

Richmond History

The Town of Richmond, Washington County, Rhode Island has a rich and varied history. The land it presently occupies, bounded on three sides by rivers, was originally inhabited by indigenous people known as the Narragansetts. Hence the area was known, after the arrival of the Europeans, as Narragansett Country and more specifically as Little Narragansett. Roger Williams had settled in the Providence area in the early 1630's and from there and Newport settlers continued south and west to conquer the wilderness.

The Rev. J.R. Irish writes in his 1876, Historical Sketch of the Town of Richmond R.I.,

"The history of this town, during its settlement, can be traced only in connection with the history of Westerly, as it was a part of that territory for sixty-nine years after its organization. Still earlier, the entire area, from Narragansett bay to the Pawcatuck River, and the bay at its mouth (early known as little Narragansett) was a subject of controversy, being claimed in turn by Connecticut and Massachusetts, in opposition to the claim of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations."

The controversy arose because in 1660 Connecticut had received a royal charter from the King of England embracing all the territory from Narragansett Bay and the Pawcatuck River westward to the Pacific Ocean. The following year the King issued a charter to Rhode Island extending its limits westward to the Pawcatuck River. Authorities in each colony then laid claim to the whole. To add insult to injury, in 1642 a colony from Massachusetts had settled in Wickford with subsequent claims to lands in Narragansett Country.

The dispute was settled in 1665 when the King dissolved the charters, assumed governance, and referred to the area as King's county or province, today's Washington County, or as it is commonly known, 'South County'.

"In May 1669, it was organized by the General Assembly of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, under the name of Westerly, as the fifth town in the colony. Westerly, as then organized, embraced what is now the four towns: Westerly, Charlestown, Richmond and Hopkinton."

Charlestown was set off as a separate town in 1738, and Richmond separated from Charlestown in 1747.

Settlement, however, was a slow process. To stimulate settlement a commission of the General Assembly in 1709 sold certain vacant lands known as the 'Shannock purchase' to approximately 27 persons who then settled in the area. These early settlers included

the Barbers, Browns, Clarkes (Clarks), Hoxsies, Kenyons, Utters, Crandalls, Teffts and Perrys, names still common in the area.

It is of interest to note that these settlers were a conservative lot. They did indeed support the Revolutionary War, sending troops and setting aside monies for the manufacture of munitions. However, in March of 1787 they voted against the adoption of the Constitution. Of the 77 legal voters in the town at that time, 69 voted. The vote was 68 nays and 1 aye!

Initially the primary means of livelihood was farming. Dairy, wool, poultry and cranberries were some of the profitable crops. Due to its inland location and origin Richmond has been for most of its history rural and agricultural in nature. Like Charlestown it has had no true center, but rather a number of villages usually sited by a waterway. The waterpower available led to the development of mills, at first gristmills, but by the 19th Century mills for the production of cotton and wool. The first textile mill was founded in 1810 in Hope Valley, then one in Wyoming in 1814, and in 1842 the Carolina Mill of Oliver Hazzard on the site of the 1802 Nichols grist mill. But it was not only textiles that were manufactured, there were iron factories in both Wyoming and Woodville, a leather tannery, boot and shoe shop and a mica factory in Shannock, and a saw mill in Arcadia. All the villages existing today, including Alton, Arcadia, Carolina, Hope Valley, Kenyon, Shannock, Usquepaugh, Woodville, and Wyoming had mills of one type or another. The productivity of the residents led to the existence of a number of village stores and with the inception of service by the Stonington and Providence railroad in 1837, with stops at Wood River Junction (1874) and Shannock Mills, many products for the home were made available.

In 1806 the first schoolhouse was built and in 1826 Bell School was constructed in Tug Hollow. The town was divided into 15 school districts each with their own schoolhouse. It was not until 1934 with the construction of the Richmond Elementary School that these districts were rendered obsolete. Then in the 1960's Chariho Regional High school became a reality in Wood River Junction.

During the Civil War the town sent 104 men for service and raised over \$21,000.00 to support the Union cause. Such patriotic service was seen in all the wars that followed and continues today.

The Twentieth Century brought changes to Richmond. With the movement of textile mills to the south the vast majority of the town's mills were shut by mid-century. A few persisted into the 1960's but not as major employers. Only the Kenyon and Alton mills survive.

Farming has suffered the same fate. With the advent of Interstate 95 residents could move easily to jobs outside of Richmond and simultaneously those looking for a more rural setting were attracted to the town. Land became more valuable for development than for agriculture, especially in the latter 1970's, and the use of Richmond as a "bedroom" community has resulted in the villages being less self-sufficient and communal. The number of housing units has increased by 200% over the last 30 years. In 1774 the population of the town was 1234, by 1870 it had grown to 2064, 1990 to 5300, and in 2000 to 7222, and it is continuing to grow.

Richmond has given the state some important citizens. Perhaps the most famous was Thomas A. Tefft, an architect, born 1826 just off present Rt.112 near the Washington County Fairgrounds. Tefft designed many buildings in Rhode Island and Massachusetts including the Boston and Providence Railroad Depot. Captain Marcus Whitford, USN, born in Tug Hollow, was recipient of the first Rhode Island Star awarded in 1957. Presently, Richmond is the home of the Honorable Frank Williams, Chief Justice of the State Supreme Court.

- Submitted by Dr. Richard E. Wolke, Richmond Historical Preservation Commission