

History – Plainville

Nestled between two basalt outcroppings, East Mountain (Bradley) to the east and Red Stone Hill to the west, we lie in the bed of an ancient lake (river). Because of this we offer a great variety of soils – some sandy, some fertile river bottom. We also have a great deal of verdant marshland, home to an amazing assortment of wildlife, and a food source for both Tunxis hunters and early settlers.

Once covered with White Oak trees on our western section, we still boast of three huge boundary marker oaks standing tall and healthy in a line. The largest is in Norton Park, and boasts a whopping 16 feet, 11 inches in girth. Coopers cut many of these trees for the making of barrels in which to ship goods, especially cider.

Originally part of Farmington, known as the “Great Plains”, we became a town unto ourselves in 1869. Farming, milling and small industries made us a busy community, even before the break.

Lack of good roads and efficient transportation held the area back from developing and fulfilling its vast potential. With the coming of the Farmington canal in 1828, that situation was greatly improved. Now huge, 70 foot long freighters plied the waterway from New Haven to Northampton, Massachusetts and, eventually but belatedly, to Brattleboro, Vermont. Smaller 60-foot passenger boats called packets carried people and small goods. However, this comfortable mode of transportation was short lived.

Tinware, copper ore, timber and all sorts of wood products – carriages, brass, brandy, cider, farm produce of all kinds, clocks, coal, limestone, Hitchcock furniture, buttons, dolls, hundreds of dozens of corn brooms, cheese, run and barrels – were all shipped from Bristol Basin in the center of town. This huge water parking lot was so named because of the vast number of Bristol made clocks shipped out. These clock firms constructed warehouses for the safe care of their merchandise while awaiting shipping.

Stage coaches ran up and down Route 19, the main route between rotating Capital cities and another route from Litchfield through to Middletown, establishing the only decent roads or turnpikes. Stages stopped at Whiting’s Basin at Routes 71 and 10.

Now Plainville’s goods were on the move and businesses expanded in size and variety. The railroads came into sight and by now we were proudly known as Plainville. This was late in the canal era, and the Farmington Canal actually became the railroad using many miles of towpath for the tracks, not for canal horses, but for steel rails. Trains were faster, large and could travel year round. The railroad with its many comfortable stations drew large crowds of passengers. It also carried freight to destinations other than those which canal boats could reach, tied as they were to their watery route. We had and still have railroad lines crossing our town.

Even later came the trolleys clanging and screeching along some of our main streets. Besides summer and winter trolley car models, there were also freight trolleys. Early cars loved

to compete with trolleys, and the competitions saw trolleys phased out for autos not confined to steel tracks.

All this time up to WWII, horses were still being used. Farmers used them on fields, and in outlying areas some could be found even later. But Dobbin's days were numbered with the invention of the gasoline engine. But yet another big change was to arrange the landscape of our tiny town. Huge highway projects were to find favor and construction steadily pushed through verdant and historic areas that today would be protected. It seems that all parts of the compass are now serviced to the steady roar of traffic.

We have gone from an agricultural community to a manufacturing town to a very mixed identity. Our larger industry is gone, being replaced by a great variety of smaller ones. In 1889 two of the five Trumbull brothers, Henry and John, started an electrical manufacturing company. They rode to work on their bicycles and had to get up in the middle of the night to stoke the furnace in their small shop. Persisting, they captured contracts for such buildings as the Empire State Building in New York City where they created the largest switchboard ever built (up to that time). With success came even larger buildings and the inclusion of at least one other brother. General Electric absorbed Trumbull Electric and still occupies some of the same area.

John entered politics, gained the Connecticut governorship and because of his great interest and contribution to aviation, was known as the "Flying Governor." Eight landing fields have been documented in town used by various young aeronauts. Trumbull favored a field where Plainville High School now stands. This was the largest and only maintained field.

The present Robertson Airport is an active place, a tribute to Stan Robertson's great efforts to keep aviation alive in Plainville.

With planes and cars speeding in all directions in our town, memories of the history of past modes of transportation exist, especially at the Plainville Historical Center. There the sound of a canal boat horn may welcome you to explore the past eras of our town.

Plainville is indeed the crossroads of Connecticut.

Respectfully submitted,
Ruth Hummel
Town Historian