



A BRIEF HISTORY OF STURBRIDGE

Robert J. Briere
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Our early visitors were Native Americans. They came from Rhode Island and Connecticut via the Providence and Connecticut Paths, which joined together at Routes 6 and 44 in Pomfret, Connecticut. Traveling northward these paths joined the Bay Path running east-west through Sturbridge.

Our first settlers came mainly from Medfield and Dedham, Massachusetts. Through a drawing of lots, each was given 50 acres of good land and 50 acres of poorer quality land. They were to each build a house and together settle a ministry before petitioning the legislature for incorporating a township.

The town has had four names. The first was Tantisquis, a Nipmuck name meaning “valley between breast-shaped hills”. The second was “Dummer” after the then Lt. Governor William Dummer. The inhabitants then changed the name to New Medfield after their hometown name of Medfield. In 1738, and after a third petition, the legislature enabled them to name the new town, Sturbridge, so named after the town of Stourbridge in England because “ancestors of the first settlers came from that place.” The name Stourbridge is derived from “bridge over the River Stour” in the West Midlands, formerly Worcestershire.

The town of Sturbridge has within its boundaries seven “villages”.

- The northeast corner is Podunk, whose name in Nipmuck means ‘Burning Place’. This village received fame from playwright George M. Cohen in the play “Damn Yankees”.
 - The southeast corner is Westville, which includes the southwest side of Southbridge with the center of the river as the dividing line between the two towns.
 - Centre village is the town common area in Sturbridge.
 - South-central is Leadmine, so named after the lead mine (actually graphite), the oldest mine in the United States. The local Indians used the mineral for ceremonial face painting.
 - North of the center is called Walker Pond, which is the name of a pond where a developer called the place by the general name.
 - Around 1842 the brothers Snell built a mill where they manufactured wood boring auger bits.
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One other body of water is a bit of an oddity. We previously mentioned Walker Pond, which by town meeting vote in 1894, officially changed the name to Lake Tantuisques in honor of the native Americans who lived here. Most Sturbridge residents are unaware of the name change and continue to call it Walker Pond so named after the Walker family who were the original settlers there.

Sturbridge, once an agricultural community, became an industrial community with the onset of large mill building. Today we are known for Old Sturbridge Village and tourism has become the major industry. We also are favored with several companies now engaged in the manufacture of fiber optic products. This is a direct result of the “Father of fiber optics” having opened a company here that was known as Mosaic Fabrications. We have companies manufacturing machine products, molded products, and many home-based manufacturing representatives of U.S. companies.

With all this in mind, Sturbridge is still a residential community. Sadly to say, the numerous farms – from dairy to normal agriculture – are no longer with us. Fortunately, through town meeting, the town has opted to purchase much of this land to preserve as open space for recreational purposes. Currently, numerous walking/biking paths are being created on the land.

As the former Indian Paths are now part of privately owned residential property, we now have in their place some of the major highways within the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Interstate I-90 travels east-west through town going from Boston to Seattle, Washington. Interstate I-84 takes travelers to Hartford, CT and onward westerly to Pennsylvania where it connects to I-80 to San Francisco. Interestingly, in Logan, Utah I-84 begins again traveling upward to Portland, Oregon.

US Route 20 takes the leisurely route from Boston to Newport, Oregon. State Route 131 opens the way from Sturbridge to Connecticut connecting to Route 44 easterly to Providence RI. Old Route 15 will take the traveler from Sturbridge Center to New York City via the Wilbur Cross Parkway in Connecticut. Hence, we have the name Sturbridge: Crossroads of New England. No matter where you are going, “You can get there from here.”

For you, the traveler, we have many motels, hotels and restaurants to serve your needs. Our Sturbridge Information Center on Route 20 (380 Main Street) has many brochures and pamphlets of local stores, boutiques, eateries, and a variety of lodging options (clean restrooms, too).

Thank you for visiting with us. As our Southern friends say, “Ya’ll come back now, hear?”