



Village Green—1835
CHESHIRE, CONNECTICUT
An Old New England Town

The Earliest Times

Cheshire was the granddaughter of New Haven, and Wallingford was its mother town. As the latter was founded by sons of New Haveners who, becoming dissatisfied with the narrow limits of the home town, fared forth to conquer the wilderness, so Cheshire grew from the urge of Wallingford's sons and daughters to create new homes in turn in new country. First known as Quinnipiac, New Haven was founded in 1638, Wallingford by the next generation, in 1669.

West of Wallingford and beyond the stream Quinnipiac was a low range of "Blew (Blue) Hills," and at their base a fine stretch of land known as early as 1680-90 as "Ye Fresh Meadows." The region was one of promise to the farmer and soon the more venturesome of the colonists' sons were going over there to clear the land and plant crops. By 1694 there was an organized settlement here, the beginnings of our present town of Cheshire. Names we know today are to be found in the list of early settlers in this region: Hall and Ives, Doolittle, Hitchcock, others. In 1705 the name of Thomas Brooks appears, and soon the name Cheshire, which he gave to the settlement, from the county of his birth in England. The Brooks name itself is preserved in Brooksvale, the southern part of Cheshire today.

Slowly Cheshire broke from the mother town, a separate school being established first, and then a church. As early as in 1719 the "west farmers" as the Cheshire pioneers were called, won the right to hold school for two months of the year "in a convenient place." In 1724 a church followed, with the erection of a Congregational Church on the site which is now Main Street and Lanyon Drive. The present Congregational Church building, third in time, of federal Colonial design and still standing on the central Green, was built in 1826-27. Well before this St. Peter's Episcopal Church had been organized, in 1760, at the bend of Main Street. An Episcopal Academy of Connecticut had been established in 1794 through the efforts of Samuel Seabury, first Bishop of Connecticut, locating in Cheshire in 1796.

Development and Growth

In 1780 the State Legislature made Cheshire a separate town. Its population was at this time 2015, and despite its new standing the figure did not rise very rapidly because of poor communications. In 1801, however, communications began to improve, as the main street became a turnpike, with a stagecoach running via Farmington between Hartford and New Haven, and making stops in Cheshire three days a week around five o'clock in the afternoon. There was further improvement in 1827, with the opening of the Farmington Canal, first link in a system of waterways designed to link the Connecticut River at Northampton with the Sound, and thus the whole production area of western New England with the world of trade. Beachport, as the Cheshire stop was called, was an important point on the Canal, traffic both east-west and north-south meeting here. Farmers and tradesmen and manufacturers would drive their oxen from Naugatuck to Beachport in order to ship their products by water, as being cheaper than by land. In 1848 the Canal was superseded by the railroad, which because it was built mostly along the old towpath of the Canal was called the Canal line.

All around Cheshire small industries were now springing up. James Mix for example, had a gimlet and hardware factory upstream from the present fine town bathing beach. In Cheshire Street, to the east, there were any number of small but flourishing enterprises. From Cheshire grew the town of Prospect, known at first as the West Rocks. Farming was of course the greatest of Cheshire's industries from the beginning, one generation after another often carrying along on the same site, as the Bishop family has done, five generations farming the same land.

Cheshire had its first boom not from the outside, thanks to railroad or canal, but from resources deep within its own soil. As early as in 1712 we hear of a John Parker finding copper on his farm, and the records show that copper was, in fact, mined here for a number of years, the Copper Valley name given to one section of town deriving from this. But the big exploitation of what lies beneath the soil in Cheshire came later, when some time before 1840 a Negro woman known as Jinny discovered some unusual stones on the hillside near her cabin. Scientists had known since 1813, when the word was published by Benjamin Silliman of Yale, that there were deposits of barium sulphate, popularly known as barytes, in Cheshire, but it took the Negro woman's chance discovery to dramatize the treasure. Following her happy find, for nearly forty years barytes mining operations were carried on in Cheshire, first at the Jinny Hill site, later on the Peck place in the northwestern end of town. The mineral found a ready market with manufacturers of glass, paint, cloth, and certain rubber products, while the industry it fostered was responsible for bringing to Cheshire a totally new population, principally from the mining district of Cornwall, England. A by-product of this influx was a notable expansion of the Methodist Church, which had been founded in 1834.

In the period of growth due to improved communications, and to the barytes flurry, Cheshire got its first manufactory. This was the Cheshire Manufacturing Company, founded in 1850 to produce, as it announced at that time, "ivory combs, and buttons of all kinds." The Company is still in full operation today as the Ball and Socket Company, its principal products being metal buttons and stampings.

With the increase in population and the diversification of national strains attendant upon it, there was a need for new churches, and in 1856 we find Roman Catholic services being held in the upstairs ballroom of Beach Tavern, which today is the fine old home at 137 South Main Street. Today St. Bridget's Church has not only a handsome edifice for worship, but a junior high school as well, opened in the autumn of 1964. In 1967 a second and in 1970 a third Roman Catholic Church was organized in order to take care of the greatly increased number of communicants. In 1888 Cheshire's first Baptist Church was organized, land for the building having been given by Josiah Hull. A handsome new edifice has now replaced the original structure. In 1956 an Evangelical Lutheran parish began to be organized and in January, 1961, a church building in pleasingly modern style was dedicated. In the summer of 1968 the Jewish community of Cheshire joined together to form the town's first synagogue, to be known as Temple Beth David. A reformed synagogue, the Temple was started with twenty-three families. It now has a membership of more than a hundred families and a resident rabbi. When the Methodists were free to move into their new church on Academy Road, the Jewish community purchased the building thus left vacant, to use as a temporary synagogue. In September, 1973, Grace Baptist Church, an affiliate of the Conservative Baptist Association of America, was incorporated and the next month began holding services in Chapman School. Starting with four families, it now has an attendance of some seventy members each Sunday.

Cheshire Today - 1976

For many years Cheshire was linked with New Haven by a trolley line, which at first ran only as far as Mt. Carmel. Cheshire people would drive to Hamden and leave their horses in a livery stable while they went on by trolley. Eventually the line was extended to Waterbury, thus linking Cheshire with the whole New England hinterland. This was important as a great deal of freight was carried by trolley. Today the old trolley line has been superseded by a system of buses.

The town today has a population of approximately 22,000 drawn from every country of the earth. The Cheshire Academy alone with its 311 students, more than 250 of whom come from beyond Cheshire, is a world of microcosm. Founded in 1794 as a boys' school, it now looks forward to a bright future as a coeducational institution, with 95 of its present enrollment girls.

Greatly expanded educational facilities have become imperative in Cheshire, what with the phenomenal rise in population, and the old Humiston School in the center of town has been converted into a headquarters for the Board of Education. A rear building has been added and is used for the training of special children, while in the basement a fully equipped Public Health Nursing Service has its home. The town has four elementary schools, one junior high school and one senior high school, serving a school population of 4896.

A name in the news not long ago, when it was invoked by Yale students seeking to make the university co-educational, was that of Lucinda Foote, who in 1784, at the age of twelve, passed the Yale entrance examinations. Although not admitted, because of her sex, Lucinda saw her brother Sam graduate before he was seventeen. Sam later became a Congressman, a Senator, and finally Governor of Connecticut. His father and maternal grandfather had been the second and first pastors, respectively, of the Cheshire Congregational Church. His son, Admiral Andrew Hull Foote of Mississippi River fame in the Civil War, lived here as a boy and attended the Cheshire Academy, along with the Union Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles, and the Confederate General Joseph Wheeler. Foote's name may be seen on the north side of the Soldiers' Monument (erected in 1866) on the Green.

Lambert Hitchcock, famous for his Hitchcock chair, was born in Cheshire. So also was John Frederick Kensett, a painter of the Hudson Valley School, known for his landscapes and marines. In 1859 Kensett was appointed a member of the National Arts Commission and engaged to superintend the ornamentation of the National Capitol in Washington. His painting of Niagara Falls was one of the canvasses chosen by Mrs. John F. Kennedy for the White House Collection.

Still others from Cheshire who have left their imprint on the world are Amos Doolittle, an 18th century engraver; Abraham Jarvis, second Bishop of Connecticut and eighth Bishop of the Episcopal Church in America; and George Capewell, who made a fortune from his inventions, among these horse-shoe nails. Many notables have attended Cheshire Academy, perhaps the most spectacular having been the great financier and art collector, J. Pierpont Morgan, a native of Hartford.

The town of Cheshire covers a surprisingly large expanse of territory. Its main street, almost straight, runs $7\frac{1}{2}$ miles, from Hamden to Milldale, while at its greatest width the town extends $6\frac{3}{4}$ miles, from Waterbury to Wallingford. With a total of 31.4 square miles, Cheshire is 68th in size of the 169 towns of the state. It has 107.7 miles of highway.

Right now plans are being drawn, looking toward a proper and harmonious development of Cheshire in the future. As to these, and on Cheshire's past, the Historical Society, like the Public Library with its many and varied services, is always happy to assist in finding information. The Historical Society, now housed in the fine old Philips House on the Green, in order to perform its proper role in the community, must maintain a steady growth, and to this end new members are always welcome.

CESHIRE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

43 Church Drive

Museum open Sunday afternoon, 2-5

Meetings: Fourth Monday evening at 8 o'clock,
October through April at the above address.

Visitors always welcome at Museum or meetings.

The Society was organized to help preserve and strengthen the heritage of the town and its vicinity. There has always been a close tie between the Society and the Library, both of which, in a real sense, were "founded" by Miss Mary Baldwin.