

COVENTRY, CONNECTICUT

A SHORT HISTORY

Coventry, Connecticut - - now a suburban-rural community of 8900 located 18 miles east of Hartford - - was once a part of the area that the Mohegan Indians reserved for their fishing and hunting grounds.

Fields, hills and valleys were annually burned over to give fresh feeding grounds to wild animals that came to feed and furnish a supply of food for the red men. Because of the cleared land, travel by ox-cart was made easier and the land also attracted the settlers.

Claims to ownership of the land were based on the last will of Attawanhood, third son of Uncas, and known as Joshua. In his last will, dated March 10, 1676, Joshua deeded over a large territory to a number of English legatees from the Hartford area. These men proceeded to convey rights to William Pitkin, Joseph Talcott, William Whiting and Richard Lord, to settle what is now Coventry. Nathaniel Rust, who had previously settled in Coventry, was later added to that list.

The first permanent settlers arrived about 1700. Samuel Burchard and Benjamin Howard were early settlers, Burchard having the distinction of building the first house, located on the south side of the pond, now known as Lake Wangumbaug, or Coventry Lake. Two brothers from Hartford, John and Samuel Meskins, recorded staying at the Burchard house in 1709 when they came to Coventry to round up their horses which had been branded in Hartford, then turned loose on Coventry's good pasture land to forage.

In 1706, the General Assembly granted permission for a committee of three to lay out the township and divide it into house "lots" as they saw fit.

In October, 1711, the General Court passed another act that enlarged the committee, giving it the power to "contrive for the procuring of a settled minister of the Gospel in said town, in the best way and manner possible." It also ordered and enacted that the town should be named "Coventry," and the brandmark for the horses should be "1-1."

The town was finally incorporated in 1712.

The General Assembly was petitioned for permission to lay a tax upon the land for the support of the minister, and for the powers and privileges of a town. There was no distinction made between civic and ecclesiastical matters; both functions were integral parts of the early Connecticut town.

It is reported that there were 16 families in Coventry in 1712; 60 years later, during the Revolutionary war era, the population was 2056. The first census, in 1790, showed a population of 2130; the lowest population recorded was in 1931, with 1551.

The first minister, Rev. Joseph Meacham, arrived soon after 1710 and served about 40 years as pastor of the church, and, after a school was built, was hired as the teacher.

The inconvenience of going so far to worship, especially in bad weather, prompted the settlers in the north and west sections of the Town to plan for a meeting house of their own. So, in October 1740, the North Coventry Parish was incorporated and the first meeting was held the following December. Prior to that, in 1738, arrangements were made for a school and burial ground.

The Second Congregational Church was organized in 1745. Over the years many changes have taken place in both the First and Second Congregational Churches organization, as well as the buildings.

Town meetings and elections were held in the two churches, as late as the 1930's in the Second Congregational Church.

The first records of a Methodist Society in Coventry date to around 1822, and the church building itself was erected in 1867 at the corner of Main and Mason Streets.

In 1859, the first Mass was offered, celebrated in the home of Jeremiah Crowley, near the railroad station. In 1877, ground was broken for a church building and the church was dedicated on Thanksgiving Day of that year, known as St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church, on School St. That building still stands, but a new church was built in the 1960's, on Main St.

Little attention was paid to the roads during the early days; most of them were improved Indian trails until about 1800.

The farmsteads were miniature manufacturing towns, and the farmer raised the wool and flax which was processed and manufactured into cloth and blankets, and years for knitting. The stock and vegetables were raised and prepared for consumption; the hides were tanned and made into footwear for the family. Later, dressmakers, milliners and showmakers provided services at the homes.

Waterpower gave impetus to industry. As early as 1716, arrangements were made with one Jonathan Hartshorn for the building and maintaining of a grist mill for grinding the settlers' corn. The old mill stone near the Sutures Factory on Monument Hill marks this spot.

It was not until the early 1800's that machine shops, mills and factories sprang up along the Mill Stream between the Lake and the Willimantic River. The following articles have been recorded as having been manufactured: cheap wool hats for slave trade, satinets, goods with cotton warp, good woolfill, cloth dressing and fulling, hooks and eyes, gun cartridges, cotton pickers, cotton yarn, cotton cloth, cotton batting and sewing silk. In the late 1800's, the list included the manufacture of paper boxes, cartridges, silk and wool, and, after 1900, glass lenses, wagons and hubs, and paper goods.

In the second society along the Skungamaug River there were saw mills, grist mills and a glass factory, many of the products of which are of great value today. Now, most of the mills are gone and other types of industry have taken their place.

Early transportation was by ox cart or horse drawn vehicle. Early in 1800, toll roads were opened, and Coventry was on the stagecoach routes from Hartford to Boston, passing through the northern part of town, and the route from Hartford to Providence through the southeastern part.

The town was served by two railroads: the New York-New England system was built in 1849, running from Hartford to Willimantic and no longer used; the Central Vermont system was built in 1850 and still runs freight but no longer stops in Coventry. The trolley car came in 1909, running from Willimantic to the Lake, and operated until November 1926, when buses were put in service, and later abandoned.

Mail came by horseback until the stages ran through and delivered it, then later by train, now, by motor transport. The first post office was at a site on the hill west of the Second Congregational Church, established in 1810 with Silas Hubbard as the first Postmaster. Over the years, there have been times when the post office was located in either a home or a commercial building. Rural delivery was established in the early 1900's, and is still in effect.

Ten school districts were established in the town and district school committees ran the schools in each district as late as 1907. The committees collected taxes in their districts for the operation of the schools, and set the terms of school from eight weeks per term in some districts, to as many as 16 weeks per term in others.

There is evidence in some old books of a library prior to 1800. One such entry reads: "Coventry Social Library No. 1A." What is now known as the Booth-Dimock Library started as the South Coventry Library Association in 1880. It became a "free" library in 1900, and in 1911 was named beneficiary in the will of Henry Dimock. The building, on Main St., was erected in 1912. The Porter Library, on the Boston Turnpike in South Coventry, started with a single donation and grew through other donations and subscriptions. It is housed in the Church Community House.

Coventry was served by telephones as early as 1903, when the service was subleased to neighborhood groups. In 1916, service became connected with a Willimantic exchange, with nine subscribers and wires running from house tops and trees. In 1913, the handcrank phones were replaced with common battery instruments. In 1949, the town received its own exchange with a dial office.

-Historical data compiled by Margaret E. Jacobson