

by J. Ritchie Garrison, Director, Winterthur Program in American Material Culture, Professor of History, University of Delaware

Listening to the Past in an American Landscape



Fragment of the earliest known map of Deerfield, c. 1688, showing lots in the North Meadows. Courtesy of Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association Library. Top: Photograph of the village of Deerfield taken from Pocumtuck Ridge by Pelham Bradford, 1867. Courtesy of Memorial Hall Museum, Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association.

In August, the sweet corn in the meadows ripples in the wind like a green sea, stretching off to the hills that bound the horizon. If you get up early enough, you can watch trucks drive down The Street laden with freshly cut ears. From the valley floor, the village appears to be John Winthrop's vision of a city on a hill. Few visitors see it that way unless they leave The Street and walk to the edges of the homelots or down one of the farm roads. But if you would understand the town's past or anticipate the future, if you would study the things that endure and change, you have to look at Deerfield's landscape and listen to what it whispers.

On Native Lands • Native peoples understood that humans were merely custodians. As in so many other 17th-century New England towns, the Europeans that came to Deerfield entered a world that Natives had already transformed. They set fires to burn away much of the forest understory to improve hunting. They also took advantage of natural meadows and open land. Long before the Williams family's sweet corn moved from Deerfield to urban grocery markets, Native women raised maize and beans, caching the supplies they needed to sustain themselves and their families. Even then, they recognized the productivity of Deerfield's fields, and cleared and planted according to their own customs. The English who arrived as early as the 1670s moved into a Native landscape rather than a virgin land.¹

That acknowledged, the first settlers imposed an order that has persisted. English families in the 17th-century Connecticut

Excerpted from Historic Deerfield Magazine, Autumn 2011

RiverValley organized linear villages of homelots surrounded by common fields. On paper, fragments of the first plan for Deerfield survive from the 1680s, showing the north end of the Street, tillage lots in the north meadows, and Pine Hill. Maps flatten reality. Deerfield was ruder and cruder in its first hundred years than most visitors can now discern. Surveyors sited the Common on high ground. From there the grade dropped away to a lower plateau where the north and south ends of the Street stretch out, punctuated by higher knobs and swampy streambeds where the Deerfield River once sculpted its way to and fro across the valley. What we now see is the artifice of more than 200 years of road and then trolley track crews that smoothed the bumpy past.²

The Deerfield River is the town's most important architect. It cut the plateaus on which surveyors platted lines and builders built. It flooded in the spring with winter's melt, layering silt on some of the richest fields in New England. Its inundations precluded most forms of domestic architecture or road making in the bottom lands. The modern highway stays dry because its builders sensibly placed it on the edge of the meadows, above normal flood stages. Sensible settlers built there, too.

In a way, the town is an island. Hemmed in on the east by a high ridge and surrounded on the other three sides by

the broad meadows, the village could not grow like Chicago or Philadelphia by developing and extending a grid. Nor was it well suited for milling. While members of the Stebbins family exploited the river's fall line to run small milling operations at the edge of the western hills, the land is too flat in the meadows to provide sufficient and consistent power for industrial production. It was and remains an ideal place for many kinds of agriculture, especially commercial agriculture.

While the photographic view of Deerfield taken in 1867 from Pocumtuck Ridge seems to show a timeless Arcadian landscape, the reality was more complicated. Farmers contended with at least three problems in the late 17th and 18th centuries: farming habits centered on the household, markets were remote, and settlers confronted intermittent violence. The first resulted in an effort to distribute land relatively equally and in small lots to provide for household needs, a common practice in 17th-century New England. But the outcome of that decision locked in some 17th-century perspectives about society and land use for more than a century and a half. The second, largely out of local control, had economic consequences; Deerfield was far away from urban markets, transportation was crude, and people in the community would have to devise ways of making money with those realities in mind. The final point—that its inhabitants were ex-



Above: Residence of Asa and E. W. Stebbins. Vignette on 1855 wall map of Deerfield surveyed by Benjamin Clark; published in Philadelphia by Richard Clark. 82.012

Right: John Sheldon house (the "Old Indian House"); built in 1699, demolished in 1848. Photographic postcard taken from an 1847 daguerreotype.



posed to imperial conflicts—insured that security would be a recurring problem, retarding the settlement of the region. Deerfield's economy took off after peace came and contiguous towns developed.

Crossroads of Conflict · Timing is important. When Deerfield and Northfield were imagined and laid out in the 1660s and early 1670s, the proprietors and their agents projected a landscape that looked much like that farther down the Connecticut River Valley in Wethersfield, Connecticut, and Springfield, Hadley, and Hatfield, Massachusetts. While the histories and landscapes of these communities varied, they were organized around farming rather than defense. King Philip's War was in the future. So were the episodes of the French and Indian Wars. Deerfield's plan was an effective way of organizing a farming community, but the long linear plan made it difficult to defend.

Optimistic projections made in times of peace collided with the reality of war. Deerfield was abandoned in 1675, resettled in 1682, and sacked in 1704 by a French-led military assault with Indian allies. Defensive precautions shaped the early Deerfield landscape in the form of a stockade and at least two fortified houses, but security improved as authorities pushed the Massachusetts's defensive perimeter north and west. None of the town's standing houses predate the raid of 1704, although a few 17th-century houses of the best sort—notably the Ensign John Sheldon house—made it into the era of photography. Preservationists lament that house's demolition, but the event reminds us that tourists and residents often differ on what elements of the historic landscape are worth saving. The 1848 homeowners, confronted by the dilapidated condition of the structure apparent in the photograph and by frequent intrusions of tourists and curiosity seekers who wanted to see the place, saw history as a burden and razed the 148-year-old structure despite the efforts of some townspeople to raise money to move it. Like their neighbors who had already edited away much of the past landscape, they remade the town according to their own sensibilities, unwilling to remain handmaidens to the town's most famous event.³

Defensive operations had a direct impact on the town. In the 1740s and late 1750s, Massachusetts authorities provisioned many of the forts and troops it maintained in the west via government contracts. Such patronage benefitted the local economy. A number of the town's 18th-century houses date to mid-century when an infusion of cash and credit from military operations provided the means for at least some families to build center passage houses and large barns and cowhouses.⁴

Security improved in 1763 as the British took possession of New France, but military patronage dried up, and expanding populations in contiguous towns altered the economic relationship of Deerfield and its hinterlands. By then the town had a mature landscape of homelots with gardens, orchards, and barnyards linked to relatively small plots of tillage, mowing, pasture, and woodland scattered about town. Dominated by families that had held on and prospered in the community since the attack of 1704, the town's population growth slowed even as improvements to the landscape continued. The best farmland near the center of town was taken. Few newcomers had the financial resources to acquire it even if they could have persuaded one of the families in town to sell. Prime tillage in the meadows cost about \$200 an acre in the 1790s, meaning that a purchase of even ten acres—insufficient for sustainable farming—cost more than any house in the village. Most settlers moving to the region and many children from Deerfield moved to other communities or went into trades.⁵

Stockyard · What visitors to the town cannot see today are the large barns and cowhouses that once supported the village's agricultural economy between the 1760s and the 1850s. Generally set back of the house and nearly on the northern lot line of the family homelot, these buildings often dwarfed the dwellings along the Street. Only the barns behind the Anna and Hinsdale Williams house, moved to the property after a fire destroyed an earlier barn, and the barns behind the Ashley house give visitors a sense of how crowded many of these lots appeared at the beginning of the 19th century.

Below: Early 20th-century photograph of the Sheldon House, showing agricultural outbuildings behind the family's residence.





Top: United States Department of Agriculture aerial photo of the North and South Meadows, and Deerfield village, late 1960s. Evidence of the original plan of houselots and fields can still be seen.

Above: Photograph by Pelham Bradford looking south along The Street, 1867-1869. The Ashley house is seen on the right, prior to its removal off The Street to the rear of Lot 2 in May 1869. Courtesy of Peter S. Miller.

Missing, too, are most of the cattle and the seasonal arrival and departure of stall-fed oxen that quickened the village's economy. Humans had set out the lot lines, but in many ways the animals and town plan controlled what happened within the village's yards and meadows."

The landscape problem came down to this: many families had very fine tillage and mowing land close to the village, but secure pasture was inconveniently distributed. Homelots were too small to lodge many animals unless confined to the barn and yard. In a pasture, cattle grazed on their own with minimal supervision; in a barnyard, farmers had to store large amounts of fodder, move it to the animals, and clear away manure. Such work was labor intensive and depended on the careful management of resources.

Negotiating new uses of the meadows to increase pasture was politically troublesome. Individual families owned long narrow lots in the common fields that surrounded the town's plateau, good for plowing but not for managing livestock. Only the perimeter of the meadows was fenced to keep free ranging hogs and cattle out. Changing the uses of individual lots in the meadows, particularly if they involved the introduction of animals to the fields, meant that everyone had to agree on when and what was to happen. Changes set off a chain reaction of disputes among owners and neighbors, making it easier to work with the existing system of land use.

The solution to the problem of where to put some of the animals, at least during the summer, lay in the upland communities that developed on the borders of Deerfield in the 1760s. Upland farms on hilly terrain had more pasture than tillage and welcomed the rental income. Many Deerfield

farmers sent cattle to upland families during the growing season. After the harvest they brought the animals back to town to graze on the stubble left in the common fields and confined the animals to the barnyard over the winter. They also bought surplus cattle from uplanders who did not have enough feed to carry all their animals through the winter. While the stall-feeding system required disciplined work, it clustered that work close to home during the coldest months of the year, normally a farmer's slack time.

Consequently, Deerfield changed seasonally as its population of cattle waxed and waned. It also smelled and looked a good deal different than it does now, with piles of manure set aside to rot before spreading on the fields. Homelot families depended upon extensive fencing to control cattle moving up and down the Street and inside feedlots. Fence designs exhibited hierarchies of finish, communicating taste and practicality. Formal picket fences like the current examples at the north end once lined almost the entire Street in the 19th century. Post and rail fences marked the boundaries of yards to the sides and rear. These landscape features formed important control points, but mattered most when the cattle were in the feedlots. Daily life involved change as the population of cattle surged in December and faded in April when drovers set off for the Brighton market.

At other times of year, farmers concentrated on planting, harvesting, processing, and storing the hay and provender (a mixture of peas and oats) that sustained the business. Many invested in large barns, cowhouses and feeding stalls adjacent to the barn to ease the labor of moving fodder, hay, and straw for bedding. It was a business in which men schemed for bragging rights over who had produced the fattest animal. To encourage weight gain and docile behavior, they fed the animals by hand and treated them like pampered pets. Confined in close quarters, the fat cattle drank as much water as they liked, exercised as little as possible and added up to a third of their starting weight in three to four months.

Valley cattle thus had a well-deserved reputation for quality. In essence, Deerfield's stockmen bought low and sold high, taking advantage of the limitations and opportunities of their particular landscape. As visitors study the Sheldon house that once sheltered multiple generations, they need to remember that the barn and yards out back were profitable enough to sustain the livelihoods of all the people who lived there. The small remnant of one of the barn's early sheds survives as a reminder of the family's agricultural roots.

Brooms and Tobacco · Many Deerfield farmers and neighbors in the Connecticut River Valley also raised broom corn dur-

ing the first half of the 19th century. The crop complemented the beef business providing farmers and hired help with work making brooms that were retailed in eastern cities, particularly New York. Although the crop was ruined by early frosts, once harvested it was easy to store in the sheds that were attached to many Deerfield barns. The equipment for making brooms did not take up much space and was relatively cheap. The valley's broom corn with its flat, wider bristles differed from the plant now grown for brush; when competition from the newer varieties emerged in the 1850s, the local broom industry went into decline, unable to compete with superior products raised on Midwestern farms.⁷

Tobacco eventually replaced broom corn as a cash crop. The 1867 view from Pocumtuck Ridge shows newly built drying sheds on several Deerfield homelots. Their long narrow foot print and louvered ventilators at the ridge line formed a distinctive profile on the landscape. In other instances, families repurposed older hay barns as drying sheds, replacing siding with hinged doors, to promote airflow. The aisle barn behind the J. E. Moors house is a surviving example of such a conversion. While some families had raised tobacco much earlier in the Connecticut River Valley, expanded production in Deerfield coincided with the decline of the fat cattle trade, the broom corn business, and the growth in cigar smoking during the Civil War. Tobacco, a labor intensive crop during all phases of production and curing, was well suited to the small lots that the original settlers had laid out in the 17th century. Many farmers grew it on the back sections of homelots, adjacent to gardens and orchards, and in some portions of the meadows. For the next century, tobacco was a part of the planting mix in the community and the tobacco drying sheds form the largest remnant of agricultural outbuildings left in town.⁸

Memory and Modernism · Deerfield's landscape changed significantly in the five decades after the Civil War. Women increasingly inherited or bought the old houses along the Street. They leased the meadowlands they acquired with the old houses to the farmers who remained or immigrated to the area. Women became the backbone of the town's Arts and Crafts revival and antiquarian interests. These changes had important consequences for the landscape. They allowed some of the remaining farmers to acquire the use of farmland in sufficient acreage to expand mechanized production and economies of scale. The landscape itself presented obstacles to development because it was too prone to flooding to use for housing or industry, and too valuable for farming to abandon to weeds and trees. Many people residing in town lacked



Detail from the 1855 Benjamin Clark map of Deerfield showing the Town Common, the Pocumtuck Hotel and its "Billiard & Bowling Rooms." 82.012

the means to make many changes to their houses, and those who did often prized history over convenience. So the domestic architecture of the town largely survived, but many of the old barns and outbuildings that no longer mattered to their owners were razed or succumbed to neglect. It was this subtle process of change that preserved the landscape of domesticity and effaced the working yards and buildings that created so much of the town's history and appearance.

For the past century, Deerfield's historic landscape complemented the increasingly important business of education. While the north and south ends of The Street retained many historic homes, various owners had made and remade the center plateau on either side of the common. There, on the old site of the 1704 raid, stood the homes and yards of Deerfield's commercial center, an Italianate villa, a new building for Deerfield Academy in an eclectic style, and at one point a three-story hotel with a bowling alley. As Deerfield Academy expanded during the height of the post-war colonial revival in the 1950s and 60s, these 19th-century structures were moved or demolished to make way for dormitories in the early colonial American style. The village became more uniform architecturally as Historic Deerfield's founders, Henry and Helen Flynt, moved four historic buildings into town from other locations and repositioned old structures on their original sites. Their efforts, and those of others less prominent, formed one more episode in the complex layering of Deerfield's landscape."

When I can come back to Deerfield on an August morning, the changes stand in relief. I am old enough to remember before the new dorms went up and when many of the elm trees, some of them planted before the 1810s during an early beautification effort, were felled by Dutch Elm disease. I listen for the faint sounds of the river and think about what is different . . . and how much is still here for those who would notice it and think about what it means. Then I head for the sweet corn, because some things besides history have enduring worth.

ENDNOTES

1. William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 54-81.
2. Susan McGowan and Amelia F. Miller, *Family and Landscape: Deerfield Homelots from 1671* (Deerfield, MA: Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association, 1996), xvii-xxxi.
3. Evan Haefeli and Kevin Sweeney, *Captors and Captives: The French and Indian Raid on Deerfield* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003).
4. Kevin Sweeney, "Mansion People: Kinship, Class and Architecture in Western Massachusetts in the Mid-Eighteenth Century," *Winterthur Portfolio* 19 (Winter 1984): 231-55; "River Gods in the Making: The Williamsses of Western Massachusetts," in: The Bay and the River, Peter Benes (Ed.), *Proceedings, The Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife* (Boston: Boston University Press, 1981): 101-17.
5. J. Ritchie Garrison, *Landscape and Material Life in Franklin County, Massachusetts, 1770-1860* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 65-93.
6. *Ibid.*, 115-49.
7. Gregory Nobles, "Commerce and Continuity: A Case Study of the Rural Broom-making Business in Antebellum Massachusetts," *Journal of the Early Republic* (Fall 1984): 287-308.
8. James F. O'Gorman, *Connecticut Valley Vernacular: The Vanishing Landscape and Architecture of the New England Tobacco Fields* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).
9. McGowan and Miller, *Family and Landscape*, xxvii-xxxi.