

## **Henniker History**

It began as a forest.

The first roads were actually mere traces, or as described by Francis Childs in a 1958 Convocation address at New England College, "...little more than bridle paths". A road was laid out from the Hopkinton line at the "Cass Hill" toward the center of town to the west. It extended toward and along the river. Later it was extended to complete a crossing to the Hillsborough line.

In 1768, the articles of incorporation were signed by 26 men, "residents in Number Six" (Childs, p2). The Charter was granted by Gov. John Wentworth on November 10, 1768, and fifteen days later the first town meeting was held. "If you could have looked down on the township from the air, except for the ponds and the river, you would have seen an almost complete stretch of primeval forest broken only by an occasional small beaver meadow and the little clearings of a few acre each..." (Childs, p3). Such was the beginning of land development. Most settlement was in the southeastern part of the town, at first, and only later reached up river toward the present center and to west Henniker. Actually, the histories depict the village there as the more prominent in those early days.

Originally, land use was of necessity aimed at logging and agriculture. The whole town is lined with stone walls attesting to the activities of the farmers. At one time the town had been cleared along the river and up the adjacent slopes and around the ponds for farmland. Later, much of the cleared land grew back to trees and forest.

Early industries were smaller mills for grist and lumber. The first lumber mill was built but abandoned before it could be used, because of an Indian scare. In 1766, a road was laid out toward the Weare line extending into Weare. It was used partly to transport butter made by Josiah Ward, whose wife was said to be the first white woman to come into town over Craney Hill (Cogswell, p56). The road still carries the name of this early commercial enterprise, "The Butter Road".

By the 1800's there were many small mills and many more farms. From then on, the mill aspect began to grow in importance. The many streams and the river influenced their locations for waterpower. The paper mill in West Hopkinton was actually founded in 1871. There was a measure mill, a shoe shop, and numerous other small operations, which gave the Town a manufacturing complexion along with farming. By the end of that century the riverbank was lined with a number of industries. While the uses of some buildings changed from time to time, they prevailed until the late 1950's when the flood control project began taking land for the present Hopkinton dam reservoir. Numerous farms (perhaps 38) and the mill buildings were all taken by the government for that purpose.

The village began to overshadow the importance of outlying farms. Six new streets were laid out between 1889 and 1899 (Childs, p9). Between 1886 and 1902, over 60 new buildings were erected within the village limits (Childs, p9).

The K&C Company replaced the shoe shop as a job provider in 1903. It manufactured wooden bicycle rims. In 1905 the first leather board factory was opened. The existing “Leather Board Bridge” marks the site of that mill, which later became the Norton Plant. Mills were on the banks from there to the present stone bridge on both sides of the river. The remnants of their dams are still visible.

As industry developed, the farms receded. The late 1800’s became an era of abandoned farms, according to Childs. “Whole sections of Town which once bore excellent crops were left deserted.” (Childs ,p8).

Dr. Childs stated in his 1958 address that “... from the beginning of the century (19<sup>th</sup>) a certain amount of emigrating from Henniker had been taking place...”. This was attributed to the industrial centers to the south both in Manchester, NH and in Massachusetts. This accelerated in the 1840’s with many of the young men being “led away”. The Civil War has a major impact with more than a hundred young men joining the struggle.

Even so, Childs said that agriculture still continued for a few more decades. Many droves of cattle and sheep were herded through Henniker and the droves found lodging and entertainment in the downtown area where the old Henniker Inn now houses the administration of New England College.

Now the town has all but lost its agriculture. Except for small endeavors by the residents who grow their gardens and own horses and such, the orchards and blueberry self-pick operations predominate. The Davidson’s still raise sheep and maintain the fields, which once supported cattle, but while in the early 1960’s there were six or seven dairy farms, now there are none. The poultry industry was then still evident then but no longer were there five or six major poultry growers. Now there are none.

The ski area and the College are major taxpayers and occupy significant tracts of land. They are two of the main contributors to the town’s industry and activity.

Industry, in general, is influenced by the several lumber mills and production of forest products such as bark mulch, chips, lumber, and pallets. Other mine gravel and sand or make concrete and related products. These are located along the Old Concord Road all the way into Town, along the Weare Road and near Warner Road. There appears to be little possibility of industrial development on the scale of the old factories but businesses are healthy. As elsewhere, the pull between commercial development along the arteries out from the center and on the fringes reflects on the health of the central community. For now they seem to be in balance.

The community is becoming increasingly residential with the demand for housing outstripping the availability. For the future this poses a promise of increasing development and more houses with the eventual need for more schools. Although the federal taking of farm and industrial land

in the late 50's devastated many of the residents at that time, the open space and rural aspects of the town, which prevailed in the early days, will be sustained by this permanent preservation of this centrally located green area.

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References: "The Only Henniker on Earth" Henniker History Committee; Phoenix, 1980  
"History of the Town of Henniker" Leander W. Cogswell; 1880  
"The Story of Henniker" Francis L. Childs, a speech at a Henniker Community Day Convocation at New England College; May 28, 1958