

Norfolk 170 Years Ago

“Norfolk is an elevated township, the central part of which is 35 miles northwest from Hartford; bounded north by the Massachusetts line, west by Canaan, east by Colebrook and Winchester and south by Goshen. It is nine miles in length from north to south and four and a half in breadth.

The settlement of Norfolk began in 1744. This township, and several of the adjacent ones, were owned by the then Colony of Connecticut; and they were severally sold at public vendue at Middletown in 1742. Timothy Horsford of Windsor took a deed of one right of 400 acres, which he retained. All the other proprietors relinquished their rights, and forfeited their first payment, which was 40 shillings on a right. The town was originally laid out in 53 rights, of which one was reserved for a parsonage, one for the benefit of schools, and one for the first minister. Timothy Horsford sold his right to Titus Brown, who afterwards removed to this town and died here.

The names of the first settlers were Titus and Cornelius Brown from Windsor; John Turner and Jedediah Richards from Hartford. They lived on Brown’s right. They were pious and exemplary families, and attended public worship in Canaan”.

In 1754, Norfolk was sold at public vendue at Middletown, the second time, excepting Brown’s right. Soon after, a number of families moved into the town, and the settlement made considerable progress. The town was incorporated in 1758; at this time there were 27 families. In 1761, the Rev. Ammi R. Robbins was ordained as the first minister. At the time of his settlement the number of families in the place had increased to 60. From this time there was a gradual increase of inhabitants, till about the year 1800, when the number of families had increased to about 290, comprising a population of 1,649. Since this period the spirit of emigration to the west has retarded and reduced the population. In 1810, the population was 1,441; in 1830, the population was 1,485, being an increase of 44 in twenty years.”

“This town is elevated and mountainous. The soil is a primitive gravelly loam, generally cold and stony, but has considerable depth, and affords good grazing. Formerly large quantities of sugar were made from the maple: more than 20,000 pounds have been manufactured in a single season; but since the land has been cleared by progressive settlements, and in consequence of the destruction of the maple trees by some tornadoes, the business has greatly declined. The dairy business comprises the principal interests of the town. A stream, called Blackberry River, runs near the center of the place, and a little westward of the Congregational church, falls over a ledge of rocks 30 feet in height. This is an excellent site for mills, of which there are several near this spot.

The accompanying engraving is a representation of the Congregational church, and most of the buildings in the immediate vicinity. This little village has a small open square, or green, in front of the church, and is uncommonly neat and beautiful in its general appearance. About half a mile north is another village, in which are two woolen and three scythe factories. There are, perhaps, in both places, about 30 dwelling houses, and 4 or 5 mercantile stores. The central part is 35 miles from Hartford, 17 from Litchfield, 42 from Hudson, and 60 from Albany.”

The author includes the following newspaper account:

“Litchfield, December 5, 1786.

We learn from Norfolk, that on the 23d of November, four wolves appeared in the neighborhood immediately after the good people had assembled to prefer their annual adorations, and as it was imagined those voracious animals intended an attack on the harmless tenants of the fold, information of their visit was sent to the place of worship, when about 80 men turned out to go in pursuit of, and destroy them. The whole of this formidable body, well armed, moved in a circular form to an adjacent mountain, the supposed retreat of these carnivorous unwelcome guests, and having by this judicious movement had the good luck to surround them, the whole were made prisoners; three surrendered at discretion; the other, having broken through their ranks, was shot in making his escape. The whole party then retired to an inn, and spent the day in joy and festivity. The coldness of the weather at the northward must certainly have compelled these creatures to take shelter in our woods.”

“The following inscription is from a monument in the burying ground, upwards of half a mile north of the Congregational church:

‘Rev. Ammi R. Robbins, a faithful minister of his beloved Lord. He was born in Branford, August 25, 1740 O.S. [old system, in other words, before the calendar was adjusted.], and graduated at Yale Coll. 1760. At the age twenty-one, he was ordained the first minister of Norfolk. He lived to bury all that called him to the charge, and with the anxious feelings of a father, addressed his flock as children. He was humble, yet zealous; peaceable, yet bold in his master’s cause. In the duties of his office, he was sincere, tender and affectionate. His doctrine and his life reflected credit on each other. And in his death, he strikingly exemplified that resignation to the divine will, which he steadily preached to others. When called for, he said ‘Let me go and receive mercy.’ He died on the 31st day of October, 1813, aged 73.’”