

Chapter 3

CANTERBURY HISTORY

Canterbury's future as a town, envisioned in this Plan for Tomorrow, is linked to its past development and heritage of over 250 years of community.

Like many towns in New England, Canterbury was created by grant of the British Crown to friends and political supporters of the King. What is now Canterbury, Northfield, and Loudon was granted by George II in 1727 to 200 persons in 80 acre lots. The first settlers arrived in 1733, and by 1742 about 30 families had established residence.

In the early years of settlement, in the midst of the French and Indian Wars, conflict with the Indians was a principal worry for residents. A fort and trading post, located close to the present intersection of Route 132, Center Road and Carter Hill provided protection and a hub of economic life. Most residents of Canterbury during this period lived within two miles of the safety offered by the fort.

By 1773 the threat of Indian warfare had decreased and residents living in the southeastern part of the grant, having grown weary of traveling relatively long distances, petitioned and were granted the right to form the separate Town of Loudon. In 1780, for similar reasons of distance and convenience, Northfield was chartered as a separate town. Despite losses of population to both Loudon and Northfield, by 1790 Canterbury reported a population of 1,048.

In 1792, a seminal event occurred which distinguishes Canterbury to this day. The Shakers arrived to establish a settlement on a hill in the eastern part of Town. This religious sect, brought to the United States from England by its founder, Mother Ann Lee, prospered in Canterbury and by 1850 numbered over 300 members. Canterbury's initial receptiveness to the Shakers also may have encouraged the migration from Warner of another sect, the Osgoodites, in 1820. The Osgoodites made their homes in Canterbury until their dissolution about 50 years later.

By 1820, immediately preceding the Civil War, Canterbury's population had risen to nearly 1700. Following the Civil War, however, talk of better land and opportunity to the west and, for some, in the mills to the south began a gradual and steady decline in New Hampshire's agriculture base and rural populations. The allure of fertile soil and land grants offered to veterans of the Civil War dispersed many of the Town's residents to Ohio, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, and other midwestern states. That decline in population was not to reverse itself until 1930, by which time Canterbury's population had fallen to 505 residents.

In April of 1943, tragedy befell the Town Center when a midnight fire swept out of control and most of its buildings, including the Congregational Church built in 1825, were

destroyed. When a shaken group of townspeople faced the wreckage the next day, they rallied their spirits to conceive a new vision for the Center. Many planning and discussion meetings ensued, and ultimately, with volunteer labor and fund-raising a new fire station, Parish House and church were built. The damaged Town Hall was moved to its present location and restored.

The 1930s to the 1950s saw moderate population growth and increasing awareness of change, and by 1952 Canterbury had established a planning board and adopted zoning. With the adoption of zoning in 1952, Canterbury took its place in the forefront of New Hampshire communities providing leadership in land use regulation. In the 1950s and 1960s the Town continued to grow moderately, and in the 1970s, as the attractiveness of life in Town became known, Canterbury's population growth accelerated.

In 1971 the Town adopted its first Plan for Tomorrow. In 1972 the annual Town meeting adopted a zoning map based on topography, water resources and soils. Although there have been minor alterations to the Town Zoning Map since it was formally established and approved in 1972, comprehensive revision of the Town Zoning Map has not occurred subsequently.

Spurred by additional growth throughout the 1970s, in 1978 the Town passed one of New Hampshire's first growth control ordinances as a temporary measure to address what many perceived as rapid and unfocused change. In 1979, by unanimous vote of Town meeting, the ordinance was amended and adopted as a vehicle for community planning. During the period of rapid growth in the 1980s, the Town of Canterbury was frequently cited by growth management advocates as an example of a small community that had sought to grapple with unpredictability and highly cyclical aspects of development with a comprehensive ordinance and limitation of building permits.

During the 1980s several important civic building renovation projects occurred, including moving the Town offices to the Sam Lake House, erecting the bandstand in the Town center, and replacement of the slate roof on the Elkins Library and renovations to the children's room in the basement. In 1987 the Town took a major step toward environmental efficiency and responsibility by opening the Canterbury Recycling Center, operating at the transfer station. In 1989 a meeting room was added to the Sam Lake House.

The trend of progress and preservation continued in the 1990s with the completion of a new soccer field and the addition to the Elementary School. The sadness of the passing of the last Shaker sister in 1992 was lessened by the celebration of the 200th anniversary of the Shaker Village in 1992, and its designation as a National Historic Landmark in 1993. Cable TV was introduced in the Town in 1992. Conservation projects such as the Intervale Boat Launch in 1994, The Riverland Walk and Observation Platform in 1996, and the addition of the Kimball Pond and Spender Meadow protected areas in 1997 evidenced that Canterbury could continue protecting its heritage and environment.