

MAKING & REMAKING WINCHESTER CENTER

By Ellen Knight¹

At the time America won its independence, according to a survey of real estate subject to tax assessments, there were about 35 houses within the boundaries of present-day Winchester, which means the population was perhaps a couple hundred.



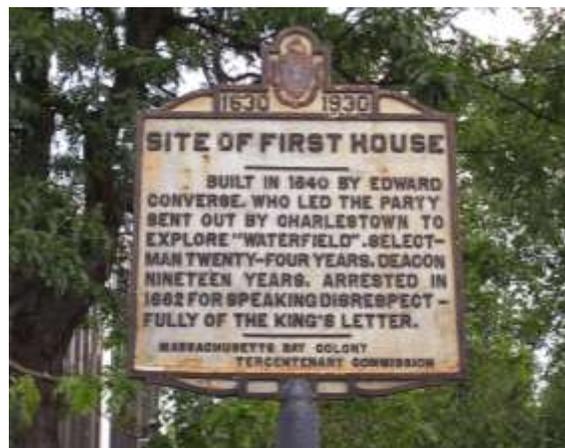
In 1861, there were over 60 dwellings, and by 1840 there were enough residents to justify building a South Woburn church. By 1849, the residents were talking about incorporating their own town, which happened in 1850. In that year, the population was 1,350. The first town map, produced in 1854, marked about 260 dwellings.

The map shows that the largest concentration of buildings was between Wedge Pond and the

eastern hills. How did the town develop that way?

Although New England towns often grew up around a church, prior to Winchester's incorporation in 1850, the church for most of this area was up in Woburn. Winchester's first church was built in 1840 and was built because the population grew, not vice versa. The Common in front of it wasn't purchased by the Town for a park until 1867, so neither of these instigated the development of the Center where it is now.

It is well known – and documented – that the first home in the area was built next to the Aberjona River, at Main Street. Did people just congregate around that first house and the mill? Apparently not. The first residents were farmers. They had large tracts of land. They were spread out. Besides, about 1700 the Belknap family had a fulling mill, then a grist mill on Horn Pond Brook. In 1787 a new grist mill was built on Horn Pond Brook and about 1790 yet another mill was built, in the area of 620 Washington St. By the end of the 18th century, business at the first mill, the Converse Mill actually fell off.



At the right is a map from 1794, actually a composite of two maps, joining the Woburn map with the upper part of the Charlestown map – since Winchester land was still part of those towns.



The Converse mill (the “grist mill” near the center of the map) stood at the junction of the two main roads, what are now Main and Washington Streets, but four grist mills are noted. Maps from the early 1830s show that there were clusters of building, in other places than what is now Winchester center.

For example, this early 19th-century map, which shows the river, Middlesex Canal, and route from Medford to Woburn, going basically along the Great Road (Main Street), shows clusters at Bacon’s Factory and Black Horse Village.



Since about 1671, the Symmes family had mills along the river, not far from the lake, later taken over by the Bacon family, which built and rebuilt one or two mills here. Over time, a variety of businesses occupied the mills. Naturally there was a little cluster here – homes for the mill owners and the mill users. There was employment here; there were houses here.

From the 1740s (or earlier) a hostelry known as the Black Horse Tavern was located on Main Street not far from the juncture with Washington Street. It was a favorite stopping place for travelers. In the 1790s, it was on the stagecoach routes from Boston to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and Portland, Maine, and the area was frequently called Black Horse Village. Nearby there was a blacksmith shop.



At the junction of Main and Washington Streets, Paul Wyman and his son Jesse operated the first known store from about 1775 to 1840.² The photo to the right from 1901 shows the sites. Today this view would show the Lincoln School. The Stanton House, still standing, is on the right. In 1825, the Grammer brothers, William and Seth, built a store near this junction on the west side of Main Street (near the classroom wing of the McCall Middles School), opposite the blacksmith shop. It was called an “English and West India Goods Store” Goods for sale, which someone remembered because they were lettered on signs, included salt fish, oil and molasses; sugar, tea, and coffee; pepper, cinnamon, cloves and allspice; plus rum, brandy, gin, and wine. Near it was a sash and blind factory run by steam power. Another store was built on the opposite side of the street a little north of the Sharon House.



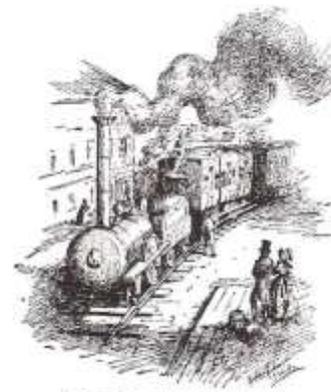
DEVELOPMENT AROUND MILL POND

The same map shows not much at the old Converse Mill Pond. The property had been purchased by Abel Richardson, and it was during his time that the mill went into a decline. One square marks the location of his house. And it appears there are two little squares at the junction of Main and Church. Then there’s another little cluster up at Cutter’s Village, due, like Bacon Village, to the mills.

Nathaniel Richardson, who was born in a house on Washington Street, recalled that in South Woburn shoemaking was the principal industry of the town. The Converse mill had gone to decay, the Cutter mill was only grinding corn for local convenience, and there was only one blacksmith shop and one wheelwright shop. There was no business center.

What happened to change all that was the railroad.

Apparently Winchester got a railroad line not because it was an important destination but because it happened to lie between Boston and Lowell. This picture purporting to be the first train was. In the late 19th century, Oliver R. Clark wrote “The original scheme of the railway connecting Boston and Lowell did not appear to contemplate any provision for business at this point, so the building first used as a station was a small shoemaker’s shop, about 10x15, which answered every purpose till the increasing size of the village rendered a larger building necessary.” For two years after the opening of the railroad, Clark said, only a few changes were observed. But then there came a man whose eagle eye saw the advantages of that spot as a good locality for business and the founding of a new town.



A drawing by W.H.W. Bicknell of “The First Railway Train”



That person was Samuel Steele Richardson or S. S. Richardson. His family were residents of Richardson's Row. He established a prosperous shoe-making business in Woburn. Seeing the possibilities of South Woburn at the site of the railroad, he bought the old Converse/Richardson mill site, rebuilt the mill, built several houses, and a new shoe shop (pictured here after it ceased to be a shoe shop). He bought the Black Horse Tavern site. He overextended himself. The Panic of 1837 (a major recession which lasted nearly a decade) left him financially embarrassed, which might have been the undoing of the fledgling village, but then Benjamin F. Thompson moved from Woburn to South Woburn. He purchased land and built a tannery down at the end of Thompson

Street, creating jobs. He lived first at the corner of Main and Thompson Streets. He then bought the Converse/Richardson home site and built a new house.

Harrison Parker, who married a Richardson, took over the old Richardson mill near the Woburn line, then bought the Converse/Richardson mill site from S.S. Richardson, moved his business there and was very successful, and created more jobs. From 1845, he shared the mill with Joel Whitney who ran a machine shop there, and also prospered.

The jobs available at these sites and the Cutter mills just up the street attracted people to So. Woburn, so did the convenience of having a country home near a railroad stop of the Boston train. As the population grew, more stores were needed. The U.S. postal department opened a post office here in 1841. First physician known to settle here arrived in 1846 and settled on Thompson Street.



B. F. Thompson home and the lane leading down to his tannery, now Thompson Street



Also residing in South Woburn was Dr. Richard Piper, who painted this view. In the background is the first building of the First Congregational Society, built in 1840. On either side are the horse sheds. On the right, the white board fence borders today's Converse Place. Above it, on the right are the house and stable built by Benjamin Thompson. On the left is the home of S. S. Richardson and the first House that Benjamin Thompson lived in. It was, reportedly, Thompson who commissioned this painting.³

It looks like a lovely little cluster of houses. What you don't see are the mill and the tannery. This was actually a little cluster of homes for the captains of South Woburn industry.

Not much else yet lay beyond this view. Pleasant Street (now Mt. Vernon) was not laid out until 1845-46. Abijah Thompson, looking back to the late 1830s, wrote of the land bounded by Main and Pleasant Streets and the river, "There were no buildings upon the land except a large barn such as farmers were wont to build in old times, simply boarded and shingled, large doors at either end. It was old and dilapidated and was occupied by Samuel Steele Richardson as a stable for his horse, cows & carriages."⁴

Because of the railroad, the village got a new unofficial name. Instead of being known as a stop on the stagecoach route, it was known as a stop on the railroad, called Woburn Gates. The gates lasted until the 1950s.



INCORPORATION

When Winchester was incorporated in 1850, the center had some of the same elements it has today – major roads which passed through it to neighboring towns, public transportation to the city (also artfully left out of this painting), business, residences, a house of worship which doubled as a meeting place. Soon it acquired municipal and public buildings, a school and town departments.

When the offer of naming the town for his family was presented to William P. Winchester, it was hoped that he would reward the town liberally enough that it might build a town hall. Unfortunately, his gift wouldn't cover the cost, and if he intended to make other gifts, the opportunities ended with his death just a few months after the town was born.



In 1851, a number of men of the community who thought that the town should have an office building with a public hall for lectures and meetings, provided the funding to build Lyceum Hall.

It looked different from today. First it lost the gingerbread and Gothic windows. Then in the 1950 there was a fire which necessitated removing the top stories.



Originally it accommodated shops in the basement, stores on the ground level and a hall which could be divided by folding doors, above that was the main hall and four offices, over that was another hall and office or committee rooms. This is where Town Meeting used to meet.

Most shops were housed in smaller buildings, including houses converted to business use. One may still see houses adapted to commercial use. This is nothing new. Benjamin Thompson's sons turned his second home on Main Street into a business building by raising it up over a new first floor, making it a commercial building (see photos, right). Today there's a lot of talk about mixed-use in the downtown. Although I don't know what upstairs was used for, this could have been a mixed-use building.



Through the 19th century there were several commercial buildings in the downtown area which have not survived, because the buildings built before the 1880s were wooden. Below left is a view of Thompson Street from the 1920s. Today a few of the wooden houses survive but many others, such as those on the little alley, known as Purrington Place, off Thompson Street, and the building used by Sanderson's Hardware store have disappeared.



BUILDING FOR PERMANENCE

The next significant step in remaking the Center was to build in brick and stone. The first of these was the Richardson Block, built in 1872, later known as the Tyler Block and as the Hotel Winchester (visible in the right background of the White Building photo, demolished in 1941). The next was the Brown & Stanton Building (right), built in 1886. It had shops, offices, and a hall above. Town Hall was built in 1887.



Other important business buildings (all still standing) include the White Building and White Block (far right), built in 1890, which was also a mixed-use building, containing not only



shops but also quarters for the YMCA, plus the Savings Bank (1892).

Not every building built at the end of the 19th century was big tall or substantial. Next to the Brown and Stanton Building was the Lieberman Block. Moving into the next century, in 1913 the Lane Building was built on Church Street and in 1914 the wooden Morrill building was demolished to make room for the Star Building. Two stories was enough, not 3 or 4, since there was no more need to create space for meeting halls.



*Lane Building (left)
Lieberman Block (right)
Main Street (below)*



There was still industry in the town center through the early 20th century. Although the Waldmyer tannery (formerly the Thompson tannery) was removed in the 1890s in order to create the Mystic Valley parkway and a park in the 1890s, the Whitney mill, successor to the Converse/Richardson mill (on the left below), stood in the downtown until the Town purchased Mill Pond in the 1910s, and demolished the building.

The Town was then left with one riverside industry in the Center – the laundry, shown here before its 1973 renovation into an office building.



Winchester Center never developed according to any plan. Rather it evolved in a haphazard manner. It has been built up over time, time during which tastes changed. There are some old frame buildings, Victorian buildings, an art deco bank, a Colonial Revival bank, a Beaux Arts school on the hill, quite a variety of styles. Following are some more pictures of the early downtown.



Left - Main Street

Below - Intersection of Mt. Vernon Street and Main Street



Left - Main Street and Shore Road

Below - Two views of Church Street and its elm



Main Street between Mt. Vernon Street and Laraway Road in the 1920s

As the 20th century progressed, more wooden buildings disappeared to be replaced with such buildings as the Locatelli Block on Main Street. Some, such as the Miller Building on Mt. Vernon Street, have been remodeled beyond recognition.

Other storefronts and facades have been modernized.



CULTURAL CENTER

The center also developed as a cultural center as well as a commercial and municipal center. Churches, schools, and a library have occupied prominent positions. The Town Common has provided a pleasant meeting and resting place.



THE GREAT WALL

One of the most significant change to the downtown during the 20th century had nothing to do with the architecture of individual buildings or the type of activities they housed. It was the building of the railroad overpass.

One of the longest controversies related to Winchester Center was what to do about the grade crossing. It was dangerous. The gates didn't always prevent accidents. After long debate, an overpass was built and opened in 1956. Though good for safety, it set up a great wall which divides the Center.



The gates open



The gates closed

While this history has focused on the early development of Winchester Center, every street and building has a more detailed history. Further, planning and redevelopment have continued through the present time

Not every building or facet of the Center is a gem. However, Winchester Center has some key pieces which have defined its character for a long time, not only worth preserving but also enhancing as change continues.



The first train to use the overpass 1956

¹ Based on a program sponsored by the Winchester Historical Society in 2015.

² Nathaniel Richardson, "Winchester's 50th Anniversary," an address delivered to the Calumet Club in 1900.

³ It was presumably Thompson's family which donated the painting to the Winchester Historical Society.

⁴ Abijah Thompson, "What I remember," typescript.