

Sandisfield: Celebrating Our Sestercentennial

1762-2012

One doesn't have to live long in a small New England town such as Sandisfield to become curious about its past. Why does this road go through this valley? How long did they quarry stone from that mountainside? When did they build that old house? Sometimes the answers are easily found; other times they take years of digging, reading old newspapers, researching deeds, asking questions of neighbors. Sandisfield's 250th anniversary is an occasion for learning more about our town, our buildings, our traditions, our forebears. Here's a capsule history to get you started.

Settlement to 1800

Sandisfield traces its beginning to 1735-36 when the Colonial administration granted land for four townships in an area they called Housatonic Township. Number 3 became Sandisfield. In order to appease Indians who had long hunted on it, the land was bought from Chief Konkapot for three barrels of cider and 30 quarts of rum and probably a sum of English money. A proper deed was drawn up and signed by the chief. In the era preceding European arrival, there is no evidence that Native Americans had a permanent presence in Sandisfield.

The original land grant owners, or proprietors, came primarily from Worcester and Middlesex counties. Some had received land from the Crown as a reward for meritorious service in the Colonial militia. It is unlikely that proprietors ever visited their wilderness properties. Their mission was to design the settlements. They arranged for surveys for roads and bridges and so-called house and farm lots (typically 60 acres per lot), as well as special areas for a church and minister, schools, and common areas or "greens." Most importantly, they needed to attract settlers who would buy their land and fulfill the Commonwealth's expansion goals. The original No. 3 grant was later augmented on three sides with additional acreage as a way to attract more settlers and to balance the populations between the townships.

The name Sandisfield was assigned to No. 3 at incorporation in honor of Lord Samuel Sandys (pronounced as sands), a British nobleman and politician who in 1761 was appointed First Lord of Trade and the Plantations, responsible for commerce with the colonies. By so naming this backwoods settlement, perhaps the proprietors made a politically smart gesture of appreciation to their overseers.

Almost 15 years passed before a capable pioneer leader was found to open the wilderness and to manage the settlement process – Daniel Brown (1698/99-c.1783), a native of Haverhill near Boston. His oldest son, Thomas (1726- 1811), arrived in Sandisfield first in the spring of 1750 and built his cabin probably where the New Boston Store stands today. The next year the elder Brown arrived with four other adult sons and several daughters to take charge. The Browns acquired much of the land which they sold to other settlers. The Browns also established a tavern or inn and a store and they built their main dwelling house and at least one mill at the place they called New Boston, all before March 6, 1762 when No. 3 was officially incorporated as the town of Sandisfield. In 1765, with a population of 409, Sandisfield was the tenth largest town in the county.

Besides Brown, the major original families (by 1765), mostly from Connecticut, included Adams, Ayrault, Bosworth, Cone, Deming, Hawley, Kilborne, Manley, Parsons, Pease, Sears (Mass.), Smith (Mass.), Spring (Mass.), Webster, and Wolcott. Two more waves of settler-families arrived before and after the Revolutionary War until about 1800 when the pace of arrivals slowed. Virtually all came from Connecticut as had a majority of the first families and many were already known to one another. They were lured by fertile albeit rocky land relatively close to their ancestral roots. By this time their smaller Connecticut farms, already a century old, were less productive. Their sons and daughters often married into their neighbors' families within the Congregational

church, creating an unusually close-knit and supportive society that endured for the next century and a half.

During the Revolution, Sandisfield was staunchly patriotic. According to military historian Elizur Yale Smith, some 240 Sandisfield men and boys, fathers and sons and brothers, served the cause. Most families sent men off to the war. For example, at least five Sages heeded the call. Meanwhile courageous wives and daughters and sisters remained to somehow manage large farms in desperate uncertainty while enduring great hardship. Innkeepers and residents in the Beech Plain gladly offered hospitality to Col. Knox's company of teamsters during their dramatic passage through in January 1776. Later, in 1786/7 during Shay's Rebellion, town sentiment supported the farmer-insurrectionists. To the consternation of many, the respected second Congregational minister, the Rev. Eleazer Storrs, openly sided with the Commonwealth. Many abandoned his ministry and joined an ascendant Baptist movement which remained strong for almost a century.

After the war, in 1780, Sandisfield's rapid growth resumed. By 1800 there were 1,857 residents, the fourth most populous Berkshire town, surpassed only by Pittsfield, Williamstown, and Sheffield. Judging from the numerous splendid surviving Federal-style houses built during this period, the people were both prosperous and optimistic.

The Nineteenth Century

Sandisfield entered the new century on a roll. Most of the good land was cleared for agriculture and was very productive. Historian George Shepard in 1885 wrote, "The early settlers turned their attention to raising cattle and some sheep, and a little later, butter and cheese became the staple articles." Abundant raw material (animal hides) and water power made for a flourishing tanning industry. The Kilborne mill, one of the first, stood near Montville (then called Slab City and later Mechanicsville). In 1797, 12 school districts were established to serve large families in every part of town. The schools had to be located within walking distance for local children.

In 1800, Eliakim Hull of Farmington, Conn., saw the potential and opened a big general store at Sandisfield Center where farm families could find practically anything that could be had at the time for sale or barter. The enterprising Hull made his store an attraction by installing the town's first post office (1807) and public library (1808). Sandisfield farmers were gaining a reputation for cheese-making and Hull encouraged them to increase production which he sold at his store. But Hull's leading product line was spirits, including locally distilled cider and rum and liquors. These were very popular and earned Sandisfield another not-so-wholesome reputation for expertise. It was said that by this time there were at least a dozen distilleries with a concentration near Spectacle Pond. Farmers took their crops for sale by wagon, for example to Hartford, returning with rum base for the distilleries.

The War of 1812 was not a popular cause in New England because these states enjoyed very good trade with England. Relatively few men joined the Massachusetts militia; however Josiah Wolcott, a prominent farmer from the Free Quarter section, served with distinction and later rose to the rank of Brigadier General.

The Rev. Levi White, writing the first history of Sandisfield in 1829, reported 230 homes, five stores, five churches, two post offices, three taverns, 18 various mills, "some of them extensive," and 13 schools in town. White also listed, amazingly, nine practicing physicians. Sandisfield at this time, with its complementary mix of agriculture, mills, and craftsmen, was well positioned to benefit from the inventions and productivity of the impending industrial revolution.

By the 1830s Sandisfield was experiencing its first outflow. Young families, members of the founding clans, were recruited by promoters to head west and establish their own farms. The lure of abundant, cheap, and very fertile farm land in New York state and Ohio, including the Connecticut Western Reserve section, was powerful. Ironically, they were heeding the same call their grandparents heard when they'd left their ancestral farmsteads for the Berkshires 70 years before. It was part of the great American expansion movement. Owing to a good economy back home their places were quickly filled by newcomers. However, Sandisfield would not be so fortunate after the next wave of emigrants 50 years later.

The 1840s was Sandisfield's golden period. The original settlements of New Boston and Sandisfield Center offered farm families social and economic amenities. Two new villages, Montville and West New Boston, emerged. Public buildings, handsome Greek Revival-style houses, and a grand new Baptist church and parsonage for two merged congregations sprouted seemingly overnight. This served the growing community of mill hands and foremen, blacksmiths and metal workers. Montville's "manufactories" made furniture, rakes, plane and scythe handles, and hoops for ladies' skirts as well as for toys, wheel spokes, barrel staves, wooden utensils, cheese boxes, and shingles.

New Boston village boasted its famous inn, three general stores, and several important mills, especially Albert Hull's tannery, said to be the most extensive in western Massachusetts. Several miles south of the village the hamlet of Colebrook River on the Farmington River was vibrant. The elegant Hawley Tavern (1798) there was renowned. "The River," as the village which straddled the state line was called, had a silk mill and a woolen mill, a fine wood products shop and even a post office for a few years in the 1870s. South Sandisfield and the Free Quarter sections remained primarily traditional farming and lumbering areas through the 19th century.

Butter and cheese, maple sugar, and lumber became big businesses. At one time Sandisfield produced 300,000 pounds of cheese and almost 100,000 pounds of butter per year. In addition to home consumption, large quantities of meats, hay, apples, cider, flax, potatoes, and other commodities were shipped by wagon to outside markets, especially Hartford. For a considerable time Sandisfield was the largest producer in the state of maple sugar. In 1885, an assessor's survey tallied at least 25,000 productive maple sugar trees. Virtually every farm had a sap house. The town was also widely known for lumber and later, in the 1890s, for charcoal (two kilns).

At Sandisfield Center Jabez Bosworth operated an important inn (1798-1835) while his neighbor, the prominent former Massachusetts Lt. Governor George Hull, continued his father's store and post office until 1862. Religion was a very important aspect of life. The meeting houses were also used for social and political events. Three Congregational meeting houses were built at the Center "on the rocks" (1757, c.1796, and 1852). Several stage lines converged at New Boston and at the Center, carrying daily mail and passengers, connecting Sandisfield to Connecticut and points north and west as far as Albany.

But the good times would not last. The Civil War (1861- 65), which exacted a horrible toll on this small town, was the turning point. At least 21 Sandisfield men were killed in that conflict, many of those as members of the all-Berkshire regiment, the Massachusetts 49th Volunteers. The unit was distinguished for its role in the dreadful battle of Port Hudson, Louisiana in 1863 where 76 members died.

Survivors returned home to a weakening farming economy and poor prospects. In the aftermath of the war a deep depression settled over the country further exacerbating local economic woes. In Sandisfield the selectmen and residents invested heavily in a promised railroad, the Lee & New Haven, intended to connect farmers with new markets. The scheme proved unfeasible and investors lost everything. Sandisfield lost about \$24,000 (equivalent to about \$500,000 today). Some farmers went bankrupt and had to sell their crops and livestock and ancestral farmsteads to pay off debt. Taxes increased while land values plummeted. By the late 1870s a full-scale exodus occurred from which Sandisfield has never recovered.

Sandisfield Center, once a beehive of economic and social activity, became a ghost, save for its beautiful meeting house. The Beech Plain, arguably the most productive farming section whose population supported four schools at one point, emptied; many roads were discontinued or abandoned. The situation wasn't much better along Town Hill Road, another locus of farming. In 1875-79, 36 Sandisfield farms were lost to delinquent taxes or unpaid mortgages. In 1876, Sandisfield set off its northwest corner to the new town of Monterey and with it lost part of its heritage and population.

It wasn't all gloom however. The villages of New Boston and Montville, which did not depend entirely on farming, fared better. New Boston real estate mogul Orlow Northway and Montville's Whitney brothers and their rake factory and other entrepreneurs kept things going and morale up. The Northways led an effort to build a beautiful

new Congregational chapel, "The Little Brown Church," in New Boston which was dedicated in 1879. In the 1880s the highly respected town clerk, teacher, correspondent and former state representative, George Shepard, persuaded the legislature to cover the town's outstanding (railroad) debt. Another prominent citizen, also a former state representative, Henry Wilcox, established a very successful dairy co-op in the old shingle mill in West New Boston in 1886 which operated until 1919. (The building (2012) is the home of the Silverbrook Café.) In 1892, Wilcox and Hen Manley and others organized an exciting agricultural fair in New Boston, drawing hundreds and commencing a tradition which continued for some time.

Nevertheless, the main story from the late 19th century was the steady population decline. From a still respectable level of about 1,500 in 1870 Sandisfield counted only 800 souls in 1890. Shrinkage continued, many people leaving the land to find factory work in the cities. In an 1893 historical essay, the Rev. Aaron Field lamented that the town's former glory and its residents' spirit was lost, its best talent dead or departed, and no one moving in. At the turn of the century virtually all of the riverside factories and tanneries and mills had closed. Only five schools opened for the 1903/04 school year. The 19th century, which opened with so much promise and energy, closed decidedly on the downswing.

The Twentieth Century to World War II

The mood of the public at the dawn of the new century was somber but realistic. Sandisfield's three economic pillars - agriculture, the mills, and small-scale manufacturing, were but memory. Gone too were the large Yankee farm families and the vibrant (Christian) social life.

Nevertheless, New Boston and Montville each could support two general stores. Four post offices and good stage lines served the town. Active churches survived in New Boston, Montville, and at the Center. The New Boston Inn still did a good business. Together with improved roads, dependable stage service, and telegraph and then telephone service (1911), Sandisfield was better connected to the larger regional towns, especially Winsted, than ever before.

At least one significant new factory opened in the late 19th century. The nationally known O. D. Case Co., of Hartford leased Northway's saw mill ("The Old Red Shop") and onetime Hotchkiss & Gladding cane chair factory in Roosterville to make school desks and furniture from native maple and beech wood. The operation closed and moved in 1904 after a run of 17 years.

On a stormy afternoon in May 1908, the venerable 3rd Congregational church at Sandisfield Center was struck by lightning and burned. Valiant residents managed to save some pews and artifacts but the loss of this edifice marked the absolute end of what had been a very robust economic and social center. From this point and for many decades the Center was essentially a summer residential compound for the affluent Swift-Atwater-Doty families of Poughkeepsie, N.Y. The Congregational Society rebuilt a chapel in 1909 in South Sandisfield on land donated by Sarah Webster Smith, surviving matriarch of two major early families there. But the destruction of the Center church was a terrible loss and a metaphor for the town's decline and misfortunes to that point.

The 1900 federal census listed 20 percent of the population (666) as immigrants. The trend accelerated in the early 1900s as new European immigrants including Finns, Russians, and Germans joined the previous wave of Irish to repopulate farms, especially in South Sandisfield. They were excited at the chance because their new situation was relatively much better than what they had left behind. They brought energy and a can-do attitude. A few of the established Yankee farms survived and continued to grow cash crops including even tobacco. But the principal agricultural activity was dairy. More than 50 farmers daily brought their milk to the Berkshire Creamery Association's facility in West New Boston for processing into cheese and butter.

Lumbering was also prominent. Starting in the 1870s companies such as Barnum & Richardson and Tiffany & Pickett contracted with Sandisfield land owners or frequently bought old farms to harvest timber to fuel booming Connecticut factories. The business however, had a darker side. Hard-living lumberjacks from "the south"

(Connecticut) earned Sandisfield the label of unruly.

Meanwhile, New Boston was “discovered” by weary residents of industrial Springfield, Hartford, Waterbury, and even New York City as a quaint, clean and relaxed place to spend a week or weekend. The New Boston Inn was usually fully booked and most nearby home owners eagerly accommodated the overflow by renting rooms in their named “cottages.” With the advent of the automobile and better roads in the late 1910s, demand increased and remained strong for another 20 years. No longer was Sandisfield a well-kept secret.

In the early 1930s a remarkable ski jump called Suicide Hill opened in New Boston. Billed as “the largest ski hill in the United States,” professional events drew huge crowds and gave a boost to the New Boston Inn and the general store as skiers and fans filled the rooming houses. The hill closed in 1938, reportedly the result of storm damage that summer. In the 1940s private summer camps were popular. The best known was Camp Woodcrest on Sears Road. The Lost Wilderness dude ranch on the Tolland town line had a loyal following. Sandisfield resorts/camps had faded by the early 1970s.

The village of Montville also experienced a rebirth. A “colony” of recently arrived Jews from eastern Europe, then living in squalid conditions in New York, was given an opportunity to resettle on old farms, particularly in northwest Sandisfield. The lack of outside support and meager resources and their limited know-how produced mixed results for this experiment. Families drifted into Montville, mostly, where they bought vacant houses and small farms. Some tried chicken farming with considerable success, and this became a solid local industry which lasted into the 1950s. Otherwise, typically, the men remained in the cities to work, for instance in the fur and fashion business, while families summered in Sandisfield. Soon friends and extended family members came up seasonally in considerable numbers and many homes let out rooms to earn cash. There were several sophisticated resort/boarding houses. The custom continued until the 1950s when leisure patterns changed.

The Baptist Society sold its old church to the Jewish congregation in 1921, and the building was converted into a synagogue. The town opened a public library in 1907, and the Montville school enjoyed a modest resurgence. The Montville general store/post office was busy once again. In the late 1920s the Montville dance hall opened and later became very popular as Baranoff’s with square-dance callers like Sammy Spring. The former creamery building in West New Boston reopened after Prohibition in 1933 as an informal restaurant and dance hall. The colorful town correspondent and long-time constable, Henry “Hen” Manley was the town’s cheerleader between 1893 and 1920. He wrote a widely read, entertaining and mostly positive news-of-the-town column for the *Berkshire Eagle* which kept people connected.

Starting in the late 1880s and continuing for at least 50 years, the unfortunate practice of “flipping” or the rapid turnover of dormant real estate was common. Cheap Sandisfield property was discovered by investors, mainly from New York, as a tradable commodity. Some long-time residents also engaged in the activity because they had few other opportunities to make money. But the practice also resulted in neglect of many proud Georgian, Federal, and Greek Revival-style houses. It was also an economic bubble. Fortunately, somehow, many fine houses survived to again become warm homes with secure futures.

In the first three decades of the 20th century Sandisfield’s social composition changed profoundly. In 1930, foreign-born and their children comprised an astonishing 58% of all inhabitants. While the few remaining descendants of the old families understandably lamented the inevitable loss of their heritage, the record shows that these new groups not only repopulated what would otherwise have become a ghost town, but they also rejuvenated community life and became engaged and committed to their adoptive community just as the previous generations had done.

World War II To Present

Sixty-seven Sandisfield men and women served in the World War; three of them were killed in action. The survivors returned in 1945 to a depressed community that numbered a mere 370 residents, an all-time low and only one-quarter of the population a century before. The future looked bleak.

Then a group of citizens, an energetic blend of old family names and committed part-time residents, sensing the needs and a new era, formed a civic organization called the Sandisfield Taxpayers' Association (STA). Over the next 50 years this non-partisan group was an effective advisory resource for town government and an extra voice for residents, including the many disconnected part-time residents who had no vote and little say in town affairs. Initially the STA tackled critical infrastructure problems such as the roads and waste disposal. The STA also evolved into the town social organization and then led the way for the town to better organize services and for new civic and social organizations, e.g., the Sandisfield Historical Society (1970), to establish.

The Association played a major role in the town's Bicentennial celebrations in 1962. Festivities included a horse show, historic home tours, block dances and an old-fashioned parade complete with fire engines and floats filled with pretty girls, and a Queen's Court. Governor John Volpe and Congressman Silvio O. Conte were on hand for the occasion and both men spoke with admiration of Sandisfield's traditional values and virtues. Gov. Volpe's speech was interrupted by a performance of parachute jumping. A female jumper surprised the crowd but gave all the girls a thrill by proving that whatever a man could do a woman could do equally well. George Sokolsky, a nationally syndicated newspaper columnist and broadcaster and proud Sandisfield resident, wrote a column about these events and his town as he often did. In August, U. S. Rep. Conte inserted a speech about Sandisfield's accomplishments and heritage into the Congressional Record.

The 200th anniversary events raised public awareness about the town's heritage and fostered pride among the townspeople. It also marked a turning point that had been long in coming.

After the War, American agri-business began to concentrate. The Sandisfield Grange was formed in 1947 in response to a resurgence of the town's poultry and dairy industries (it disbanded in 1985), but advances in farming technology, such as gas tractors and automated milking systems, spelled the demise of smaller family farms whose owners lacked capital to invest. Just as had happened 50 years earlier, many of Sandisfield's remaining farmers departed for jobs in factories or turned to logging. Hurricane Diane in 1955 accelerated the trend as floodwaters destroyed crops and washed away topsoil. Dormant farmsteads became seasonal homes for city-dwellers and today account for a large proportion of total residential units.

Several old family farms including Riiska Orchards in South Sandisfield (1913), Snow Farm at West New Boston, and the Kimberley family's (1870) on upper Town Hill Road have adapted to market needs. A renewed interest in locally grown produce gained popularity in the 1990s and spawned a movement known as sustainable agriculture. With the support of the town, the movement is attracting a new class of farmers such as the Snyder's When Pigs Fly Farm at Sandisfield Center who are promoting the benefits of locally grown food.

The land continues to be the principal economic base for Sandisfield. A significant number of residents are engaged in logging and forest management, reflecting a long standing tradition. Likewise, Sandisfield is home to small landscaping businesses and nurseries. The C.W. Nelson nursery (est. 1984) in South Sandisfield has a substantial customer base in the area.

The aftermath of "Diane," the great 1955 storm that dumped a foot of water and caused much property destruction, especially in Montville and Roosterville south of New Boston village, was that federal officials moved to protect downstream communities in Connecticut. A major new reservoir and the Colebrook River Dam were constructed on the state line in 1967. Private land was taken under eminent domain around town for flood control. State Route 8 was realigned south of New Boston, including a new bridge over the West Branch of the Farmington River. Unfortunately, the project came at a dear cost to Sandisfield's heritage as the hamlet of Colebrook River, including

the venerable former Hawley Tavern, were dismantled and moved or lost to the wrecking ball.

The Jewish community of Montville, long sustained by the poultry business, eventually succumbed to the same problem that had plagued other farmers: their children sought better prospects elsewhere. Membership in the synagogue by the late 1970s had declined to a point that after some 60 years regular services ended. This historic edifice, originally the home of Sandisfield's Baptists followed by the Sons of Abraham, was rescued in the 1990s by a group of concerned residents. Reborn in 1995 and earning a place on the National Register of Historic Places as "The Montville Baptist Church," the building is now home to the Sandisfield Arts Center for the performing arts.

Following the War, many changes and improvements took place in municipal services. The most dramatic was the closure of the archaic one-room neighborhood grammar schools and their consolidation into a new building, the "New School," on Route 57 in 1950. That school closed in 1999 when Sandisfield merged operations with Otis, thus ending 237 years of town-administered public education. The building now houses municipal offices as the Town Hall Annex.

Public safety was also addressed. In 1947 the first organized (volunteer) fire department was started by members of the American Legion in New Boston under Steve Campetti. In 1992 a major new facility near Sandisfield Center was commissioned under current chief Ralph Morrison. A police department was established in 1962, Selectman Charles Allan, chief. Michael Morrison has been Chief of Police since 1983.

In 1956 the post offices in South Sandisfield and Montville were closed. Service continued at the New Boston Store until 1980 when a new United States Postal Service building on Route 57 opened.

Everybody looks forward to a time when all residents have access to high speed Internet service, something taken for granted in larger towns and cities. Improved service represents the best opportunity for economic growth for Sandisfield.

Sandisfield evolved as a collection of hamlets and villages and distinct farming sections. But no public parks were made. The closest thing to a park may have been the large "green" or common area at Sandisfield Center. It was essentially forgotten after the Center faded in the late 19th century. Chances for a municipal park improved in 1995 when the Yanner family donated 257 acres of woodland on lower Town Hill Road for that purpose. In 2004 a group called The Friends of Yanner Park formed to raise funds to create the park and recreation areas but after initial enthusiasm progress has been slow.

Today rural Sandisfield, although not wealthy, is a stable and well-run town. The full-time population is about 900 and slowly growing and the seasonal resident population is significant. The land is again heavily forested, beautiful and wild, due in large part to many tracts placed in permanent protective status by various conservation groups. A large proportion is under the aegis of the Commonwealth, particularly Sandisfield State Forest and Otis State Forest. However, the town's tax base has suffered as a result and our infrastructure is at risk. Outdoor recreation may ultimately provide economic benefits.

Sandisfield boasts a large inventory of beautiful antique and historic houses and public buildings including three listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The New Boston Inn and the New Boston Store, which trace their beginnings to the mid-18th century, are among the longest continuously operating businesses of their kind in the United States.

As is plain to see, Sandisfield has much to celebrate this year.

Ronald M. Bernard
Sandisfield, Mass.
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