
1 HISTORIC PERSPECTIVE

2 *It is necessary to know where we have been and where we are now in order to determine where we should*
3 *be headed. This basic principle applies to charting our future course not only as individuals, but also as a*
4 *town. ~~The following is a brief sketch of Norwich's history, which provides insight into how the town arrived~~*
5 *~~at its current situation.~~*

6 18th Century

7 **Formation and Founders**

8 Norwich is one of four adjoining towns in the Upper Connecticut River Valley to receive charters granted
9 on July 4, 1761, by Governor Benning Wentworth. The other towns are Hanover and Lebanon, New
10 Hampshire, and Hartford, Vermont. Norwich's first settlers came, as did those of the other towns,
11 principally from north-central Connecticut. They traveled northward almost 200 miles up the Connecticut
12 River and, in many cases, named their new towns for their previous ones. Easily overlooked now this
13 territory was home to indigenous peoples and French trappers and merchants establishing trade routes
14 and extracting resources. The waterways were major transportation routes and thus the leading edge of
15 white colonial landscape transformation. The settlement pattern we now observe of linear development
16 along valley floors has been established for centuries. The harnessing of water for power and waste
17 removal allowed for greater concentration of development and more permanent settlements, where
18 commerce could establish, processing agricultural and forestry products, and cultural life could flourish.

19 ~~Generally, the men whose names appear on the charters — the grantees or proprietors — were not the~~
20 ~~ones who settled the new land, but were the older and more established inhabitants of their Connecticut~~
21 ~~towns. The younger men, those with the strength and skills to be pioneers, to build sawmills and~~
22 ~~gristmills, to clear the forests, were the ones to undertake the hardships of the move. In 1763, a few~~
23 ~~settlers came to Norwich and located close to the river and in the Pompanoosuc area. The first clearing in~~
24 ~~the township was made by John Fenton and Ebenezer Smith, both proprietors, and Fenton's nephew,~~
25 ~~John Slafter, son of proprietor Samuel Slafter.~~

26 ~~The exploration and "sizing up" of the chartered township, which was "to contain six miles square, and no~~
27 ~~more" began in 1764. Jacob Burton of Preston, encouraged by the proprietors in Connecticut, made the~~
28 ~~journey north. He had the knowledge and the ability to build and operate a mill, take the measure of the~~
29 ~~region and survey the town. He determined suitable spots on Blood Brook for a sawmill and a gristmill.~~
30 ~~The location of roads and lots needed to be planned, and there were other conditions laid out in the~~

1 ~~Norwich town charter with which the settlers would have to comply. Burton's own permanent dwelling~~
2 ~~was constructed in 1767.~~

3 ~~Among other early comers to Norwich were Samuel and John Hutchinson, who arrived in 1765. They~~
4 ~~cleared an island in the Connecticut River, planted corn on it, then returned to Connecticut; the next year~~
5 ~~they came to stay. Nathan Messenger also arrived in 1765. His cabin is thought to have been located near~~
6 ~~the Norwich end of the Ledyard Bridge.~~

7 **Historic Settlement Areas**

8 ~~The confluence of the Ompompanoosuc and the Connecticut Rivers came to be known as Pompanoosuc.~~
9 ~~Union Village in the northeastern part of the town is also on the Ompompanoosuc. By 1795, a gristmill~~
10 ~~had been established there. Beaver Meadow (West Norwich), now a small community, had its beginning~~
11 ~~in 1780 when its first settler, Conant B. Sawyer, came from Hebron, Connecticut.~~

12 ~~Lewiston, of which little remains, was located near the west end of the Ledyard Bridge. Dr. Joseph Lewis~~
13 ~~settled here near the bank of the Connecticut River in 1767 and owned much of the surrounding land. It~~
14 ~~was here that an early ferry provided transportation to the Hanover side of the river. John Sargeant, the~~
15 ~~original operator (at least as early as 1771 and probably in 1770) had a continuing conflict with~~
16 ~~Dartmouth College founder Eleazar Wheelock over the ferry, and because Sargeant's tavern apparently~~
17 ~~provided liquor for Wheelock's students. Lewiston's demise came with the construction of the Wilder~~
18 ~~Dam in 1950 and Interstate 91 in 1968.~~

19 ~~Norwich Center must be remembered for several reasons. It was here, on Meeting House Hill, that Peter~~
20 ~~Olcott built his first house and barn in 1773. Olcott was a leading citizen of the town, serving in various~~
21 ~~town and state offices, including that of lieutenant governor; he was also a trustee of Dartmouth College.~~
22 ~~The first church in Norwich was built at the Center on land given by Olcott. Begun in 1778, it was finally~~
23 ~~finished in 1785. For about two weeks that same year, the Center Church served as the meeting place of~~
24 ~~the Vermont legislature. All that remains now of Norwich Center is the burial ground on Meeting House~~
25 ~~Hill and whatever archeological evidence remains of some 10 homes, shops, and offices.~~

26 ~~Union Village, Pompanoosuc, Beaver Meadow and Lewiston are all rather clearly defined places, but in~~
27 ~~addition there are settlements that did not develop business or commercial places. Rather, they are~~
28 ~~distinctive and more nearly neighborhoods: Podunk, New Boston and Tiger Town.~~

19th Century

Population and Migration

Norwich now has a population of about 3,400 people. Historically, the growth of the town reflects trends elsewhere in the state and in the New England region, and has been influenced by events throughout the country. Norwich grew quickly from the early settlers to a peak population of 2,316 in 1830. After that date population slowly declined to a low of 1,092 in 1920. The 1830 figure was not reached or surpassed again in a decennial census until 1980 when a count of 2,398 people was registered. (See Chapter 4)

While Norwich was becoming increasingly settled, land in the northern part of the state was being opened up to development. The movement that brought settlers from Connecticut to the region we now know as “the Upper Valley” was repeated, as residents of Norwich set out to settle new lands further north. The movement actually began quite early; for example, in 1803, after having lived in Norwich for some 20 years, Captain Benjamin Burton with his family moved on to Irasburg in Orleans County.

Though they might not have always moved, Norwich residents were also active in organizing other towns. Thus, we find that the proprietors of Randolph, Vermont, were in large part from Hanover and Norwich. A History of Norwich, Vermont (1905) by M. E. Goddard and H.V. Partridge notes that (p. 135) “the evidences of depopulation and disappearance of houses in Norwich seem to be especially marked at Beaver Meadow, and along the ‘turnpike,’ ...”

In the earlier portion of the 19th century, agricultural and forestry practices shared in creating the conditions that made people living in Norwich seek new and unused lands. The importance of good resource management had not yet been realized to any extent either locally or nationwide. In 1840, for example, more than 13,000 sheep grazed in Norwich. Sheep are close croppers and can quickly reduce the value of a hillside.

Just as local people left the town for places further north in the state, so residents were enticed by the opening of the West with its vast natural resources. Jasper Murdock set out as early as 1801 with his family, including his father-in-law, the Reverend Lyman Pottaer, who had been the town’s first settled Congregational minister, to journey to Ohio (then the Northwest Territory). The move of settlers westward whether into New York State, Pennsylvania or beyond continued into the early 20th century and to such an extent that emigrant aid societies were frequently formed and guidebooks were published for those undertaking the trek.

1 **Education**

2 ~~Looking at Norwich's 200 years of history, a concern for education can be identified from the beginning.~~
3 ~~The Vermont Constitution of 1777 had specified that each county should have a grammar school.~~
4 ~~Windsor County built the first in 1785, located in Norwich. Between 1785 and 1841, 20 school districts~~
5 ~~were formed and these can still be identified on maps such as the one in the Beers' Atlas of Windsor~~
6 ~~County (1869). Some of the old schoolhouses survive as present-day dwellings.~~

7 In 1819, Captain Alden Partridge, a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and its
8 superintendent from 1815 to 1817, returned to ~~his native town of~~ Norwich and established the American
9 Literary, Scientific and Military Academy. ~~From 1825 to 1829, Partridge moved the school to Middletown,~~
10 ~~Connecticut, where he hoped to find a greater potential and larger financial base; the school, however,~~
11 ~~returned to Norwich.~~

12 In 1834, it was incorporated as Norwich University. ~~During the next 30 years, the university had its ups~~
13 ~~and downs for apparently Partridge was not as good a businessman as educator; he also quarreled with~~
14 ~~Truman B. Ransom, who succeeded him as president. Then, in In 1866, the South Barracks building was~~
15 destroyed by fire. When the Town of Northfield, Vermont offered both a location and buildings, the
16 university accepted the invitation to move there.

17 The Norwich Classical and English Boarding School, a relatively short-lived enterprise, occupied the North
18 Barracks after the university's departure. It operated from 1867 to 1877. The North Barracks burned in
19 1898, thus ending a dominating presence on the Norwich Green.

20 **Economy**

21 ~~Industry was supported by natural resources in Norwich. Business partnerships developed along the river;~~
22 ~~the trade of timber and its by-product, potash, in exchange for rum, molasses and sundries was especially~~
23 ~~lucrative between Norwich landowners and merchants in Springfield, Massachusetts and Hartford,~~
24 ~~Connecticut.~~

25 As ~~merchantable viable~~ lumber dwindled, ~~however~~, emphasis shifted to agriculture based on wheat and
26 other grains. In 1810, merino sheep were brought to Vermont, ~~and, by 1830, Norwich, like many other~~
27 ~~New England towns, was raising them by the thousands.~~ The wool and the breeding stock itself were
28 eagerly sought and easily transported elsewhere; wool commanded high prices, particularly during the
29 Civil War when the supply of cotton was cut off and armies had to be clothed. ~~During this time, wool was~~
30 ~~valued at \$1.00 per pound versus today's value of about 25¢ per pound. That The boom was over in-by~~
31 ~~the late 1860s, complicated by trade policies ariff manipulations and unbeatable competition, first from~~
32 western states, then from Australia.

1 ~~When dairy herds were introduced at the end of the century, intended to service a fast growing mill~~
2 ~~towns with and cities as far away as Boston, the pastures yielded new productivity. Though not clean~~
3 ~~sweepers like sheep, cattle demanded more silage (thus more hay fields) and larger barns.~~ The growth of
4 the milk industry was gradual in the late 1800s, but, once secure, it caused a visual revolution in the
5 landscape and helped slow down the rate of population decline. A typical mid-19th century Norwich farm
6 consisted of about 150 acres, of which 125 were cleared and 25 forested.

7 **Railroad**

8 The Connecticut and Passumpsic Railroad, finished in 1848, connected the Upper Connecticut River Valley
9 to tracks across the country. When White River Junction became the region's principal railhead, Norwich
10 farmers and merchants had a faster means of transporting their produce and wares, by boxcar rather
11 than wagon load. The railroad replaced the Connecticut River as a trade route, eliminating the
12 disadvantages of seasonal transportation.

13 The sharply increasing demand of growing cities for fresh milk, cream, and butter brought prosperity for
14 those who had successfully shifted from shearing sheep to milking cows. Already established
15 communities like Lewiston and Pompanoosuc grew around railroad depots. The former boasted its own
16 store, post office, and coal and lumber yards.

17 **20th Century**

18 **Education**

19 ~~In 1963, Norwich and Hanover joined together in the first interstate school district in the country, forming~~
20 ~~the Dresden School District. Its first annual report noted that the two towns had "been impelled by~~
21 ~~common difficulties toward a cooperative solution of school problems." The district was established as an~~
22 ~~interstate compact by Public Law 88-177.~~

Comment [RF1]: Move to education section of
Utilities, facilities and Services

23 **Infrastructure**

24 In the 20th century, two technological advances affected the history of Norwich: construction of the
25 Wilder Dam and Interstates 91 and 89.

26 Wilder Dam, built south of town in 1950, is part of a network of hydropower dams that altered farming
27 patterns along the Connecticut River and its tributaries. Many of Norwich's fertile flood plains were
28 submerged, including those in Pompanoosuc.

29 Perhaps the building of Interstates 91 and 89 most dramatically influenced the course of Norwich history.
30 Completed in the late-1960s, the four-lane highways connected Norwich overnight to the entire East

1 Coast and to the rest of the country. Travel time between Norwich and Boston or New York City was cut
2 in half. Dilapidated or abandoned houses quickly became summer and retirement homes (a trend already
3 evident in Beaver Meadow in the 1940s), replacing working farms but rescuing some rural architecture.

4 **Land Use**

5 The second half of the 20th century saw Norwich transition from an agricultural to a bedroom
6 community. In 1940, it is estimated that one-half of the town's land was cleared. The trend away from
7 agriculture is reflected by the fact that currently less than 30 percent of the land is cleared.

8 ~~Only a few people in town can remember seeing cattle being driven down Main Street to their barns from
9 pastures further out. While Norwich did exist for many years as a quiet farming community, longtime
10 residents have seen it change into a bedroom community for nearby employment centers.~~

11 ~~Those who work elsewhere choose to live in Norwich because of the town's good school and its proximity
12 to Hanover, Dartmouth College, and the Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center. They come here for the
13 kind of life that has disappeared elsewhere and which they perceive can be found here. The Dartmouth
14 presence is strong and the college and its library have long drawn both summer renters and permanent
15 residents. Academics from other institutions have been coming here since the 1940s, and many of them
16 settled in the Upper Valley after fleeing Europe during World War II. Others see Norwich as a place for
17 retirement; frequently these are alumni of Dartmouth College. All of these trends are agents of change
18 for Norwich.~~