

A Brief History of Webster with Historical and Cultural Resources

Introduction

History gives us a view of how societies, institutions, and human behaviors change over time. Understanding history improves our decision making, policy development, and problem solving by helping to anticipate challenges, avoid past mistakes, and make informed choices.

We are fortunate that Webster has such a long and rich history to guide us. This history has also fostered a culture—a way of life—that creates much of what makes Webster such a special and increasingly unique place in New Hampshire. Our historically significant resources—old buildings, stone walls, etc.—remind and influence us in our current lives. They give us a quality of life through that sense of continuity to time and place, and a reminder that we will one day hand that torch to future generations. It is our challenge to manage the inevitable impact of growth on Webster, and to plan for a future which maintains that good quality of life for the generations to come.

This chapter seeks to highlight local historic and cultural resources, to indicate why they are important, to suggest how they should be preserved, and to identify tools and resources for that task.

History of Webster

Historical records tell us the first settlers of this region were the Eastern and Western Abenaki tribes. Within this tribe were smaller bands: Androscoggin, Cowasuck, Missiquoi, Pennacook, Penobscot, Pequawket, etc. The word Abenaki means *People of the Dawn Land*, who also called themselves Alnobak, meaning *Real People*. These tribes lived and roamed from Connecticut to Quebec.

In the early 1600's, the British government wanted to take advantage of the seemingly limitless resources in the New World, but lacked the financial resources to fund colonization in North America. Instead, King James granted charters to two groups of London merchants to colonize the Massachusetts Bay and Virginia. Privatization of government functions is nothing new. This history also demonstrates that surrendering power to gain riches might not end as planned.

By 1619, the Puritans in Leiden, Holland contracted with the Massachusetts Bay charter merchants to settle there. The first arrived on the Mayflower in 1620. The Puritans' objective was not to gain riches, but to isolate their religion from outside influences. This plan could not withstand the test of time. The trickle of immigrants soon became a flood, so great that by 1634, ship logs no longer recorded passenger names, just the number on board.

These "newcomers" were mostly farmers (called "planters" or "husbandmen" in the day) who came with their own religious beliefs and a mission to obtain free land. As we know, farming will feed a family, and surplus will feed a wallet. So, these farmers (and speculators, and others,

and all their descendants) maintained a persistent pursuit to enlarge their acreage and their income.

England was pleased to discover the colonies had an abundant source of trees over 250 feet tall. The royal Navy needed them for ship masts, and by a 1691 royal decree, white pines greater than 24" in diameter (later reduced to 12") were restricted for the king's use. Before a settler could clear his land, a Surveyor Deputy would mark trees with three hatchet slashes, then a Mast-Master and crew would chop them down, carefully rig them to mast wheels, and drive them to ports. The king's "Broad Arrow Pines" were harvested until the American Revolution.

By 1732, settlements ranged along the seacoast and rivers from Maine to Georgia. In this year, a group of Massachusetts residents petitioned the Massachusetts Bay government to build a new plantation north of Rumford (now Concord, New Hampshire). They were granted seven square miles, originally named the Plantation at Contoocook, and re-named Boscawen in 1760.

This was the outpost of civilization, with only unbroken wilderness from here to Canada. The first comers in this new plantation settled on the eastern side, on the plain alongside the Merrimack River. A few settled across the river in what is now Canterbury, and it was decades more before Hopkinton, Warner, and Salisbury were settled.

The first settlers who ventured west beyond Beaver Dam Brook (into what is now Webster) were Thomas Cook, who was killed by Indians in 1745. Edward Emery settled his family before 1754, when an Indian uprising forced him to abandon his homestead. Emery was killed by Indians in 1756.

Sometime after 1760, only the Corser family lived west of Beaver Dam Brook. In his journal, Enoch Little Jr. writes that he came to Little Hill with his parents in 1774. He describes an unbroken wilderness between them and his nearest neighbors, Mr. Corser on Corser Hill, and Capt. Peter Coffin on Water Street (in Boscawen).

By 1777, there were probably not more than ten legal voters in western Boscawen. These settlers had to travel more than five miles, through brooks, hills, and swamps, to attend the Meeting House in eastern Boscawen. They made several requests to build another meeting house closer to them in western Boscawen, but their efforts for local control were repeatedly rejected.

In 1791, seventy-one legal voters in western Boscawen petitioned the New Hampshire court to divide the town. This petition documented the rapidly growing number of legal voters in western Boscawen, alarming residents of eastern Boscawen who did not want the town divided. That year, voters agreed to build a new Westerly Meeting House on the east side of the Blackwater River.

The Westerly Meeting House (now the Webster Meeting House) was used for both civic and religious purposes, both of which were paid by resident taxpayers. In this same period, there

was a growing revolt of residents who belonged to other religions, or no religion at all, who objected to paying taxes to support a religious sect alien to their own beliefs. In 1819, New Hampshire passed the Toleration Act which prohibited public taxation to support a religion. This effectively drew the line between church and state, and the religious law enacted by Puritans two centuries earlier became history.

The Congregational Church of Webster, which had been the sole religious user of the Meeting House, withdrew and constructed a new church on Corser Hill in 1823. In 1844, the Christian Union Society cooperated with the town to remodel the Meeting House to comply with the Toleration Act. The renovation created a town hall for civic meetings on the first floor, and a church on the upper floor. This effort is a textbook example of the impact of New Hampshire's Toleration Act on the traditional architecture of New Hampshire.

By an act of the NH legislature, signed by the governor on 4 July 1860, all that part of Boscawen west of Beaver Dam Brook "is severed from said town, and made a body politic and corporate, by the name of Webster." It is not well documented why this finally happened 69 years after the first petition to divide was submitted to the court, although history suggests that local control and taxation issues are likely considerations. These issues continue to the present day.

The following decades were relatively unremarkable. A notable exception was local efforts to recruit for and contribute to the War of the Rebellion (Civil War).

Webster was dramatically reshaped following a major flood in 1936 and the great hurricane of 1938, which destroyed five covered bridges crossing the Blackwater River. In response to these disasters, in 1941, the Army Corps of Engineers constructed the Blackwater Dam. This project forever altered Webster. Using eminent domain, the Corps condemned approximately 1,100 acres in Webster to create a floodplain almost 13 miles long, more than five miles in Webster and stretching into Salisbury. Webster's town center was along the Blackwater River, the home of families, businesses, and the Meeting House and its cemetery. The Corps paid citizens and the town for the condemned buildings; some were abandoned, and some were moved.

The Corps paid the town for the Meeting House, and the town planned to abandon it. Instead, a group of citizens purchased it from the town, and had this 200-ton building moved through fields up a 10% incline for 3/4 of a mile to a new 186-foot higher location on Corser Hill. This was done using a single horse turning a progressively anchored capstan as it inched up the hill.

For the next 49 years, Webster did not have a municipal town hall. In 1989, voters approved the purchase of the Anderson Memorial Church and decommissioned Daniel Webster Grange Hall on Battle Street, and to build a connector between, to create a Town Hall Complex. Town offices were constructed on the lower level of the former church, with the Webster Public Library above. The former grange is now Webster's Town Hall, and today serves as a community center for town and committee meetings, voting, fund-raising suppers, exhibits, arts and craft sales, and many other public events.

Old Home Day has been celebrated in Webster nearly every year for more than a century. Governor Frank Rollins developed the concept in 1899, when the lure of industrial jobs in urban centers and free land in the West reduced populations in New Hampshire’s rural areas. The Webster Historical Society has hundreds of photos from Old Home Day, including several from 1925, and a large group photo of the 1991 gathering. In 1902, the Webster Old Home Day Committee and the Old Meeting House Cemetery Association collaborated to restore the Meeting House, by then in weathered condition. This was one of the earliest known acts of preservation in New Hampshire. They placed a bronze tablet over the front door, which proclaims the building to be *“A sacred legacy from the past. Guard it well.”*

At its height, over 120 communities celebrated Old Home Days, described as a “family reunion at a grand, Victorian scale” by Tom Curran of the New Hampshire Preservation Alliance. Old Home Day offers a unique and important opportunity to celebrate community life and meet with your neighbors.

The 172nd Field Artillery of the National Guard practiced in Sawyers Field on Little Hill each summer from 1928 to 1937.

In 1957, Massachusetts agreed to pay New Hampshire communities for lost property tax revenue caused by 15 flood control facilities constructed to prevent Merrimack River flooding that primarily benefits Massachusetts. The agreement included an annual payment for 70% of the lost property taxes, but the exact amount was not agreed upon. In the early 1990’s, Massachusetts capped its annual contribution, and in following years, paid some or nothing. This led to a prolonged dispute. In 2022, Massachusetts agreed to pay nearly \$3.5 million in arrears, and to develop a formula to determine future reimbursements.

Per Wikipedia, Webster’s land mass is approximately 28.8 square miles. As of the 2026 Webster Town Report, this acreage is taxed as follows:

Taxable Land	Acres	Percent of Total
Residential	2,689.98	13.99%
Current Use & Conservation	12,007.68	62.47%
Commercial/industrial	111.20	0.58%
<i>Total taxable acreage</i>	<i>14,808.86</i>	<i>77.04%</i>
Non-taxable Land		
U.S. Government	1,143.11	5.95%
Water	371.20	1.93%
Tax Exempt	2,898.07	15.08%
<i>Total non-taxable acreage</i>	<i>4,412.38</i>	<i>22.96%</i>
Total Acreage	19,221.24	100.00%

In addition to other revenue sources, seventy-seven percent of Webster's taxable acreage funds 100% of the Town of Webster, and Webster's portion of the Merrimack Valley School District, the state school tax, and Merrimack County.

From the first settlers to current day, Webster has been a rural and agricultural town hosting a wide array of commercial enterprises: mills producing lumber, shingles, clothespins, grist and grain, and nails; shops of blacksmiths, cobblers, dry goods, machinists, landscaping, greenhouse, and farm supplies; a recreational campground; an auto re-seller. There are also many home-based businesses: farmers, loggers, cabinet makers, furniture restorers, long-arm quilting, auto and small-engine repair and towing, accountants, plumbers, electricians, engineers, hairdressers, massage, home cleaners, bait shop, and a wine maker.

Historical Sites, Artifacts, and Records

Webster is home to many historical sites. The 1791 Webster Meeting House is one of only four remaining 18th century meeting houses in New Hampshire—and the only one in the upper Merrimack Valley—that remains in nearly original condition. The last remaining nine-foot Mast Wheels were restored in the 1970's, and now on display at the Webster Meeting House. In 1985, Webster had two historic buildings listed in the National Register of Historic Places: the Webster Meeting House, and 1823 Webster Congregational Church. The Meeting House was added to the New Hampshire Register of Historic Places in 2020.

Webster maintains a Veterans Memorial, at the corner of Allen Road and Battle Street, dedicated to Webster residents who served in major conflicts since World War I. The park on Battle Street, behind the Webster Elementary School, is dedicated to Sgt. William Roy "Billy" Pearson, who was killed in Vietnam in 1972. The Battle Street bridge across the Blackwater River is dedicated to Sgt. William John Tracy Jr., who was killed in Kuwait in 2003.

There are several historic cemeteries in Webster: three active and maintained cemeteries, one maintained farm-family burial yard, and an unmaintained "lost" cemetery. Each year, Webster's cemetery sexton places a flag on the graves of patriots, and school children adorn them with flowers following a Memorial Day school program.

Beaver Dam Cemetery, on Long Street, is likely the oldest active cemetery, with more than 433 known burials. Maintenance of this cemetery is shared by both Boscawen and Webster. The earliest inscribed burial here is 1818, although the earliest known but not inscribed burial was not long after 1779. Riverdale Cemetery, on Tyler Road, was first a family burial yard, with the earliest inscribed burial in 1802. Riverdale is an active cemetery with more than 485 known burials. Clough-Sanborn Cemetery, on Clough-Sanborn Hill Road, is an inactive farm-family burial yard of the Clough family; the earliest of its 12 known burials is 1803.

In 1911, the Town of Webster purchased land between Allen Road and Pleasant Street for Corser Hill Cemetery. In 1941, to make way for the Blackwater Dam project, burials were disinterred from Old Meeting House Cemetery, located beside the Webster Meeting House on

the Blackwater River. Most graves were moved to Corser Hill, with a few to Beaver Dam at family request. Corser Hill is an active cemetery with more than 1,365 known burials. The oldest inscribed burial is 1776, which had been moved from Old Meeting House Cemetery.

The “lost” cemetery is across Pleasant Street from Corser Hill Cemetery. In 1878, it was noted to be overgrown with large trees, but some graves were still seen. This cemetery was never maintained by the town, and nothing is visible today. Research suggests this was the Corser family burial yard, with the earliest burial possibly in 1767, when William Corser and his 10-year old son William Jr. drowned in Great Pond (now Walker Pond) “by the bursting asunder of a birch canoe.” William’s eldest son, Asa Corser, made it safely to shore, and in 1777, was a drummer in the Battle of Bennington during the American Revolution.

There are dozens of veterans in Webster’s cemeteries who served in the Revolutionary War, War of 1812, Civil War, World Wars I and II, Korea, and Vietnam. They are alongside those who served their community and families: first settlers, ministers, blacksmiths, cabinet makers, millmen, farmers, teachers, town employees, and more.

A significant number of old homes are being preserved by their owners in Webster today. Forty-three of these homes predate 1800, and 88 predate 1900. Older homes richly contribute to the character of Webster, and their maintenance and preservation should be encouraged.

New Hampshire RSA 79-D allows towns and cities to grant a renewable 10-year preservation easement to historic barn owners, which reduces the assessed value of the building. Webster currently has two barns in preservation easements. The New Hampshire Preservation Alliance Historic Barn Preservation Program offers grants, tax incentives, and technical assistance to help barn owners preserve and maintain historic agricultural structures.

A striking feature of Webster’s landscape is the network of stone walls. Many continue to flank Webster’s roads and define long-standing property boundaries, while others meander into the woods where once they bordered farm fields or colonial roads now overgrown with trees. This network of stones is a map of old New England, and should be protected and preserved.

Many of Webster’s roadways have significant histories. For example, an act of the legislature in 1769 directed the construction of “The Province Road” as the first east-west highway across the state, connecting Boscawen with Fort No. 4 in Charlestown. This project included Province Road (off Battle Street, and later discontinued for the Blackwater Dam floodplain) and Dublin Road (a portion of Little Hill Road).

In 1976, Battle Street (NH Rt. 127) was designated as a central portion of the Currier and Ives Scenic Byway that runs from Salisbury to Warner, becoming one of several picturesque New Hampshire “Yankee Trails.” Webster’s highlights along this trail are the Meeting House, Congregational Church, Webster Town Hall, farms, open fields, and the Blackwater Dam and floodplain. Today, Bashan Hollow, Gerrish, and Mutton Roads have been designated Scenic

Roads by a town vote. A state ordinance serves to protect the trees and stone walls on scenic roads, and a public hearing with utility companies is required before trees may be cut.

The Corps of Engineers describes the floodplain as an historic and culturally rich area because of its early role in the town. Webster Historical Society produced a guide for a walking tour of old Webster that follows a series of granite markers noting the site of structures that were lost. The floodplain also provides many recreational opportunities: hiking/walking trails, canoeing and kayaking, horseback riding, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, hunting, and fishing.

Today's records will one day become history. For example: birth, marriage and death records, town reports, meeting minutes, property descriptions, invoices, maps, photos, journals, newspapers, and so much more. Accurate history suffers when records are destroyed, either unintentional by fire or natural disaster, or intentional such as "I'm just cleaning up." We cannot know today what may be of critical importance in future to prove ownership, citizenship, liability, inheritance, etc. Record preservation is a gift to all those who follow us.

Town Hall records are typically stored in a vault room, many of which are unique and exist nowhere else. In recent years, Webster has implemented a digital archive system to save these records from loss, and to aid in records research.

The Webster Historical Society has a growing collection of scanned records and artifacts related to the history of Webster. These include town reports, some of The Grapevine, photos, journals, oral histories, the Mast Wheels, antique farm equipment, and more. The Society also continues to document our forefathers, their lives, achievements, homes, genealogy, service, and their final resting place.

Economic Growth

Gradual and persistent erosion of historical character can result from incremental changes to buildings and land. The goal of a Master Plan is to guide economic growth while preserving Webster's historic features and important cultural and natural resources to maintain that good quality of life for current and future residents. Webster can achieve this with thoughtful planning that carefully avoids large population increases and cluster housing, which would forever alter Webster's rural nature, and increase the cost for necessary government services.

The changes to Webster through the years, both subtle and dramatic, have significantly narrowed options for economic growth. Construction of the Blackwater Dam removed about 1,100 acres from community development and tax revenue for Webster. Sweeping open farm fields once offered breathtaking vistas to surrounding peaks for artists and photographers. Local swimming spots have become private property or gated for liability protection. The only major roadway in Webster (NH Rt. 127) is now the center of a designated scenic byway. The development of the Pillsbury Lake District alerted the town to the problems of uncontrolled development; Webster adopted zoning in 1978, and subdivision regulations in 1993.

Webster's scenic byways offer few attractions and no activities, leaving Webster a drive-by and not a destination. This could improve simply by signage and advertising. There are many adventures for the outdoor enthusiast, particularly in Cogswell Woods on the Blackwater Dam floodplain. The Webster Meeting House maintains open hours during summer, and has applied for a NH Historical Highway marker to attract more visitors.

Increasingly through the years, residents are employed out of town and Webster is their bedroom community. Many residents are not engaged in any town affair, except perhaps to vote and, for some, with the schools. That sense of home and belonging is eroding, which will be a problem when those who feel no vested interest in Webster vote against the community's best interests to keep their own dollar.

Developing that vested interest and maintaining Webster's rural character could be achieved by economic development efforts focused on home-based businesses. Examples include child care, farm markets, B&B's, agri-tourism, and more in-town activities, much like the free movies at the Library. A volunteer coordinator could regularly organize speakers or coordinate dances, games, knitting circles, etc., which would attract a wide variety of townsfolk to learn of and engage with local businesses, and socialize with their neighbors to improve community spirit. Businesses and events could be advertised on a community calendar in the town's website.

Webster does a good job of improving its environmental footprint. Residents use the recycling facilities at the jointly owned Hopkinton-Webster Transfer Station. Recyclables are sold, providing revenue to offset taxpayer cost for waste disposal, and reducing the volume and cost of sending trash to landfills. To encourage residential solar arrays, in 2011 voters approved excluding their value from residential taxation. In 2017, Webster installed a solar array to offset the cost of municipal electric bills, and through the years, installed energy-efficient lighting, heating, and cooling systems in municipal buildings.

Summary

Webster has a rich history, complete with heroes and scoundrels, full of jubilant achievements and heart-breaking loss, of disasters endured and overcome, of contentious public issues and community resolve, of residents sharing skills and working together to build a better life for all.

Despite our close proximity to larger populations and commercial sprawl, Webster remains an oasis in an increasingly crowded world. This place of peace and safety is not only ours, but a gift to our future generations. Preserving and teaching our history is their guide to keeping that quality of life and community spirit we cherish in Webster.

Suggestions for how historic and cultural resources should be preserved:

- Maintain assistance for and promote the local historical society.
- Maintain assistance for and promote Old Home Day.
- Implement a program to track cemetery lots and burials.

- Promote historical sites and local activities.
- Encourage preservation easements for historical barns.
- Maintain five-acre minimum lot size to discourage dense housing and destruction of forests and fields.
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Suggestions for tools and resources for that task:

- Adopt national building codes to improve property values and decrease insurance premiums.
- Create residential-only zones (prevent another CoPart in a residential neighborhood).
- Restrict high-volume and heavy-weight traffic businesses to designated zones.
- Increase zoning enforcement on illegal, dangerous, and unsightly properties.
- Encourage home-based businesses that improve local tax revenue and retain Webster's rural nature.
- Add signage and advertise activities and historical locations.
- Develop and encourage more community events.
- Create a town news feed and calendar on the town's website as a one-stop place to find local businesses and events.
- Create a volunteer coordinator position that seeks volunteers for any town need, and to maintain the town news feed and calendar.
- Develop a beach for residents.
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