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An Introduction to Brimfield History from the Library's Historical Collections

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A Topographical Description of Brimfield

Clark Brown was the minister of the First Congregational Church in Brimfield and the husband of Tabitha Moffat. His description of the town in 1803 is located in the Massachusetts Historical Society collections, Vol IX, Page 127. The version below is an accurate and true copy of the original housed in the Sherman Room.

A TOPOGRAPHICAL DESCRIPTION OF BRIMFIELD

By Rev. Clark Brown

June, 1803

BRIMFIELD lies in the county of Hampshire, Massachusetts, seventy-five miles southwest by west from Boston, and thirty-four southeast by east from Northampton, the shire town of this county.

Boundaries.

It is bounded by Worcester county twelve miles and twenty-two rods: viz. east by Sturbridge, four miles and three quarters and twenty rods; northeast by a small corner of Brookfield, one quarter of a mile; north by Western, seven miles and an half. It is bounded by Palmer and Monson on the west, three miles on the former, and three miles and a quarter and forty rods on the latter; and south by South-Brimfield and Holland, three miles and three quarters and twenty rods on the former, and two miles and three quarters and ten rods on the latter. The line between Brimfield and Sturbridge is strait; from the south to the north, it inclines $6^{\circ}.30'$ east. From the northeast corner of the town, the separating line from Western was first west, 15° . South, three miles and a quarter and two rods; then north, 4° . West, one half of a mile; and then west, 23° . North, three miles and an half; thence on to the south. Chickopee river divides the town from Palmer for three miles, when it strikes the northeast corner of Monson; from which, the line runs south, 5° . East, which separates the town from Monson; the line on the south, which separates the town from South-Brimfield and Holland, is straight; from the west to the east point, it inclines only $8^{\circ}.30'$. North.

Upon an average, the town is about six miles in length, and five in breadth.

It was incorporated by the General Court, July 14th, 1731. It then included Monson, South-Brimfield, and Holland, and part of Western, now in Worcester county. It began to be settled in the year 1701.

Soil. Wood. Produce.

The soil is much preferable to that of the adjacent towns. There is very little unimproved land in the town. There is about one thousand acres of tillage land, and upwards of eight hundred of good uplan mowing.

The black and white oak is the most common wood' there is not much pine and hemlock; but there is a considerable quantity of chestnut, butternut, birch and maple. Firewood is growing scarce; it is generally sold for one dollar and seventeen cents a cord in the middle of the town.

The principal part of the produce raised in the town consists in rye, corn, beans, butter, beef, and pork; the four last are most of the articles, which are carried to market. The inhabitants generally trade at Boston. Most of the farmers carry their own produce to market. There is but little wheat raised in the town, not so much as is consumed by the inhabitants. A small quantity of

cheese is made for market, and that not of the best quality. The dairies are small. There are but few large farms. The butter, which is carried to market, is generally of an excellent quality.

The inhabitants principally get their living by farming. There are but few tradesmen., not so many as are really wanted. The land naturally being fertile, and easy to improve, the inhabitants have never been distinguished for industry; the farms are poorly fenced; and few only are under proper improvement. Double the number of inhabitants might be supported in the town by agriculture were the farms as well managed, as they are in Sturbridge, an adjacent township, where the soil is not half as good. Were the inhabitants more ambitious to excel in agriculture, and to encourage tradesmen to settle among them, the town would assume a very different aspect.

Its manufactories and publick buildings, which are necessary to render any town flourishing and respectable, have been neglected.

There have been proposals made to the inhabitants by those of other towns, to have turnpike roads pass through the town; particularly the one which is already completed from Norwich to Stafford, in Connecticut, and which is to be extended to Dartmouth College; but the proposals were not treated with much attention by the most wealthy part of the inhabitants. They act with respect to almost all publick institutions, as if they thought the property, expended upon them, was in effect thrown away.

Buildings.

There is one gin distillery, four saw mills, and four grist mills; but none of flour in the middle of the town.

There is but one house for publick worship, which has been built upwards of sixty years. It is small and inelegant. It stands on a beautiful rise of ground, in the centre of the town, gradually descending as you go from the house on every side, and subsiding after a few rods into level ground.

There are ten districts for schools, and nine schoolhouses; but the schoolhouses are mostly out of repair. The one in the middle of the town is small, very inconvenient, and quite old; and although there are nearly one hundred scholars belonging to the district, its inhabitants cannot be convinced at present of the necessity of erecting a new one of a larger and more convenient size.

Except six two-story dwelling houses, in the middle of the town, which are finished and handsomely painted, and about twenty others in different parts of the place, the houses are small and mean. It may, however, be reasonably expected, that, in a few years, the town will appear much more respectable as to its buildings.

Streams and Ponds.

The town is well watered. Chickapee river, which has its rise in a large pond, in the south parish in Brookfield, separates Brimfield from Palmer for the distance of three miles, it strikes the northwest corner of the town; from which its general course is south, 16°. west, until it comes to the north-west corner of Monson, when it turns off to the west: it empties into Connecticut river in Springfield.

Quinabogue river runs through the south-east part of the town. It rises in Union, Connecticut, runs through Holland into Brimfield, then into Sturbridge, and so on till it empties into Thames river, near Norwich landing, Connecticut. Its course is very crooked. It runs near north, till it comes into Brimfield, then nearly east, till it gets into Sturbridge where it takes about a south-east course.

The river receives another, about half as large, one mile and an half before it runs into Sturbridge. This latter stream is composed of several smaller streams; one from a pond, lying north from the Townplat, which runs south one mile and a quarter, and crosses the Townplat about half of a quarter mile east of the meeting-house; it then turns off, south-east, and unites after a few rods with another stream which comes from the south part of the town; these two being thus united, and constituting one stream, receive another, nearly as large as both of them, from South-Brimfield, about three-quarters of a mile from the meeting-house; which being united, the course is east, two points south, until it empties into the Quinabogue, one mile and an half before it comes to the Sturbridge line, as before observed.

There are two ponds in the town; one of which, the largest, is about one mile north, 22°. 30'. East, from the Townplat, on the road to the south parish in Brookfield. It contains about sixty acres. From it large quantities of clay are taken, with which excellent bricks are made. The other, which is called Allum Pond, in consequence of its very solid white bottom, and the water being very clear, is two miles and an half east of the Townplat; it contains about forty acres. From it a small stream runs east into Sturbridge. They both abound with the fish and eels common in fresh ponds

Townplat, Roads, &c.

The Townplat is beautifully situated. The road from Sturbridge, South-Brimfield, Holland, Monson, Palmer, Western, and Brookfield, all centre at, and pass though it. It is mostly surrounded by hills, at different distances and of different magnitudes. There are two roads leading from it to the northward; one to Western and to the west parish in Brookfield; and the other to the south parish in Brookfield, which is the Boston road. The former runs almost directly north for two miles, at which distance it turns off to the north-west, and from the same place there is a cross road leading to Western city, so called, which runs north one point west.

The other road, leading northward from the Townplat, runs north, 22°. 30'. East; and then turns off to the northeast. The road, leading from the northwest corner of Sturbridge, comes into this road four miles from the Townplat at the southwest corner of Western. From the Townplat, for the distance of three quarters of a mile, these two northern roads are only about one quarter of a mile from each other; but they are separated by a hill, which is very steep on the east side; they are connected by a cross road, which however is very steep, rising from the east to the west, being almost impassable for teams and carriages. The east road is very level for one mile. This is the most direct road to Boston from Monson, South-Brimfield, and Holland.

The road leading to Monson and Palmer, and through one part of Palmer to Springfield, and through another part to Northampton, &c. runs west, 22°. 30'. North; the meetinghouse stands fronting this road, a few rods north of it.

The road to Sturbridge, &c. is east one point, [sic] or 11°. 15'. South.

The road to South-Brimfield, and so on to Stafford, in Connecticut, is south for three quarters of a mile, and then south, one point west; and to Holland, and so on to Union, in Connecticut, at the same place, where it separates from the South-Brimfield road, is south, 1°. 30'. East, for one mile and three quarters, and then south one mile unto Holland, inclining in its general course half of a point to the west.

About two miles west of the Townplat, there is a large and steep eminence, called by the inhabitants, West Mountain, on which there is a large high rock; from this rock there is a very extensive and beautiful prospect exhibited, the neighboring towns and their houses of worship rising to view.

Number of Inhabitants.

There are between thirteen and fourteen hundred inhabitants in the town; among whom there is an uncommon proportion upwards of seventy years of age.

The town is considered healthful. It has proved so to the writer of this, who upon his settlement in the town was an invalid, weak and spare, but now fleshy and healthy.

There have been no very remarkable instances of longevity in the town. The most remarkable, which has ever happened, was Mr. Joseph Morgan; he died in the winter of 1798, aged ninety-five. He retained his mental faculties, and his bodily powers, to the last hour of his life; his memory was very tenacious; he could relate with precision things and events which took place in his youth.

There have only two hundred and eighty persons died in the town for fourteen years past, ending December 31st, 1802. The population of the town does not increase, on account of the spirit of emigration, which has prevailed among the inhabitants for several years past. Within about four years, nearly forty families have removed into the new settlements at the westward. Were it not for this, and the want of some enterprising and publick-spirited men, with some more industrious tradesmen and farmers, the place would soon become one of the most flourishing and beautiful towns in the county, except a few of those on Connecticut River.

Literary Characters.

The town has not been distinguished for many characters of extensive erudition. There have been four ministers of publick education ordained over the church and congregation in the town, memoirs of whom shall hereafter be given.

Hon. Timothy Danielson, Esq. was distinguished as a literary and publick character. He was a brigadier-general, a justice throughout the Commonwealth, and a senator for the county of Hampshire, during a number of years. He was educated at Yale College, and graduated in the year 1756. He studied divinity, and preached one sermon only, and that for the Rev. Mr. Bridgham of this town. He died September 19th, 1791. His widow, who was left young and in affluent circumstances, married Capt. William Eaton, late consul from the United States to the kingdom of Tunis. Capt. Eaton is a gentleman of liberal education, and a distinguished talents. He was educated at Dartmouth College.

Abner Morgan and Stephen Pyncheon, Esqrs., attorneys at law, are gentlemen of liberal education; the former was educated at Harvard College, and the latter at Yale College.

Mr. Abner Stebbins educated a son at Yale College, who was a tutor there for several years; he is now an attorney at law, in New-Milford, Lincoln county, District of Maine.

Dr. Joseph Moffett educated his eldest son at Dartmouth. He is now settled as a physician in Danville, Vermont.

Deacon Ebenezer Fairbanks educated a son at Yale College, who is now and has been for several years a licensed candidate preacher.

Deacon Jonathan Morgan has given a publick education to an only son; he graduated at Union College last May.

Mr. Caleb Sherman, whose parents are dead, will graduate at Providence College the next commencement.

Schools.

It has been too much the custom in this town, as it has been in several other country towns, to hire cheap schoolmasters. This being the general principle, upon which the committees of districts proceed, it cannot reasonably be expected, that proper

persons should always be engaged as instructors. Add to this, that there is no one school taught through the year, and no one kept in the summer season, except by young women for little girls and boys, and also that the selectmen of the town, and the committees of districts, are altogether negligent of their duty in visiting the schools., and causing the scholars to be examined; the consequence must be, that in all such schools there must be great deficiency. But notwithstanding all this neglect and delinquency, the schools are under much better regulations than they were a few years past. Most of the instructors, who are employed in the winter season, have a general acquaintance with grammar and arithmetick, and also a general knowledge of the rules of reading, pronunciation, and of the other branches, taught in our common English schools. It is to be hoped, and it may reasonably be expected, that a much greater attention will yet be paid to the schools, and consequently to the morals and abilities of those whom they shall employ as teachers.

Libraries.

There was a library established in town near thirty years past; a considerable part of which consisted in old school divinity; the books are mostly worn out, and many of them wholly destroyed. There have been no additions made to it for several years; the present proprietors pay little or no attention to the rules and restrictions upon which it was originally established.

About four years past, a new one was established; the proprietors of which are incorporated, according to an act of the Legislature provided for the incorporation of such associations. It consists of upwards of one hundred volumes judiciously selected. But it is painful to observe this very useful and laudable establishment finding but little encouragement from the wealthiest part of the town. Hence it must be inferred, that publick institutions are not much encouraged by charitable donations.

Ecclesiastical Affairs.

The church records having been destroyed, during the ministry of Rev. Mr. Bridgham, at the time his house was burned, it cannot be ascertained when the church was gathered, nor when the first minister was ordained.

Rev. Richard Treat was the first settled minister. He was dismissed from his pastoral relation to the church, March 25, 1734.

Rev. James Bridgham, a native of Boston, was his successor. He was ordained June 9, 1736. He was graduated at Harvard College, in 1726. He died Sept. 17, 1776, aged 69. He was said to possess moderate powers of elocution, but extensive learning.

Rev. Nehemiah Williams, who was also an alumnus of Harvard College in 1769, was ordained colleague with Mr. Bridgham, Feb. 9, 1775. He died Nov. 16, 1796. During the latter part of his ministry, he suffered somewhat through the disaffection of part of his flock, who employed as preachers illiterate itinerants. But he uniformly sustained the character of a pious and learned minister, and was highly respected by all his acquaintances. He was a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences; and a volume of his sermons, since his death, has been given to the publick. It is to be hoped, that the grave of this respected minister will not be neglected like that of Rev. Mr. Bridgham, which, for want of a stone, cannot be found.

Rev. Clark Brown, who was first ordained over a congregation at Machias, (Maine) having obtained a dismission thence, was installed in Brimfield, June 20, 1798.

In the February preceding, a council convened for the purpose of installing Mr. Brown. After sitting one or two days, it dissolved itself without accomplishing the object for which it was formed.

Soon after Mr. Brown's installation, several persons in Brimfield, who opposed his settlement, applied to the association of neighboring ministers for advice. They advised to the calling of a mutual council. This measure was not acceded to on the part of the town. The minority called an ex parte council, which advised them to renew attempts for a mutual council. In case of a second failure, they were to apply to three neighboring churches to establish them, "The Christian congregational church of Brimfield." The advice was carefully followed; and the minority were accordingly in this manner constituted a church of the above mentioned description.

The male members of Mr. Brown's church at his installation were eighteen. The minority consisted of thirteen only. In the major church there are now twenty-six male members; in the minor church there are only ten.

In the spring of 1801 the town voted, in consequence of repeated applications from the minority, consent that a mutual council should be called, and that Mr. Brown, if he thought proper, should unite in the measure. The council was called. It was found to contain, when convened, a majority of three who were chosen by the minority. The council proceeded to business, resulted, and advised Mr. B. to ask a dismission from his pastoral office. He complied with the advice; but the town at a legal meeting refused to grant his request.

Both before and after the sitting of this council, an opinion prevailed in the minority, that they were not severally holden legally to pay their proportion of Mr. Brown's salary. Under the influence of this opinion an individual of the minority [sic] a member of the new church, and of reputable estate, on being called upon to pay his ministerial tax, refused, denying that he possessed any property. The collector carried him to jail. Unable to get freedom without paying his tax, he paid it with the cost,

and commenced prosecution against the assessors for illegal taxation. The town defended the suit. At the Court of Common Pleas, he made no effort [sic] to support his cause, which of course failed. He appealed to the Supreme Judicial Court, where by the aid of three attorneys he attempted to prove the illegality of the tax. The Court however would not suffer the case to go to the jury. But unanimously gave it against the plaintiff. Nearly four hundred dollars were expended in this suit, of which none of the minority, the plaintiff excepted, is legally holden to pay any part.

Thus has ended the legal contest between the town and the minority. And it is hoped, that, as Mr. B. intends soon to take a peaceable dismissal from his charge, which there is the highest probability of his being able to do, the town will no more be agitated by ecclesiastical controversy; and that the inhabitants will cultivate for each other that charity, which is the brightest ornament of Christians.