

History



The story of Medfield begins in Dedham, which originally included the territory that is now Medfield as well as several other towns. Dedham was incorporated in 1636 and by 1640 Dedham men started farming and pasturing animals along the broad meadows and continuous plains of our area. The land was perfect for farming because of the Indian custom of burning the fields each November to provide grazing for wild game. Our area was first known as Dedham Village.

In November of 1649, Dedham held a town meeting which approved the laying out of an area for a new town. This was accomplished in the early spring of 1650 and corresponds very nearly with the boundaries of the present town. The thirteen original settlers paid fifty pounds to the inhabitants of Dedham in compensation for the land.



Ralph Wheelock, a graduate of Cambridge University, considered the founder of Medfield, proceeded with Thomas Wright and Robert Hinsdale to the new settlement, which was finally incorporated as the 43rd town in Massachusetts on June 2, 1651. Eighteen new men were accepted as townsmen and grants of land made to them in 1651.

Education was very important from the start of the settlement. In 1655 the settlers voted fifteen pounds "to establish a schoule for the education of the children." Ralph Wheelock became the first schoolmaster in the schoolhouse (site of the old post office on the corner of Janes Avenue and North Street). A later school on the site Dr. Stagg's office on Pleasant Street was named after Ralph Wheelock, as is the present elementary school on Elm Street.

By 1660 the town was laid out and new families admitted, thus increasing the population to 234.



During the King Philip War in 1675, Medfield became the frontier town when Mendon was abandoned. In February of 1676 approximately 1,000 Indians, under the command of Monaco,

burned 32 houses, two mills, and many barns. Eight people were killed, including Timothy Dwight, the original owner of the Dwight Derby House on Frairy Street. Two streets serve as reminder of those fateful days- Philip and Metacomet (Philip's real Indian name). After King Philip was killed in August of 1676, the indomitable settlers rebuilt and repaired the damage to their farms and mills, with monetary assistance from the provincial legislature.



Patriotic fervor was evident in 1774 when the town sponsored 25 Minutemen to fight in the battles of Lexington and Concord although they did not arrive in time to fight. One hundred and fifty-four men, however, fought in the Continental Army. That made the ratio of soldiers one for every five of population. By 1787 a new oath was required of the town officers who renounced loyalty to the king and swore allegiance to the new sovereign, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

In 1800 the population of the town was 745. The manufacture of straw bonnets first commenced that same year and the manufacture of ladies' hats was the principal industry of the town until 1954. Mansions for the owners were built near the factory on North Street and the seasonal workers lived in boarding houses throughout the town. During the busy season as many as 1,000 were employed at the straw hat shop.



In 1806 the Hartford and Dedham Turnpike was established and its stage coaches stopped at Clark's Tavern, next door to the Peak House. The stage route through Medfield was known as the Middle Post Road, but the Upper Post Road through Sudbury was preferred by travelers because it provided better taverns. For a period after the discontinuance of the stage coaches, the town had no public transportation until the first passenger train of the New York and Boston Railroad came to town. By 1870 Medfield became an important rail junction and freight depot to the Framingham/Mansfield branch of the New York, New Haven, and Hartford Railroad. At the end of the century, steam and electric railways terminated in front of the Town House.

The people of Medfield prepared themselves to fight in the Civil War following the election of an abolitionist senator who would represent the district. Eighty-two men served in the army and navy and fifteen men gave their lives for the preservation of the Union.

Medfield remained a rural village for all of the nineteenth century. However, with the 1896 establishment of the "asylum," (now Medfield State Hospital), the population of the town grew to over 3,000 by the end of the century. Half of the town's population were patients at the hospital, which provided employment for over 600 residents of Medfield and surrounding towns.



At the time of the 250th anniversary in 1901, Medfield was still a lovely village with green fields, lush meadows, and winding rivers. Medfield had grown to 1,600 residents, not counting the patients at the state hospital. It was a typical New England Town consisting of 335 dwellings. A tax rate of 1.1% based on townwide valuation of \$1,454,265 met the appropriated obligation of \$17,347. Education had the highest share of the town budget; \$5,375 for 283 students enrolled in grades one through nine. Those continuing their schooling graduated from Dedham or Walpole until the new high school graduated its first class of eight in 1908.



Long before the 19th Amendment to the Constitution in 1920, Medfield encouraged the voting rights of women. In 1900 seven women paid a poll tax and qualified to vote. As early as 1881 women voted for the school committee and by 1916 women were permitted to serve on the school committee, as overseers of the poor, and as trustees of the public library. When the state constitution was amended to conform to the federal law, 48 of the 381 votes were cast by women.

Charles Innes, one of America's great landscape artists, painted Medfield Meadows, Evening in Medfield, and his famous Peace and Plenty during his stay here from 1859 to 1864. Many of his paintings are the property of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

In 1900 the importance of farming was reflected in personal property taxes which were levied on 431 cows, 64 other cattle, 31 swine, 1,637 fowl, and 256 horses. Associated trades and small industry, such as three sawmills, and slaughter houses, a tannery and two cider mills, were flourishing trades. A wire factory, a straw shop, a hat shop, and a steam packing mill also existed. The wagons and carriages manufactured by J.H. Baker were known worldwide for their quality.



The twentieth century also saw buses and automobiles begin to replace steam and electric trains. The town sold its electric company in 1906 to the Boston Electric Illuminating Co. and in 1921 the town took over the operation of the Medfield Water Company. In 1924, the town established a Planning Board to prevent haphazard growth. That same year the Peak House was restored and Baker's Pond was purchased from the carriage manufacturers. Other attempts to conserve green areas came with the establishment of the Conservation Commission in 1962. In 1964 a Master Plan was undertaken to plan for projected growth. Medfield has continued to grow into a desirable, residential suburb. New subdivisions are developed in a controlled fashion. Industrially zoned land has been limited to clean light industry.

Medfield passed an historic district bylaw and created the John Metcalf Historic District during the 1989 annual town meeting. This first historic district included four houses on west Main Street and the oldest portion of Vine Lake Cemetery. The district was enlarged to include a total of sixteen historic buildings in 1996. The second historic district, established in 1994, included 33 buildings at the Medfield State Hospital and the historic landscape surrounding the buildings. A third district, the Clark-Kingsbury Farm Historic District on Spring Street, was approved at the 1997 Town Meeting. This provides some protection to the unique grouping of the 18th century farm house, outbuildings, and pond with grist mill.



The voters of Medfield have committed themselves to several significant projects downtown. Having agreed to purchase land for a post office site a year earlier, in 1996 the town went forward with plans to completely renovate the Town Hall, to construct a major addition to the library and to assist the historical society in its efforts to preserve and restore the Dwight Derby House. The Town Hall, library and post office were completed in 1998.

The Dwight Derby House, an ongoing project, is of particular significance because it is one of the oldest houses in the United States. The original section was built in 1651, the year Medfield was incorporated. Once restoration is complete it will undoubtedly join the Peak House and the Unitarian Church on the register of State and Federal Historic Landmarks.

Anyone wanting a more detailed history may refer to the three books available at the Medfield Public Library. *History of the Town of Medfield, Massachusetts: 1650-1886* by William S. Tilden has an interesting section on genealogy, *Medfield Reflections, 1651-1976* is an historical commemorative book published during the town's 325th birthday, and the recently published *History of the Town of Medfield, Massachusetts 1887-1925* by Richard DeSorgher. *The Norfolk Hunt- 100 Years of Sport* has text and pictures of Medfield as well as surrounding towns. The

brick Medfield Historical Society headquarters on Pleasant Street, behind the library, is open every Saturday morning for those who wish to know more about the town and its history.