

History of Becket MA
By Steve Hamlin
Copyright 2010

The town of Becket was incorporated in 1765, named for the estate of Admiral Lord Barrington, which was located in Shrivvenham, in Berkshire, England. According to the *Bicentennial History of Becket*, by Cathaline Alford Archer and Mitchell Mulholland, “the economic and social hub of the town was in the area now referred to as Becket Center, where the picturesque Becket Center Church still stands overlooking the original town cemetery and the Minute Men's parade and drilling ground. A second center of activity was built up at the intersection of the Farmington River and Becket Turnpikes in West Becket. Stores and a post office were set up at this point, which was for a time a thriving business area.”

The building of the Western Railroad in 1840 brought about a huge change. The railroad followed the West Branch of the Westfield River, a route that brought it through North Becket some five miles north of the center of the town. North Becket, which was a small, fairly insignificant community near the Washington town line before the coming of the railroad, soon overshadowed the original center.

Ready access to remote markets, along with abundant waterpower stimulated the growth of manufacturing in North Becket. The railroad station, and the passengers who used it, attracted innkeepers and merchants to North Becket. Within a few years, North Becket was a thriving commercial center.

Over time, the development of North Becket as the commercial center of Becket had the opposite impact on the other villages in town. While Becket Center remains the center of town government, its social importance, along with that of West Becket is greatly reduced.

North Becket was home to basketry and silk mills into the 20th century, when a disastrous flood wiped out much of the village and ended those industries. On November 14, 1927, several days of heavy rain brought flooding to most of the Northeast. In Becket, William Ballou, the owner of a reservoir upstream of town, sat watch over the crumbling dam in his car. As its failure became imminent, he drove through town alerting the residents. Due to his warning, all were saved except 60-year-old Mrs. Justine Carroll. Mills, houses and barns were washed away in the flood.

Lumber and quarrying were the main industries in Becket throughout much of its history. Like the other towns along Jacob's Ladder Trail, farming was also important, particularly dairying.

The former Becket Quarry, which supplied granite to Chester via the Becket & Chester Railroad, is now preserved by the Becket Land Trust as recreational land. Stone cutting continues near Becket, with truckloads of granite carried through Bonnie Rigg Corners daily from the Chester Granite Co., just over the line on Algeria Road in Otis.

Today, Becket is known as an artists' community. Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival and the Becket Arts Center are the most visible examples of the arts, but there are also many artists working in home studios.

With its many lakes and ponds, Becket is also known as a vacation community. The town's population swells considerably each summer as people return to the summer camps and lake-front second homes that make up a large part of the town.

