, the petition was granted, the general court of Connecticut on the 12th of May, 1692, enacting that township privileges be granted to the petitioners, and that the town should be called Windham. These petitioners were Joshua Ripley, John Cates, Jeremiah Ripley, Jonathan Crane, Joseph Huntington, William Backus, Jonathan Ginnings, Thomas Huntington, Richard Hendee, John Backus and John Larrabee.

Under the new charter the first public town meeting was- held June 12th, 1692. By this time four more had been added to the eleven just named. These were John Fitch, who had recently removed to the Hither-place, and Jonathan Hough, Samuel Hide and John Royce, who had established a settlement in the distant Ponde-place. At the first town meeting Joshua Ripley was chosen town clerk; Jeremiah Ripley, Jonathan Crane and Jonathan Hough, townsmen; Thomas Huntington and John Royce, surveyors; Joseph Huntington, Jonathan Hough, Samuel Hide and John Fitch, to lay out highways. A committee was also appointed to carry on negotiations with a minister in regard to settlement among them.

Previous to the settlement of a minister Mr. Jabez Fitch officiated as religious leader. The house of Mr. John Fitch, the latest and probably the best built house in the settlement, was selected to be the meeting house until other provision should be made. The town ordered that it be fortified and a lean-to built, " every man doing his share of the fortification." During the summer of 1692 several new inhabitants removed to the Ponde-place, and considerable progress was made in that settlement, and altogether the growth of the settlement was such that at its town meeting May 30th, 1693, the list of approved inhabitants numbered twenty-two: Their, names were: Joshua Ripley, Jonathan Crane, Jonathan Ginnings (or Jennings), Joseph Huntington, Thomas Huntington, William Backus, John Backus, John Larrabee, Thomas Bingham, John Rudd, Jeremiah Ripley, John Cates, Richard Hendee, James Birchard, Jonathan Hough, Samuel Hide, John Royce; Samuel Birchard, Robert Wade, Peter Crosse, Samuel Linkon and John Arnold.

Of these twenty-two inhabitants the last eight had settled at the Ponde-place, all others except John Larrabee (who kept the ferry between the two settlements) being residents of the Hitherplace or southeast quarter. Thomas Bingham, who had-removed from Norwich with a large family of sons and daughters, was an important acquisition to Windham. He purchased, in March, 1693, Captain John Mason's first lot at the southeast quarter, being then about fifty years old. His oldest daughter, Mary, had married John Backus the previous summer. John Arnold had been a schoolmaster in Norwich, and was one of the most intelligent and influential of the Ponde-place settlers. Samuel and James Birchard were the sons of John Birchard, one of the Norwich legatees. Improvements and accommodations kept pace with the increase of population. Great care was taken to provide for the Ponde-place people. Sign posts were ordered against William Backus' house at the Hither-place, and Samuel Hide's at the Ponde-place. A public pound was provided and burying grounds were laid out, one at each settlement. Jonathan Ginnings and the Ripleys were granted the privilege of setting up a saw mill at No-man's-acre Brook."

During that summer (1693) it was determined that the dividing line between the settlers in the wilderness from Hartford and from Norwich should be the Willimantic river, the Norwich people holding on the east of it and the Hartford people holding on the west of it. In December the town passed regulations in regard to fences, cattle, swine, timber and the warning of town meetings. In the following spring we have the first record of the layout of a highway. This was ordered through Peter Crosse's division, extending from the Ponde-place to the Willimantic river near the falls. The meadows in this vicinity furnished the Windham settlers with a great part of their hay, and to facilitate its conveyance this highway was ordered " four rods wide from the hill to the river, seven rods wide down to the meadow and four rods wide between meadow and fence." Twelve acres below the falls were allowed to Mr. Crosse in compensation for land taken up by this highway.

The home lots laid out at Willimantic were not as yet taken up by the proprietors, and in April, 1694, they received permission from the town to exchange them for allotments " at or about the Crotch of the river "that remarkable curve in the Natchaug near its junction with the Willimantic, also known as the Horseshoe. Seven lots were now laid out in this vicinity. Joshua Ripley, Samuel Hide, Joseph Huntington, Peter Crosse and Thomas Bingham were appointed a committee to select two lots at the " Crotch of the River," one for the minister and one for the ministry. The remaining home lots were sold to settlers, who soon took possession. Goodman William More, of Norwich, purchased a lot laid out to William Backus; Benjamin Millard, also from Norwich, bought of Thomas Leffingwell a thousand-acre allotment at the Horseshoe, a part of which is still held by his descendants. Benjamin Howard and Joseph Cary, of Norwich, and John Broughton, of Northampton, soon settled in this vicinity. This new settlement was also called " The Centre," from its position between the older ones, and seemed destined for a time to become the most important. The seventh lot was chosen for the minister and the sixth for the ministry, and great efforts were made to have the meeting house built upon it.

Windham had previously manifested a desire to be annexed to Hartford county. She had petitioned the general court to this end, and in May, 1694, the petition was granted, and this town became a factor of Hartford county. The town was now fairly embarked upon its career of ups and downs, and various experiences common to the towns of that period and surroundings. A military company was founded, of which John Fitch was lieutenant, Jonathan Crane was ensign, and Samuel Hide sergeant. Training days were inaugurated, and ever after celebrated with the usual hilarity. Highways were laid out such as were needed " on or about the hill that lies west of the Pond." A custom was then established by public order, that at subsequent town meetings the moderator should open the deliberations with prayer.