

INTRODUCTION

How did Bedford, Massachusetts, come to appear on so many postcards? Let us consider some of the ingredients of Bedford's history.

First, there was the land. It was sufficiently fertile to be desirable to settlers in the early 17th century. There were some fast-flowing streams to run the gristmills, essential to early New England life. The land was fairly level, suitable for plowing, and most of it was upland rather than low-lying swamp. Farmers settled and built houses, sowed crops, and raised families. Another feature of the land was a geological quirk: mineral springs that gained a reputation for possessing healing properties. In 1843, the Springs Hotel was opened to accommodate the many visitors to Bedford's famous waters.

For more than two centuries, Bedford remained primarily a farm town, growing very slowly over the years. It had all the charms of a small rural community: old New England houses, old New England traditions, winding country roads, and a picturesque village center with a church on the Town Common. Some wealthy Bostonians found themselves drawn to these charms. Among them was Charles Jenks, a Boston businessman who withdrew from his profession and became a gentleman farmer in Bedford when he inherited Fitch Tavern.

A very important factor in Bedford's history has always been the town's proximity to Boston. From the earliest farming days, Boston was a market for Bedford's farm products and firewood. When the railroad came in 1873, Bedford was drawn closer to the city. A few factories, such as the Bedford Safety Razor Company, sprang up near the station, and this became the town's industrial and transportation center. Meanwhile, the small business district that ran from the common westward and along North Road to the intersection of Carlisle Road continued in operation, but it changed very little in the century that followed. The rest of the area around the Town Common remained mostly residential. The train also made it practical for some people to live in Bedford and work in Boston; for example, Arthur W. Blake, who built Fairwick on Hillside Avenue. A few mansions were built on extensive grounds, and as some of them became available for purchase, they were acquired by institutions that relished the country air and seclusion.

Examples of these are the Willard Hospital, Llewysac Lodge, and the Maryvale Seminary.

Bedford drew even closer to Boston with the coming of the Lexington & Boston Street Railway in 1900. Because Bedford had a suitable tract of woodland along the streetcar line and was midway between Boston and Lowell, it was an ideal place for a seasonal amusement park. Lexington Park gave city and country people from all walks of life the chance to spend a pleasant and relaxing day in the shade and the fresh country air. Another recreational opportunity came when streetcars began bringing out-of-towners to a small district of summer cottages along the Concord River.

It was not country charm or rural quiet but large tracts of affordable land near Boston that brought two major institutions. The federal government bought two adjoining properties on Springs Road and opened the US Veterans' Hospital in 1928. Bedford's officials had campaigned strenuously to have the town chosen as the site. In 1941, the federal government, seeing a need for a second airport in the Boston area, built a civilian airport on land that the state was able to acquire through eminent domain. The thinly populated southern end of Bedford, with some farmland and much scrubland, was chosen as the airport site despite the opposition of Bedford residents.

The most important factor throughout Bedford's history has been the spirit of its people. From the earliest days of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, they had governed

themselves. In 1729, a handful of families in a thinly settled area received permission to incorporate the Town of Bedford. This meant that they had to find the resources among themselves to build a meetinghouse, hire and pay a minister, start a school, and elect a full complement of town officials. Their tradition of self-government gave them the confidence and skill to do this for themselves. When this tradition was put to the test in 1775, nearly every able-bodied Bedford man of military age took up arms to defend it. Bedford is very proud of its founders and defenders, as can clearly be seen in images of their houses and the sites associated with the American Revolution. Today, Bedford's people still participate in the world's purest form of democracy, the open town meeting. All of Bedford's registered voters can participate, speak their minds, and help to set the course for their community.

Bedford's churches have played a central role. The town's original parish divided itself between Congregationalists and Unitarians in the 1830s. By the 1880s, the town's Yankee farmers had been joined by enough Catholic immigrants from Ireland and elsewhere to support a Catholic chapel.

Bedford people have always been community minded. This can be seen not only in town government but also in the town's social organizations. For example, one of the largest and most active groups was the Bedford Grange. From 1909 until the middle of the 20th century, most of the town belonged to the grange. This and many other social groups have contributed to Bedford's vibrant community life. For much of its history, Bedford was very conservative, and most of the voters were Republicans. Bedford was a temperance town, prohibiting the sale of liquor from 1888 to 1913.

The post-World War II construction boom brought profound change to Bedford. Farmers found that their greatest source of profit was not agricultural products but house lots. Bedford's population surged. Houses, schools, churches, and industrial and commercial buildings were erected in record numbers. Bedford finally had enough schoolchildren to fill a high school of its own. Motels and shopping centers were built along the Great Road. Through it all, Bedford's residents managed to do some very effective planning. They also put a great deal of effort into historic preservation. Today, industrial parks are tucked into the landscape, mostly in peripheral areas of the town. The bulk of the retail district has moved to the eastern end of the Great Road, leaving the original village center around the Town Common looking much the same as it did 100 years ago. Though no longer a small farming community, Bedford still retains much of its New England village charm.