

DUDLEY: A BRIEF HISTORY

English settlers made their way to Dudley beginning in the early 1720's. They initially settled in the vicinity of Dudley Hill, which was also occupied by the Pegan tribe, a branch of the Nipmuck Indians. The Indians called their homeland "Chobonokonomun" and the area covered parts of Dudley, Oxford and Webster, including a portion of Thompson, Connecticut. Spurred by the desire to establish a local church, Dudley Hill settlers petitioned the General Court for incorporation as a township in 1731. Final incorporation occurred on June 1, 1732 and the Town was named after Thomas Dudley, one of the earliest governors of Colonial Massachusetts. It is interesting to note that Governor Dudley never personally visited the Town! Dudley was the first town incorporated after the formation of Worcester County.

Dudley's first town meeting was held on June 20, 1732 at the William Carter House, located just north of Dudley Hill. Owing to an abundance of fertile soil and a gently sloping terrain, Dudley existed as an agrarian community until the start of the "industrial revolution" in the early 1800's. The emergence of the textile industry in New England brought about some major changes to Dudley's landscape. In particular, the community's economic base began to shift from farming in the Dudley Hill area, to textile manufacturing along the banks of the French River. Ranging from Merino Pond in the north to Perryville in the south, several textile mills set up shop in East Dudley between 1812 and 1825; most notably Merino Woolen Mill (eventually the Stevens Mill), Amasa Nichols Cotton Mill (the Chase Mill) and the Dudley Woolen Mill (the Perryville area).

Originally part of Dudley, the Town of Webster became incorporated in 1832. Webster's incorporation reduced Dudley's population by over a third, and Dudley also lost five cotton mills, three woolen mills and numerous mill-related enterprises. Dudley survived though, and the building of the Norwich and Worcester Railroad in the 1840's provided Dudley with access to new markets.

In 1846, Henry Hale Stevens bought the old Merino Mill and began a large-scale expansion effort. One can still see the monumental four-story stone buildings (made of granite from local quarries) constructed during the mid-1800's. Stevens Linen Works continued to prosper during and after the Civil War period, leading to the construction mill-worker's housing district (Merino Village). In addition to the mills in East Dudley, manufacturing centers of a smaller scale established themselves in the northeastern and western sections of Town. Tufts Village (between Gore and Shepherds Ponds) contained several stone buildings including a mill, grist mill, boarding house, several residences and a store. The Quinebaug River also saw some manufacturing activity with the establishment of the Eben Stevens Jute and Satinet mill (1872) and the Gleason and Weld Paper Mill (1864). Dudley's mills enjoyed great success until the Great Depression era, when several mills moved their operations to our nation's south, and several mills closed down altogether.

Dudley's landscape has seen modest changes in the last fifty years. The Stevens Linen Mill and the Chase Mill were able to survive the hardships of the Great Depression and are still in operation today, although at a reduced scale. Nichols College is still in operation on Dudley Hill. The construction of the Massachusetts Turnpike (Route 90) and Interstate 395 has not resulted in

a significant expansion of Dudley's economic base. The Gentex Corporation, an optics manufacturer employing roughly 250 people, is the most significant new industry to come to Dudley in the last fifty years.

Dudley never completely abandoned agriculture and there are numerous active farms scattered throughout the northern and western sections of Town. Numerous small vacation houses were built along the shorelines of Dudley's ponds during the 50's and 60's, particularly Pierpont Meadow and Hayden Ponds in the northeast. Many of these vacation houses have been converted to year-round residences.

Residential development has steadily increased during the last fifty years, as has Dudley's population. Since 1970 when Dudley's population consisted of 8,087 people, the Town has added roughly 60 new residents per year, bringing the total population to 9,676 by 1996. Dudley has been experiencing a higher growth rate during the past few years, with a record number of building permits being issued during 1997 and 1998. Dudley's rural character and quality schools, coupled with its accessibility, have made the Town a very desirable place to live.

Dudley typifies a New England small town where municipal officials work part-time and volunteerism is strong. Manufacturing and farming are still viable economic options, although the service sector of the economy has shown the largest increase in recent years (much like our nation's economy as a whole). Dudley stands at the threshold of the twenty-first century striving to retain the best elements of its past while planning for the world of tomorrow.