

HISTORY OF WESTMINSTER - AN OVERVIEW

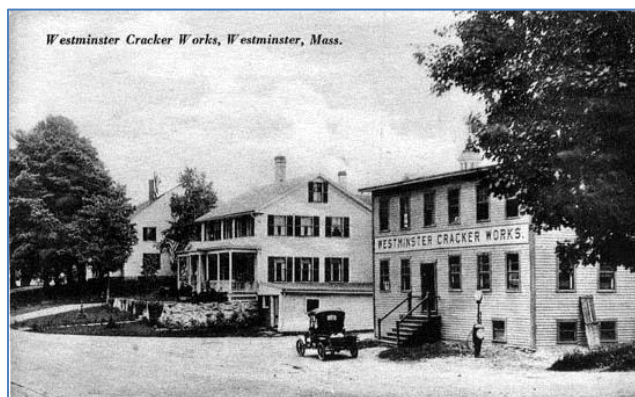
By Betsy Hannula

In the middle of north Central Massachusetts sits Westminster whose name is rooted in traditions of the minister in old England. This virgin territory was first settled in 1737 by pioneers from more civilized areas around Boston. The land was intended to be the payment for soldiers who had fought in the King Philips War, but none of them wanted to leave the comforts of their homes, so bounties were given for their descendants and others to settle here. The town was first called Narragansett Number Two in deference to the many Indian tribes who lived in the region. However, as the population grew, it became incorporated in 1759 and assumed its more proper name of Westminster.

Early in its history Westminster was populated by farmers. As the residents began to specialize in their skills, industries that were needed by the early settlers were established: sawmills, grist mills, and then pail factories and chair factories. The rushing rivers leading to the Nashua River afforded many opportunities for the water power necessary to run the mills. Wachusettville was the first true industrial area with a sawmill, grist mill, fulling mill, paper factory and textile mill.

But, the largest industry prior to the Civil War was chair making. There were dozens of companies that made chairs, stools, benches, and settees. When the new railroad bypassed the center of town in the mid-1800s the factories lost their ability to bring raw materials into town and their finished products to the rest of the country cheaply. These businesses closed, and today there's little evidence left of these early industries. A few box shops utilizing forest-products existed into the 20th century, including Smith's, Hicks and Young Brothers Box Shops.

One of Westminster's claims to fame is the Westminster Cracker Factory, the longest running cracker bakery in the country for many years. It closed its doors in the 1970s, but the red clapboard building is still a landmark anchoring the east end of Main Street. Even though the famous crackers are now made in Vermont, the logo on the packaging features the original building in Westminster. Other unique companies in Westminster have been the Tobacco Shed Pottery, and the Pine Tree Power Plant. Another small business which has brought fame to our small town is the Wachusett Brewing Company which now has its beer on shelves in much of New England.



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Post Civil War, Westminster saw its population become the work force for neighboring cities, with the trolleys connecting Gardner and Fitchburg to Westminster from 1899 to 1923. The travel back and forth was huge and also led to the creation of Wachusett Park, which offered recreational opportunities to families on weekends until the trolley lines closed because of the advent of the automobile.



The automobile itself changed Westminster in many ways. More than two dozen families established gas pumps in front of their homes and dozens of families opened small restaurants along the major roads to cater to the new traveling public. One of those was the Old Mill Tea Room which eventually became the 1761 Old Mill Restaurant, a popular eating place with an attractive location next to the stream which powered the sawmill below.

After World War II, the 1950s saw a huge boom in the economy. Families were willing to live in our small town and drive their cars to work in the Boston area. We also were fortunate to have some key businesses move into town. Digital Equipment Corporation purchased land in Westminster to build their home plant and hundreds of Westminster residents were employed there. Later, Simplex Time Recorder Company purchased the property and then eventually this became Simplex Grinnel. Other large businesses have moved to Westminster boosting our economy, Ranor Manufacturing, W.E. Aubuchon Inc, Advance Coatings, Fitchburg Welding, Miles Kedex, and TRW Fasteners.

With the population well over 7000 persons in 2012 the town can reflect on dramatic growth which has fortunately left much of rural Westminster intact. Much of the land in Westminster is owned by the state and therefore conserved, in areas such as the Crow Hill Reservation, Leominster State Forest, the Wachusett Mountain State Reservation, the High Ridge Wildlife Management Area, and several state forest areas. We are also fortunate to have a large number of lakes and waterways, and although many of them are owned by other communities or privately owned, they provide recreational opportunities and are key to the quality of life locally.

Westminster has the honor of having one of the largest National Register of Historic Places districts in Massachusetts, 92 acres with 72 structures covering much of the downtown area. Although the town common was once the center of activity with the meetinghouse, minister's home, town pound and Westminster Academy on the hill, it began to change about 1937. Once the church and state were separated by state law, the town activities moved down the hill and the town common was isolated enough to retain its original character. In 1976 a Town Committee built a Bandstand on the Common and it is well used on Wednesday evenings in the summer for band concerts. The Town Benefit, Christmas Tree Lighting, Memorial Day services, Easter Sunrise services, and weddings and other events occur there as well.



Visitors of all ages can enjoy a variety of sports in Westminster. Top among them is Wachusett Mountain, the tallest mountain in Worcester County. Although the top of the mountain is in Princeton, the rest, including the ski lodge, is in Westminster. Hundreds of thousands of people go to the Mountain, not just for downhill or cross country skiing, but for the huge festivals taking place very weekend in the fall. Hiking trails extend through the town including the Mid State Trail. And most recently, the development of the

Crocker Pond swimming area has been a tremendous boon to residents and another reason so many people are proud to call Westminster home.