



Canaan Village History

Early Days. Before the Great Northern Railroad came to Canaan in 1847, the Village area was known as East Canaan. Most of the Village was originally part of the Hutchinson family farm. Mr. Levi Hutchinson, a hatter by trade, brought his wife and three children to Canaan from Pembroke, New Hampshire. His house, built by Asa Whittier, was where the post office is now located. In 1841, Levi's son Richard married Mary Sanborn and gained possession of his father's farm.

In 1844, plans were made to lay tracks for the railroad from Concord, New Hampshire to White River Junction, Vermont. For two years, workers blasted through ledges at Rams Head and the Summit to lay the rail for the railroad. On November 17, 1847 the first train passed through Canaan, with the Honorable Daniel Webster on board. Richard Hutchinson's offer of land was quickly accepted by railroad officials and a rail station was built at the present site of the Village Washtub. The first station agent, Caleb S. Putnam, had been a driver on the stage route. He kept his job as Canaan's Station Agent for over twenty years.

Once the railroad began operation, the Village grew quickly. Main Street, which ran from the train station to the present home of Brian and Betty Hayes, was laid out in 1848. Today, the portion of this road between Auto Ware and Neily's Store is known as Depot Street. Mechanic Street, laid out in 1853, was originally named Willow Street and ran from the Veteran's Memorial to the Square. Parker Street, also laid out in the 1850s, was named for Freeman S. Parker who built the house now owned by Mrs. Stacia Ballou. The Methodist Church was completed in 1861 and a new school was built on School Street. By 1860, the Village had shops for shoes, tin, woodworking, and harnesses. There was a hotel, a blacksmith, and a wheelright. The brickyard was on the site of Marvin Rocke's home. The Village had become the Town's trade center.

The ease of passenger rail made Canaan an ideal vacation spot for tourists who enjoyed access to Cardigan Mountain and Hart's Pond (Canaan Street Lake). The "Ski Train" brought winter sports enthusiasts to town in the 1930s and 40s.

Fire, Flood, and Hurricane Shape the Village. By 1918, Canaan had witnessed four floods and two tragic train wrecks. For the Village, however, the worst was yet to come. On the morning of June 2, 1923, a call came in concerning a fire in a haymow at the Stevens' home on School Street. Within two hours, the entire business district, 48 homes and businesses, had been destroyed. The townspeople were resilient, though, and moved quickly to rebuild. Twenty-two buildings were replaced within a single year. Trees were planted along the roadways soon after the fire and the Town Green, once the site of private homes, was formed. The four corners at the Village center were built up as stores and businesses. In 1938, another disaster struck in the form of a hurricane. More recently, the decline of passenger rail and growth of Rte 4 affected the shape of the town as well. In the 1970s the large graceful trees along Depot Street began to die of Dutch Elm disease. The Canaan Inn burned in 1977. A wildly popular rock concert in the 70s drew 20,000 fans to the old fairgrounds. It proved so disruptive to the Village that the Town adopted an ordinance to require a permit for large outdoor musical events. In the 1980s there was another flood. Through it all, Canaan Village survives – a testimony to the townspeople who refuse to give up in the face of adversity.

Information and postcard provided by Donna Zani-Dunkerton, Canaan Town Historian.