

Our Town – A Short History of Bedford, New York

On December 23, 1680 twenty two puritans walked up the “cart path”, now known as Long Ridge Road, from Stamford, Connecticut and purchased 7,673 acres from seven Indian Chiefs. For an assortment of cloth, blankets and wampum valued at 45 pounds, 16 shillings and 6 pence, these “proprietors” became the new owners of the first purchase known as “ye Hopp Ground.” At that time, it was simply a plot of land which later was named Bedford. Additional purchases made through 1723 comprise the six square miles that is Bedford today. Originally a Connecticut patent, a land dispute placed Bedford in New York by royal decree in 1700. The town consists of three hamlets, each with its own distinctive history.

Bedford Village is the original settlement. In March 1681, the proprietors walked back to the land they purchased the winter before. Following New England tradition, a common of about three acres, now about a third of that size, was laid out with space for a meeting house, a burial ground and a grist mill on the Mianus River. House lots and lots for “pasture or tillage” were laid out around the common for each proprietor. The villagers were a sturdy, self-reliant group and they made all that they needed, trading with the Indians when necessary, growing crops and hunting game for food.

During the revolutionary war, Bedford Village lay between the British and American lines and was considered “neutral ground.” However, on July 11, 1779, the entire village, with the exception of one house, was burned by 400 horsemen under the command of Lt. Col. Samuel Birch. Today, all that stands around the original village green was built in the years after the Revolution.

Bedford was the largest community in northern Westchester at this time and shared half-shire and county seat status with White Plains for much of its first 200 years. The 1787 Bedford Court House, Westchester’s oldest, extant government building, is a testament to that time. The coming of the railroad in 1847 made travel easier and so in 1870, the Bedford Court House ceased to be a county court and all county business was conducted in White Plains. The railroad stop was established northwest of the village and called “Bedford Station.” Since transportation was the key to all business and commerce, growth and development shifted to the area closest to the railroad and Bedford Village remained a quiet village.

Originally known as Bedford Station, Bedford Hills grew up around the stop established there by the New York & Harlem Railroad. Farms had occupied the area for many years and the farmers sent their potatoes and apples by boat from Sing Sing on the Hudson, now Ossining, or overland by wagon to New York. In 1847, the railroad came and gave the area a name of its own and a post office. The speedier delivery of milk products to the metropolis permitted the growth of profitable dairy farming. W.B. Adams built his store next to the railroad and at his suggestion; the name of the town was changed to Bedford Hills on April 1, 1910. Bedford Hills is home to the Bedford Town House, built in 1927 and recently renovated. The New York State Women’s Reformatory was established there in 1892 in the hopes of reforming young, first time criminals. Also in Bedford Hills was the Montefiore Home of Bedford, a sanitarium for tuberculosis patients which later became the Hillcrest Home for orphaned children.

Katonah also grew up around the railroad but its most interesting history revolves around the building of the Croton Reservoir which caused the entire town to be moved a mile south to avoid being flooded. Although several hamlets existed prior to the railroad, in 1847 when the first trains came through, people moved and settled near the old Katonah station. In 1892 ground was broken for the new dam and the villagers learned that their land would be condemned. They quickly found a new site for their village and bought back from the City of New York their homes which they planned to move to the new village. The founding members of the Katonah Village Improvement Society were instrumental in planning the village and in April of 1897 the first train stopped at the new Katonah station and the postmaster delivered mail there. Today, many of the houses you see along Bedford Road and the Parkway date from 1847 while the town itself was established fifty years later.

Another community in the area that grew as a result of the railroad is Mount Kisco. In the summer of 1847, this first stop bore the name "New Castle". Many Bedford farmers asked why a stop located within Bedford's boundaries should be named for a town smaller than theirs. A group of them met to discuss the situation and at the suggestion of Stephen Wood who lived on Croton Lake Road, renamed the stop "Mount Kisco" because of the view he had "of that noble hill" as he rode into the depot. The town grew straddled on one side by the Town of Bedford and on the other by the Town of New Castle. In 1978, Mount Kisco declared its independence from both towns and became its own Village Town, establishing its own tax base and government.

The history and unique identity of each of these hamlets contribute to the town's character as a whole. Bedford Village as the first settlement, Bedford Hills as the hub of railway transportation and Katonah as a planned development, moved by the necessity of progress. Bedford Village and Katonah both contain historic districts which are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Development and changes in these districts are carefully watched by subcommittees of the Town, the Bedford Village Historic District Review Commission and the Katonah Historic District Advisory Board. Working in concert with property owners in these districts, these committees ensure the continued preservation, architectural integrity and aesthetics of these areas.