

WHERE IS HATFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS?

Hatfield is a town of approximately 3,500 people located in Hampshire County in Western Massachusetts. The total area is 9,300 acres of relatively flat, rich land well-suited for agriculture. Hatfield is bordered by Whately and South Deerfield to the north, Hadley to the east and south, and Northampton and Williamsburg to the west. The Connecticut River forms the eastern and southern boundary of the town. It is also part of the Mill River Watershed. Hatfield is located 24 miles north of Springfield, 98 miles west of Boston, and 161 miles from New York City. The Town of Hatfield is an historic agricultural river town on the west bank of the Connecticut River. Main Street in Hatfield retains a remarkable historic character, with a dense concentration of well-preserved 18th and 19th century family homes. In the 1960s I-91 was built which runs through the town.

HISTORIES OF THE TOWNS OF WESTERN MASSACHUSETTS

Heritage Surveys, Inc. (Land Surveying and Civil Engineering) is building a compilation of historical pictures and sketches of the towns of Western Massachusetts from its archives of ephemera and books. This is a work in progress.



Main Street, Hatfield 1890

The Town of Hatfield was founded in 1670. Native Americans had lived there for many years, living in small tribes and farming, fishing and hunting for their own needs. One tribe, numbering about 200 at the time, were The Nonotucks with their Chief Chickwollup. They met the white settlers on friendly terms. The first white residents were 16 Puritan families who had migrated north from Hartford and Wethersfield, Connecticut. Hatfield was commonly called "The West Side" while it was still legally considered part of Hadley, which stood on the East Bank of the Connecticut. The West Side made a general picture not so different from today. The settlers viewed a wide valley, abounding in large meadows of lush native grass, good for mowing but devoid of timber except for tree clumps in swampy parts or along the river. The land was rich and relatively flat and therefore, very well-suited for agriculture. The Native Americans had long before cleared the forests and kept the growth checked by annual burnings each November. Capawonk Brook (Mill River) wound its crooked path just as it does today. Meanwhile, the mighty Connecticut River flowed along the town's Eastern border - the river bed narrower and its banks further from Main Street than they are today.

The road from Northampton to the south made the same big bend as it does today before turning up Main Street, except that it was a narrow ox path. Main Street in 1661 was, just as now, about a mile in length with a Common on the south end, so patterned after many New England towns. The first houses were set back on either side and extended from the present Maple Street corner approximately to the present School Street. Perhaps it would be hard to associate the first homes with the more pretentious dwellings built later, many of which still remain. It is certain these rude dwellings were hastily built. Most of these were only one story. Oak and elm were used mostly as the trees were plentiful in and the near the swamps. The early houses were gradually replaced, often on the same sites. The new ones were sturdier and larger, frequently with the original rugged beams and timbers. The houses were simple and had few extras.

Survival was the settlers utmost concern at first. Once established, they quickly engaged in the processes of running an orderly settlement. Most of the Hatfield residents farmed the land. The Hatfield meadows were divided and their original names are still used, such as Cow Bridge, Long Lots, Bashan, Little and Great Ponsett, Indian Hollow and the Nook. Each resident was allotted acres for his house lot, bordering the Main Street and each had a turn, by drawing of lots, to choose acres in the meadows. The first mill for grinding corn was built in 1661 on the Capawonk Brook (Mill River). In 1662, Thomas Meekins operated a grist mill on the Capawonk Brook and in 1669 he added a sawmill. This single area in the town remained an industrial locus for over 200 years. Important, too, was the gathering of firewood and candlewood, which was pitch or hard pine and the only substitute for candles. The people became quite self-sufficient by trading for other necessities with the Native Americans and settlements on the river below, a pattern of relatively simple living which continued for many years.

In 1776, 127 men of a population of 582 were serving in the army. In 1786 the town was the site of a 50-community meeting of the rebels involved in Shay's Rebellion. The rebels, led by Daniel Shays and known as Shaysites, were mostly small farmers angered by crushing debt and taxes brought on by a cash-poor economy and debt from the war. Failure to repay such debts often resulted in imprisonment in debtor's prisons.

Two philanthropists who were residents of Hatfield during the nineteenth-century were responsible for the creation of two very important institutions in Northampton. Sophia Smith, heiress to Oliver Smith who made a fortune investing in land and agriculture, used her money to create Smith College. And Caleb Cooley Dickinson put his money to the founding of the Cooley Dickinson Hospital.

-excerpts taken from Hatfield, Massachusetts 1670-1970, copyright The Town of Hatfield, Massachusetts 1970



Edson Strong's Saw Mill



Old Hatfield Mill