



NORWICH
Historical Society
and Community Center

HISTORIC DRIVING TOUR

— NORWICH EARLY SETTLEMENT —

A Companion to the Norwich Historic Audio Tours

Podcast Tour for Kids Transcript **Early Settlement**

Welcome to our Norwich Early Settlement Podcast Tour. My name is Sarah Rooker and I'm the Director of the Norwich Historical Society. I hope you're ready to learn about how our town of Norwich came to be. It didn't happen without a lot of hard work!

My name is Mr. Bill and I'm Romany Granzio-MacKenzie, and we're going to be your guides on this journey into the past.

The Beginning: A Charter is Granted

After the end of the French and Indian War, life settled down in the colonies. The pioneer spirit flourished and the interest in finding new lands to settle grew. There was a man named Benning Wentworth who made all the difference to the future of Vermont and especially to the town of Norwich.

The King of England had made Benning Wentworth the Governor of New Hampshire, a vast wilderness only inhabited by the Abenaki people. Wentworth thought to himself, I'm going to divide up this wilderness into parcels of land and sell them. Each parcel will be 6 miles by 6 miles in size and I'll only sell them to worthy, hardworking men.

Now there were many towns in Massachusetts and Connecticut that were getting crowded, the sons and grandsons of those earlier settlers were running out of land for their farms and livestock. A group of men from Manchester, CT got together and petitioned the Governor of New Hampshire, Benning Wentworth for a Grant of land. They met at the Waterman Inn and wrote the petition. They had to convince him that they were worthy of the land, that they had the spirit of the pioneers and the

necessary skills to settle in the wilderness. Don't forget these were the descendants of the Europeans who had come across the Atlantic Ocean to settle an unknown land many years before.

They would need lumberjacks, carpenters, farmers, blacksmiths, teachers, a minister and a doctor. They needed people who knew how to build and run mills to cut lumber into boards and to grind grain into flour. These skills and talents would help make the town thrive and prosper.

The Governor would not grant land to just the average settler, he wanted hardy, rugged souls who were willing to give up the comfort of their villages in Connecticut and use their courage and determination to forge a homestead out of the wilderness. They needed to be clever and resourceful and full of hope for their town which would be called Norwich!

On July 4, 1761, Benning Wentworth, Royal Governor of New Hampshire, granted a charter to this group of men, called proprietors, in Connecticut, giving them permission to establish the town of Norwich.

A month after receiving the charter, the proprietors gathered at William Waterman's tavern in Mansfield, Connecticut, to decide on the first steps to be taken to settle the wilderness land.

There was much to discuss at those first meetings in Connecticut.

They had to divide up the land among the proprietors--setting aside 500 acres of excellent land for the Governor, a share of land for the first minister and a share of land for a school. And they had to think about where to build roads, and who could build the mills so they would be able to saw boards and grind their grain or corn. They sent surveyors north to lay out the lots and report back on the land and soil.

Stop 1: The River

Kwanitekw, the Abenaki, and the New Arrivals

Now, here we are at the Connecticut River, look downriver, past the Ledyard Bridge, and just imagine Abenaki people fishing along these banks. The Abenaki had lived on this land from the beginning. This was their land that the proprietors had been granted and planned to settle.

The names on the land and waters remind us of that!

Kwanitekw or “Long River” is the Abenaki way of saying the Connecticut River’s name.

Ascutney comes from *Kaskadenak* or “Wide Mountain”;

Mosbasak Sibosis or “Mink Brook.” Is the name for the stream that enters the Connecticut River in Hanover just south of Blood Brook.

Bemômanosek or “At the Fishing Place” is the name for the old village ground at Pompanoosuc, upriver about 5 miles.

Now imagine you’ve been paddling and poling upstream in the shallow water, against the current for 10 to 15 days, all the way from Connecticut. You see a brook with rapids that might be used to power future mills. You notice the flat, open ground around the mouth of the brook and the grassland beyond with thick forests leading to the hills beyond.

You have found a land fully inhabited by the Abenaki people and you are grateful for their gifts of knowledge, and their understanding of living on this land.

Now, keep imagining... it is springtime in 1763 and Jacob Fenton, Ebenezer Smith, and John Slafter, the first English settlers, arrive in dugout canoes on these shores and stay through the summer.

Over the next years more men and boys followed, spending the warmer months clearing the land and planting corn and other crops in open areas and between the dead trees, and returning to Connecticut for the winter.

To clear the densely forested land, they cut the enormous trees, using the big trunks and limbs for log cabins and outbuildings.

They placed the stumps of the trees in rows for the first fencing and then burned the remaining debris. If a good burn resulted, they planted wheat or corn for their first crop.

In 1765, two families, the Hutchinsons and Messengers, were the first to spend the winter in the new township, in a cabin near here. The cabin was made of logs and had a dirt floor and a roof made of bark. The floor was divided into sleeping areas with blankets. The families shared the work gathering and splitting wood for the fire in the middle of the cabin, and hauling water from the river. It must have been a difficult time for these families, and a long, cold winter.

In the next year or so twelve more families moved into the township of Norwich!

There are some wonderful stories about travel on the river in those early days. It would have served as a frozen highway in the winter as traveling by horse drawn sled was the best way to go.

One story tells of a settler taking bushels of corn by canoe to the Abenaki village at the mouth of the White River. The Abenaki friend canoed him 30 miles to Charlestown, NH where the only available grist mill was found. Their corn was ground and then they paddled the lucky settler back up to their White River village.

Before a gristmill was built in Norwich in 1768, corn was pounded in a wooden mortar with a large pestle. To pound a bushel of corn by hand would take as much as a full day of very hard work!

Stop 2. The Hatch-Peisch House

The First Town Meeting in the Hatch Cabin

Now you've come back up the hill from the river. This part of Norwich, what we think of as the center of town, was once known as "Burton's Plain." It was probably called that because Jacob Burton, one of the earliest settlers, owned 200 acres here and built one of the first log cabins. In the summer of 1770 a group of men gathered at Jacob Burton's house to decide on the location of what would become Dartmouth College.

Captain Joseph Hatch also purchased a large section of land here on the Plain. He too built a log cabin and then several years later the beautiful blue house you see in front of you. Look across the street to the first brick house. Hatch's log cabin was located just over there.

In March 1768, the voters gathered in this log cabin for the first town meeting. They elected officers such as the moderator, fence viewers, tithingmen who collected taxes, and a constable. They decided on burying grounds, ministers, taxes, bridges, and roads. There were many important decisions to be made and they were all important steps in building a new community. Can you imagine what important responsibilities you'd like to have had in building your town?

It would be twenty years before they were to build their first school! You'll learn about the schools in Norwich on another Podcast!

Jacob Burton built the first sawmill in Norwich in about 1768. It was located at the spot where Elm Street crosses Blood Book. This meant that bigger, framed homes with clapboard siding could be built. It's fun to think of Joseph Hatch using boards from this sawmill to build the lovely blue Hatch house. You'll be visiting several more of these very old houses on this tour. I hope you'll look very carefully at each of them and jot down things you notice about each house.

Stop 3. Ferry Place

A Foothold in the Wilderness

This area of town was known as Ferry Place. A rope ferry docked at the bottom of Loveland Road, which originally led to what was once Norwich Center, the site of the first Meeting House. On the Hanover side of the river, the ferry docked at the bottom of the road that led directly into the center of Hanover too. If you wanted to cross the river, you could drive your horses and cart onto the ferry which was like a big flat-bottomed boat. The ferry master would use poles to push the boat along the rope to the other side. Then you would drive right off the boat and onto the shore. People traveled back and forth that way. Does that sound like more fun than driving or walking across the bridge?

The Slafter family was one of this area's first settlers. Samuel Slafter, of Mansfield, Connecticut, was one of those proprietors who met to divide the land and plan the town.

He sent his son John, who had served in the French and Indian war, to make "the journey through the forests of New Hampshire." Once there he began to clear the land on the Slafter river lot and build a rough home of logs. He planted corn and other crops, so it was ready when the family arrived.

After several years of making these trips to Norwich and then returning to Connecticut, John Slafter married Elizabeth Hovey and brought her by canoe to the log house he had built by the river. Inside, the bed, table, and chairs were all made of rough split logs.

The young Slafter family would have been very grateful for the squash, sunflowers, sunchokes, and pumpkins the Abenaki women shared with them. John Slafter traded for things he needed in Charlestown. On one of his supply trips, he brought back the very first potatoes to be planted in Norwich. Do you think they shared potatoes with the Abenaki?.

The Slasters and other early settlers in Norwich bought or traded with the Abenaki as well for many other helpful items like snowshoes, baskets, tool handles, toboggans and 'pung' sleds which were very simple box shaped sleighs. These would have been very helpful during the long hard winters of Vermont.

Stop 4: The Slafter House

Settling into Farming

In 1786, 20 years after they first moved to Norwich, the Slafters moved two miles inland, to their other larger lot. The soil was better and there was more open land to farm. They built this house you see here. Can you see anything about this house that reminds you of the Hatch house?

I wish we could go inside together! The heavy timbers that make up the frame of the house can be seen in many of the rooms inside. John and his son would have had to chop huge trees into square beams by hand with broad-axes. You can still see the marks they made along their rough sides, marks very likely made by John Slafter himself!

By this point there was a sawmill in town, which meant that the Slafters were able to cover the timbers with clapboard siding on the outside, a much more handsome house than the log cabin they had been living in!

It originally had a hipped roof which you'll be able to see at the next house we visit. There was a very large central chimney. According to a Slafter descendant, the chimney "was an immense structure, in the center of the house, having three ovens, where the family bread and meats were cooked for the table." Sounds cozy!

The hipped roof was replaced with the gable roof you see today.–The central chimney would have been removed and replaced with two or more small chimneys so that wood stoves could be placed in various rooms around the house making the house much warmer.

The Slafters farmed their land here at Goodrich Four Corners for the rest of their lives. They found the land easier to clear, till and harvest for crops than the wet land by the river. They must have had a vegetable garden, probably an apple orchard and sugar bush and they grew corn, oats and plenty of hay to feed their livestock.

The steeper, rockier hills around the house were good for grazing animals. All over Norwich, the early settlers removed rocks from the fields by hand and used them to make the stone walls that we still see all over town.

Later a sheep boom meant that at one time there were approximately 10,000 sheep in Norwich! John Slafter complained that his sheep often “became the prey of wild beasts,” what with the many wolves and mountain lions that roamed this area. Vermont offered a bounty, or payment of eight pounds for the destruction of a wolf or mountain lion, so John Slafter made animal traps by digging holes that were impossible for a predator to climb out of. Gulp! He placed a lamb near the hole to serve as bait!

And as you can see, this property is now the home of Hogwash Farm. Stop by the farmstand and check it out!

Stop 5. Meeting House Hill

A New Town Center and Store

This part of town used to be known as "The Center". Remember that what we think of today as the center of town was known as "Burton's Plain."

And remember that people could cross the river by rope ferry and walk up Loveland road to this center. In fact, the roads projected from here to all parts of town and to the river. It's really interesting to look at maps that show the old roads of Norwich. Many of them started out as narrow bridle paths or cart tracks, just wide enough for an ox-cart in the summer and a sled in the winter.

Norwich's first meetinghouse was built just south of the cemetery, ten years after the first settlers had arrived in town. The population had grown! There were about 120 families in town and Joseph Hatch's log cabin was no longer large enough to serve as a meetinghouse for the town of Norwich.

Until the new meetinghouse was built, religious services were held all over town, and families often hiked three to six miles to attend. They met in homes, barns, or out in the open air if the weather was agreeable. The early ministers would travel from town to town to preach. One early minister, Peter Powers, travelled up and down the river in a canoe, calling out to men working on the shore, telling them when he would be back to preach to them.

In 1775, when Reverend Potter became minister, the community gathered here on this hill to celebrate. Eleazor Wheelock, president of Dartmouth College, also came to the celebration. He crossed the river at Rope Ferry and together with a number of white students, Native American students, and several slaves climbed the hill to take part in the service.

The new meetinghouse had 40 pews and each pew was designed to hold five families!!! They must have been huge and it must have been crowded! There was no steeple, no bell, and no heat!! This building was a great achievement of the first generation of Norwich settlers.

In June 1785, Norwich hosted the Vermont state legislature, which held sessions there for 16 days. It must have been quite the procession into town with fifes and drums escorting the governor and his council.

The agenda included the petition of Lucy Terry Prince, an African American woman from Guilford, VT, who had walked to Norwich to present her suit against a neighbor accused of harassing her family. She convinced the Governor and Council of her case and won her suit.

By 1817, Norwich's population had doubled and the town had grown prosperous. So, a larger, second meetinghouse was built here. What do you think happened to the timbers of the first meetinghouse after it was torn down?

Take a walk in Meetinghouse Hill Cemetery and notice the names of some of the early settlers on the gravestones. You might recognize some names.

Now look across Union Village road and the fields to the large Georgian yellow house and red barns.

This house was built after the Revolutionary War and was the home of Peter Olcott, one of the town's most prominent citizens. Peter Olcott was the last lieutenant governor of the independent Vermont republic and the first lieutenant governor under statehood.

He came to Norwich just before the Revolution and chose this high ground right along the road leading from the ferry on the Connecticut River. This house has a hipped roof which is what the Slafter house originally had and a central chimney just like the Hatch and Slafter houses.

Have you noticed that just like the blue Hatch house and the Slafter house, there are five second-story windows with the middle one at a little distance from the others and placed directly over the door!

It is believed that the timbers for the back ell were removed from the original meeting house when it was demolished!

The oldest, east barn, known as the "cow house," has cow stanchions, a sheep manger, and a threshing floor. Olcott had two horses, five cattle, four cows, and 90 acres of pasture. How would you like to grow up on a farm like this?

Peter Olcott kept a store just across Union Village Road from the graveyard. It was the first store in town. His store was filled with luxury items from around the world such as silk fabrics, sewing items, ivory combs, and snuff boxes, all of which probably arrived by way of a flatboat on the Connecticut River.

An upstream shipment to Norwich in 1780 included rum, molasses, salt, large iron tea kettles, hand skillets, and grindstones. Goods were shipped downstream by flatboat as well, and would have included ginseng, butter, cheese, beeswax, grain, furs, pork, and logs.

Stop 6: Meeting House Farm

There is no page in the comic book for this stop. Now it's your turn to draw! How about drawing the front of this beautiful house and include as many architectural details as you can!! If you have another idea, that's ok too!

Thomas Murdock built this house. He was one of the earliest settlers of Norwich. His first house was the small cape you see behind you up the driveway on the west side of the road where you are parked. At the very first town meeting, held in the log cabin on Burton's Plain in 1768, he was elected as town clerk, constable, and fence viewer. What positions would you like to have held in early Norwich?

Notice the hipped roof ! And the arrangement of the second story windows? And the 'something extra' above the doorway? There are two very old landscape murals in this house created by painters who traveled throughout the countryside decorating majestic homes like this one.

At this time, the town was growing fast and the first Meeting House on the hill was over crowded so it was sold to Thomas Murdock's son, Constant and he used the lumber to build the barn--that's why this farm is called Meeting House Farm.

Constant Murdock owned other farms in Norwich, one known as the "hill farm" and the other "turnpike farm". Those were hard years for farmers, with season after season of crop failures. The year 1816 became known as "Eighteen Hundred and Froze to Death" or "the year without a

summer” because it was unusually cold that year- there was a frost every month of the year!
Imagine that!?

Jasper Murdock, Constant’s brother lived in a large house where the Norwich Inn stands now. It was at the intersection of roads to Sharon, Thetford, and Hanover and was a stagecoach stop.

Stop 7. Captain Paul Brigham’s House

Women’s Work

Captain Paul Brigham, a distinguished Revolutionary War soldier, came to Norwich in 1782, and later built this yellow two-story house. He brought his wife, Lydia and their five children: Thomas, Mary, Don Josephus, Paul Worcester, and Lydia.

After moving to Vermont, Brigham was almost immediately elected to the state legislature and then served as lieutenant governor. He retired in 1820, after serving 22 terms as lieutenant governor of Vermont!!

When Paul died, he provided for his loving wife Lydia, allowing her to use all his household goods and kitchen furniture and live in his house during her lifetime. He also allowed her use of the garden, use of the woodland so she would have fuel to cook her meals and heat her house, and pastures for her two cows, five sheep, and hog. After her death, it would all go to their son. This was typical for the time! Imagine that!

Did you know that at that time, women owned no property? Even though it was the women who reared the children, gardened, worked in the dairy, cooked at the massive hearths, spun and wove the cloth for clothing, washed the clothes, and generally kept much of the farm running day to day. How do you think you could have helped your mother ?

Stop 8: Norwich Historical Society

A New Center for Norwich

Here we are back on the “Plain”!

All houses hold much history. The Norwich Historical Society was built in 1807 by Joseph Burton, grandson of Jacob, on land cobbled together from his father, Elisha Burton, and Joseph Hatch. Remember these families were among the very first to settle this part of town.

Shortly thereafter, the land across from their home erupted with activity!

From their parlor windows the family watched the building of the South Meeting House, the Congregational Church, near where the gazebo is today. Years later it was “rolled “ across the green to where it now stands. Think about that--can you imagine how a huge building might have been moved at that time. The term ‘rolled’ is your clue!

A military academy, which would later become Norwich University, was also being built. In 1890, the school’s barracks caught fire and burned and the Village School was built. The Village School was later named the Marion Cross School.

Norwich was flourishing with a population of nearly 2,000 people! They valued education, were deeply religious, believed in hard word and independence. But above all, just like today, the people of Norwich looked out for each other. Always.

All of this tradition and these stories rest on the landscape, in the bedrock and on the fields, in the walls and by the fires of Norwich homes today.

We hope you had fun on this tour and learned a lot. You can find photographs and more stories of Norwich at the Historical Society website! Please visit us soon!