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# ECHOES OF A NEW ENGLAND PAST:

## *The Hopkinton Town Green*

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*As one drives around New York State's North Country—especially in the northeastern counties—it's not difficult to spot unpainted 3-bay English barns, small family graveyards in farmers' fields, maple "sugarhouses" with their prominent cupolas, even generations-old, hardy lilac bushes. All are reminders of New Englanders' traditions, transplanted here by early settlers attempting to re-create a way of life familiar to them. So, too, is the village green, a land use practice of shared public space with a rich history and purpose, which is often maintained by communities to this day.*

Local people who travel from Potsdam to Malone often choose to take Route 11B, because "they can make better time. It's shorter, more direct, and there are fewer small towns with speed limits to slow you

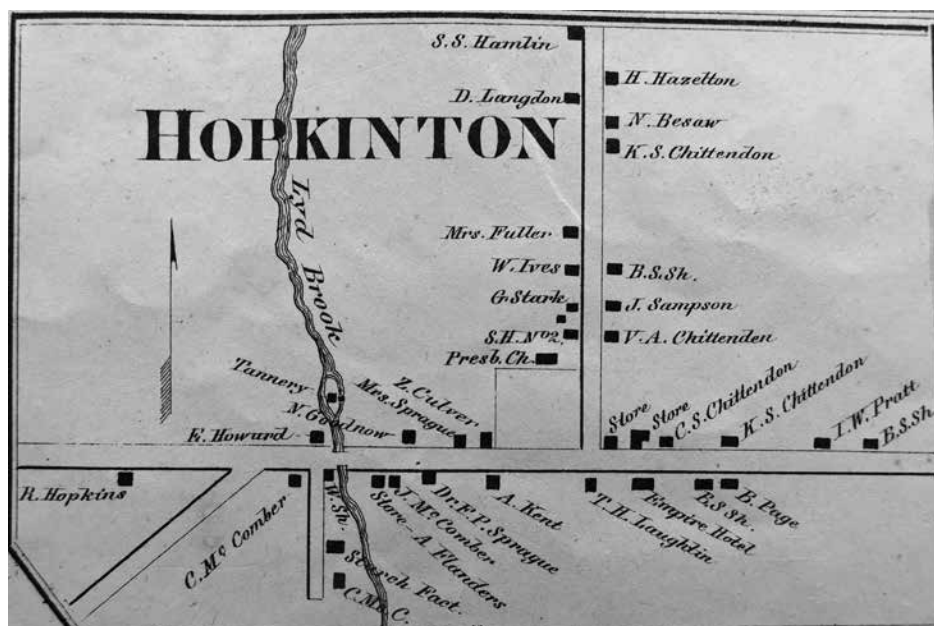
down" along the way. Typical of those towns is Hopkinton—a settlement of about 300 people today—with farmland at either end and a handful of modest houses in a mix of styles, a convenience store and gas station, a couple of other small local businesses, a volunteer fire department, and no traffic lights. In the center of the hamlet, however, is one feature to distinguish it from others along this route: a grove of stately tall maple trees, surrounded by a white clapboard church, a town hall, and the town library/museum in attractive, well-kept buildings of 19th-century vintage. Briefly, one might think he's mistakenly found himself in a comparable village in rural New England, several hours away. In Vermont or Connecticut, a similar combination would

be called "a village green" or "a common"; in Hopkinton, it's long been called "the park." Beyond the casual glance of the driver in a rush today, research into the history and functions of such public spaces reveals that these similarities are no coincidence and speak to an important part of American heritage.

### The Physical and Psychological Center for the Community

The concept of the village green as a public common is actually ancient in Western culture. Some historians contend that the idea of shared public spaces goes back at least as far as the Forum in Rome and the Agora in Athens (Blake 1898, 10). "The practice of setting aside 'common or undivided land' for communal ownership was transplanted to the Massachusetts Bay Colony by English settlers during the period of the Great Migration in the 1630s, and adapted to the geography and specific needs of new settlements" (Town-Greens.com 2021, 1).

At first, Puritan colonists, while undertaking the demanding task of clearing their own land for raising crops or grazing animals, often designated some communal land for pasturing or containing them when needed. By the time subsequent generations were seeking more land to settle for farms of their own, inland of the ocean, the tradition was well established; the village green represented a distinctly New England land-use pattern. In his book, *Common Landscape of America, 1580 to 1845*, John R. Stilgoe described "the 'common' or 'green,'



Detail of Hopkinton Town Green from the Beers and Beers (1865) *Topographical Atlas of St. Lawrence County, New York*. Author's personal collection.



VILLAGE GREEN, HOPKINTON.

Young maple trees in the Hopkinton Town Green from Sanford's *Early History of the Town of Hopkinton*, 1903.

called in some towns the 'meetinghouse lot' because of its proximity to the chief public structure" (Stilgoe 1982, 48). Near the turn of the 19th century, the village green, often used for a variety of public functions, like militia drills, political meetings, and even hangings, was no longer primarily for a husbandry purpose, as in earlier years of settlement, as "the shift from husbandry to farming found expression in the changing landscape" (Stilgoe, 1982, 138).

Establishing a green served more than a practical purpose for the Puritan settlers. Their sense of mission was influenced by a history of suffering from religious persecution and authoritarian rule over their lives and property in the Old World. The Mayflower Compact itself was "a collective economic agreement," agreed upon by all on board; at first, at least, the land and houses were considered joint property (Good News

Tucson 2010). Having land set aside for all to use was hardly an alien concept. Even though the original attempts at communal living failed, over the next couple of centuries, there was still a strong belief in community. As one group of historians has put it: "The spiritual health and welfare of the community as a whole was paramount as well, for it was the community that honored and kept a covenant. The integrity of the community demanded religious conformity. Dissent was tolerated, but only within strict limits" (PBS 2021) In addition, most of them were already supporters of a splinter group of "Separatist" Protestants, who called themselves Congregationalists for their belief in a church governance in which each congregation independently and autonomously runs its own affairs, including choosing their own ministers, while living in a community of fellow believers.

At first considered the official religion of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and supported by taxes on the public, it wasn't until the early 19th century that the courts determined that practice to be illegal. At the same time, westward expansion into New England states and beyond caused the Congregational churches to seek opportunities to expand. They joined the "voluntary religion" movement of the time and openly competed with other Protestant denominations—like Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists, and Universalists—for new members and churches; missionaries were dispatched to new settlements, where their churches dominated, at least for a while. For some in the 19th century, the Congregationalists' more progressive positions on abolition, education, and women's rights were attractive. Especially in smaller, rural New England communities, Congregational churches are still active today, often as members of the United Church of Christ.

Because they were the dominant religious group in New England in the beginning, "the central-most parcel of communal land in a town was usually reserved for the main street and/or the Congregational meetinghouse, which was the physical and psychological center for the Puritan community" (Town-Greens.com 2021, 2). Carol Berkin, a historian of the American colonial period, has explained how the dedication to the mission of these Puritan/Congregationalists influenced both the physical and spiritual shape of new communities:

Massachusetts colonists created tight-knit farming villages and small seaport towns



Panorama view of Hopkinton Town Green, ca. 1900–1910. Courtesy of the Hopkinton Town Historian Collection.





Photo postcard view of Hopkinton Congregational Church and Hopkinton Town Hall, ca 1930s. Author's personal collection.

in which citizens could monitor one another's behavior as well as come together in prayer. This settlement pattern fit well with the realities of New England's climate and terrain, since the short growing season and the rocky soil made large, isolated plantations [like those in the South] based on staple crops impossible. The colonists, homesick for English villages in regions such as East Anglia, did their best to reproduce familiar architecture and placement of public buildings. The result was often a hub-and-spoke design, with houses tightly clustered around a village green or common pasture, a church beside this green, and most of the fields within walking distance of the village center. (Berkin et al. 2014, 63).

Creating greens or commons that would be available to all (including, in the future, those of other faiths and backgrounds as well) became "one of the only relics of the Puritan past to survive ... [as] the oldest continually used element in town planning in America" (TownGreens.com 2021, 1). Architectural historian William Krattinger has observed:

The size of the green varied greatly across New England, depending on the needs of the town and the period in which it was first settled and developed. For some

settlements, it was too small to be anything more than a perfunctory reminder of the Puritan's original desire to live communally. Civic, religious and commercial structures commonly communicated with the green, as did dwellings sometimes (Krattinger 2013, 11).

By the late 18th century, farmers in Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Vermont realized a need for more and better land and began looking westward. In that time, "the exodus of New Englanders into New York State was one of the earliest and most significant internal migrations in the nation's history. The shift was dramatic: New York State's population grew fourfold from 1790 to 1820, largely fueled by New Englanders and their children (Krattinger 2013). In the first two decades of the 1800s, several thousand families settled in the northern New York counties of Essex, Clinton, Franklin, St. Lawrence, and Jefferson (Kosto 2005, 1734). The appeal was especially attributed to modest land prices, rich soils, and the close proximity to the New England communities that they had left behind. "In the north country, the area between the St. Lawrence and the Adirondacks became another Yankee colony. So many Green Mountain residents crossed Lake Champlain to this region

in search of land, timber, and millsites that it was designated 'New Vermont' on some early maps" (Kosto 2005, 1734–5). Some stayed and others moved on, so the Yankee migration continued for a generation or two across New York State and even into northernmost Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Iowa, and Indiana.

As was typical of other migrations in history, these New Englanders took with them to northern New York various aspects of their culture and way of life. Place names (like New Haven, Essex, Bangor, Rutland, Winthrop, Adams), foodways (cheddar cheese, johnnycake, baked beans, chowder), dialect choices ("woodchuck" for "groundhog," "brook" for "creek," "pail" rather than "bucket," "three sheets to the wind" for "drunk"), and vernacular material forms (one-and-one-half story Cape Cod houses, stone walls, and stoneware pottery) are examples of other folk traditions transplanted early by migrating families to the region as well. "Spreading across New York State and then into the Midwest, New Englanders' politics, agricultural practices, sense of community and manners became the cultural norm of life in the North during the nineteenth century" (Ellis et al. 1967, 190). Because becoming literate so that one could read Scriptures was



Hopkinton Congregational Church, 2005. Photo by Martha Cooper, courtesy of the TAUNY Archives.

a fundamental principle for Protestants, tax-supported public schools and libraries were very important in settlements as early as the 17th century. “Meetinghouses”—for worship and school—were among the first structures to be built in new communities in northern New York, too.

Geographer Donald Meinig has said that [Yankee] early settlements stamped a distinct imprint wherever they went, especially on the land (Meinig, 1979, 166). “As the New England diaspora pushed westward ... villages and towns replicated the [Connecticut and Massachusetts] model of a nucleus of churches and public buildings” (Hall 2007, 13). “They laid out villages as a ‘town green’ pattern, bordering a shared meadow with churches and home sites; this can be seen in many New York towns” (Kosto 2005, 1735).

## A Public Green, for No Other Use Whatever

Like several other towns in St. Lawrence and neighboring counties of New York, Hopkinton was founded about the turn of the 18th century, after the purchase of large tracts by land speculators, mostly from New York City. These men actively sought investors and land

agents who were adventurous enough to take a chance on land in the wilderness, “remote, unimproved, and well-removed from settled areas” (Krattinger 2013, 9). One of these men was Col. Roswell Hopkins (1757–1829), a veteran of the American Revolution, who had served as Vermont’s Secretary of State for 14 years and purchased about 7,000 acres of land in northern New York State for about \$1.50 per acre (Sanford 1903, 16). For several years, he continued to live in Vergennes on the eastern shore of Lake Champlain, while planning for the new settlement and recruiting other men to purchase land within his tract. The deed for the land that became Hopkinton was dated July 6, 1802.

In 1903, Carlton E. Sanford, a direct descendant of several of Hopkinton’s early settlers, published *The Early History of the Town of Hopkinton*, an extraordinary book based on years of his research in public documents, private diaries, and letters, as well as numerous interviews with elderly, first- and second-generation townspeople. The local history, published in honor of the town’s centennial, is as thorough and accurate as they come. According to Sanford: “The first pioneers came to these lands in 1801, among them Joel and

Samuel Goodell, who came not from Vermont but from Hartford, Washington County [near the Vermont line]. In 1803, Hopkins relocated from Vergennes to the new settlement, along with Eli Squires, Ashbel Squires, and Abraham Sheldon.” He added: “Roads were laid out and built, land was cleared, log houses erected, and other efforts mounted to bring this frontier into a more ordered and inhabitable state, and one that would encourage settlement” (Sanford 1903, 18–19; 38–43, as quoted in Krattinger 2013, 7). Hopkins kept an account book in which he recorded his transactions with the first settlers from 1803 to 1808. In that period, he listed 62 different men with whom he had done some business (Sanford 1903, 39). There were likely other men not included in his book who had relocated and women or children, so the population was growing quickly. In that same period, the Town of Hopkinton was created by the state legislature (1805), and the first town meeting was conducted at the house of Eliakim Seeley.

In those first years, joining Roswell Hopkins—who had lived in Bennington, Arlington, and Vergennes—were other Vermonters, like Eliphalet Brush (Bennington), John Henderson (Swanton), Henry McLaughlin



(Bristol), and Elisha Risdon (Dorset). Each of those communities already had village greens (and still do). Most have or have had churches and public buildings, like schoolhouses or town halls, on their perimeters; some also include the early houses of prominent families, inns or taverns, or retail stores. More than likely, many other early settlers in Hopkinton were already familiar with and desiring such a plan in their new hometown as well.

Krattinger, a historic preservation analyst for the New York State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), who prepared the nomination form for the Hopkinton green to the National Register of Historic Places in 2013, summarized the creation of the green this way:

In 1808, Roswell Hopkins deeded land to the town ‘in the consideration of his good will and respect’ for his fellow citizens and for the purpose of establishing a green, or common, upon which public buildings could be erected ‘when the inhabitants shall think proper’ [Krattinger 2013, 7]. This parcel was described as beginning at the southwest parcel of Reuben Post’s ‘home lot,’ west twenty rods, north twenty-two rods, and returning east to Post’s lot. A strip six rods wide was set off and reserved for the construction of public buildings as residents saw fit. Hopkins, also, at this date and as part of this deed, gave a separate parcel to the town for use as a burial yard. His name was later blotted out and the seal torn from this deed, to which was added the notation. (Krattinger 2013, 9)

This deed cancelled the original, and a new deed set aside another parcel of land for a burying ground. It seems that Hopkins had overextended himself financially, beginning in the 1810s, requiring the sale of property to satisfy creditors. His circumstances required him to issue a new deed for the land in 1817. All or most of Hopkins’s unsold landholdings in this area were acquired by Abraham Varick, who in 1827, confirmed the previous deed for a village green and associated building lot. However, Varick did not convey the land to the town, as Hopkins had. Instead, he transferred title to Bushnell Moore, Gaius Sheldon, and Zoraster Culver, trustees of the First Congregational Church Society: ‘for the inhabitants of the town, to be used for a public Green or Common and for no other use whatever’ (Sanford 1903, 122). The green and building lots were described separately; this was, nevertheless, the same property as originally deeded by Hopkins in 1808 (Krattinger, 2013, 7–9; Sanford 1903, 121–6).

The first building, erected opposite the northeast corner of the green, was the “old stone schoolhouse” or meetinghouse, built in 1815. It was a two-story building, with a meeting room on the second floor to be used for both religious and civic purposes. Consistent with New Englanders’ commitment to literate citizens, even before the schoolhouse, “In 1810 a circulating library was established, with \$115 put forward for that purpose by

45 subscribers” (Hough 1853, 323). “In 1820 it was voted that the town room was for the exclusive use of the Congregational Society—though town business continued to be conducted there” (Sanford 1903, 136). By then, a Baptist congregation had organized, and the decision left them without a place to meet in town, at least until they could build for themselves. (Other denominations were eventually established in the Town of Hopkinton, with church buildings of their own: Methodist Episcopal in Fort Jackson, 1839; Freewill Baptist in Fort Jackson, 1844; Holy Cross Roman Catholic in Hopkinton, 1876; and Universalist in Fort Jackson, 1896.) While the Congregationalists had first begun meeting in members’ homes in 1808, they lacked a permanent minister until 1814, and finally constructed their first house of worship in 1827, next to the meetinghouse and facing the green. Built in the classic Asher Benjamin/New England style—with box pews, a tall steeple in several stages, ample lighting with clear glass windows, and white clapboard exterior—it was entirely reminiscent of churches that Hopkinton’s pioneers knew well. And don’t assume those descendants of Puritans didn’t know how to have a good time! According to one account, the heavy frame took two days to erect, during which time the team of men raising the building consumed 10 gallons of whiskey (Sanford 1903, 139).



Panorama view of Hopkinton Town Green, 2005. Photo by Martha Cooper, courtesy of the TAUNY Archives.



Hopkinton town museum and public library in former Zoraster Culver house (1838) and town offices in converted horse barn. Photo by Martha Cooper, courtesy of the TAUNY Archives.

Hopkins' old account book showed that there were about 30 men, some with their families, in the settlement by the end of 1804. To provide for basic needs of the pioneer families, within the next few years Col. Hopkins made sure that both a gristmill and a sawmill were constructed next to the brook. Asheries to process the ashes of hardwood trees, felled to clear land, for crops and a tannery to treat animal hides were built to get some needed cash and goods into settlers' hands. While Sanford's sources remembered some log cabins and shanties built at first, the first frame house was erected by Abraham Sheldon in 1809. In that same year, Henry McLaughlin built a log house for a hotel on land that would become part of the village green; in 1814, his son Thaddeus built a two-story frame hotel on the south side of the green. In a couple of years, Artemas Kent purchased the land next door and built an imposing farmhouse facing the green as well. Both would remain in those families for decades.

On a lot on the southwest corner of the green deeded to Samuel Wilson by Hopkins in 1817, Wilson built a house and a store. After razing the Wilson house in 1838, Zoraster Culver built a new house and a separate store adjacent to the green; this store was subsequently moved, then moved a second time, and converted into a dwelling, but later, was destroyed by fire (Sanford 1903, 87). Each of the houses was built in a vernacular version of Federal style that had been popular for several decades in New England. Surrounded by the meetinghouse to serve both the spiritual and civic needs of the young community, homes of prominent early families, a hotel/tavern and a store, the Hopkinton green now bore a close resemblance to the hometowns that these Vermonters had left behind. It was decades later before other buildings appeared on the green, either because they replaced existing buildings or were additions to the site.

The earliest known map depicting the green was drawn about 1820 for Hopkins, showing the developing hamlet and the green, located at the intersection of the road to Fort Jackson and the St. Lawrence Turnpike [reproduced opposite page 84 in Sanford's (1903) history]. The green is also shown on the map of Hopkinton included in the 1865 Beers' *New Topographical Atlas of St. Lawrence County*—it appears as a square-shaped parcel by that time; the meetinghouse, labeled on the map as Presbyterian [an error], occupies a position immediately north of it, while the residence of Zoraster Culver is shown at the southwest corner (Beers and Beers 1865, 41).

Nearly two centuries have passed since those early days of settlement. The green and surrounding buildings have seen some significant changes in that time, but the principal features have remained remarkably the same. In the meantime, authors of a popular history of St. Lawrence County, published in 1878, made this observation about Hopkinton and its origins:



Among the families that first settled here and whose representatives yet remain were the Hopkins, Laughlins, Sheldons, Spragues, Chittendens, and others, who came from New England and brought with them the ideas peculiar to that section. Hence, the village has its commons, wide, tree-planted streets, spacious dooryards, and large lots, affording every resident a goodly portion of nature's heritage, and a combination of the best features of rural and village life. (Durant and Peirce 1878, 321)

For a current description, here are brief highlights from the nomination of the green prepared in 2013 by Krattinger:

The Hopkinton Green is a small landscaped parcel that is characterized by a level grassy area interspersed with mature maple trees and a smaller number of coniferous trees. It is roughly square in shape, though on the northwest side it follows the curving course defined by Church Street.... A number of small-scale features... are located on the green ... the

Bicentennial Gazebo, [ca. 2002], installed to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the formation of the town; a small playground area; three cast-iron electric lampposts; and a wood sign. Damage sustained in a 1998 ice storm accounted for the loss of some of the green's mature maple trees; however, efforts were immediately undertaken to replace these with new plantings.

[Built in 1870 to replace the deteriorating stone meetinghouse], the Town Hall is a single-story brick building erected above a stone foundation; it measures approximately 58 by 40 feet, not inclusive of a small frame lean-to on the west side.... It is oriented to face southwards towards Church Street and the green.... A semi-circular cut marble panel, located beneath the gable's apex, reads "TOWN HALL 1870"... Exterior ornamentation, while restrained, nevertheless conveys traits associated with the prevailing Italianate style of that period.

The Congregational Church [was built in 1892 on the same location as the original church building after a disastrous fire destroyed the original the previous

year]. It is a frame building erected above a foundation of coursed, rough-hewn red sandstone, quarried from a nearby Hopkinton location.... The exterior is sheathed with a combination of narrow-width clapboard and wood shingles ... that relate the building to the "free classic" phase of the Queen Anne style.... The windows [in] the worship space are fitted with period stained glass; each of these windows was donated in memory of an early Hopkinton settler. The interior is remarkably intact and displays the bulk of its historic-period finishes and the original Akron plan layout. The worship space features an auditorium-style arrangement with slip pews arranged on a curved plan and downward-sloping floor ... facing westward towards the pulpit. (Krattinger 2013, 4–5)

Because the former Culver house facing the west side of the green has undergone numerous major changes to its original architecture over time, SHPO would designate it as "a contributing factor" but not of architectural significance to qualify it for inclusion in the



Veterans' Memorial Gazebo, project of Hopkinton Historical Group for town bicentennial, 2002. Photo by the author.



district for the Register. The Town of Hopkinton acquired the property in 1985, and had the house renovated for the local history museum and public library. In 2016, the town board authorized construction of a one-story frame building (on adjacent land) for several town offices and a courtroom, in an attractive traditional style, befitting the historic nature of others on the green.

As for the green itself, it's not clear how or when it became more of a landscaped park than an open field that, for nearly a century, had accommodated the likes of local militia training exercises, July 4th celebrations, and traveling circuses. By 1917, a Connecticut historian was writing:

A characteristic feature of the village greens of early times was the absence of shade trees; with few exceptions, this seems to have been the rule. In these modern times, when the village green is kept up, the presence of shade trees is as characteristic as their absence was formerly. Some of the New England village greens possess many beautiful and picturesque shade trees. (Dennis 1917, 6)

A photograph of the Hopkinton green taken in 1902 that appears opposite page 122 of Sanford's (1903) history shows very young maple trees, possibly meaning the area had previously been cleared for open green space. In a recent conversation, Town Historian Mary Converse told me, "From the perimeter of the green looking inward, the old trees stand in exact rows, meaning the planning was carefully thought out and executed as a park" (Personal communication, Mary Converse, September 28, 2018). In fact, it may have been about that time that local people began to refer to their "green" as "the park," and it has been referred to that way for as long as anyone alive can remember.

Hopkinton's park was hardly unique in the North Country. To this day, people of Malone, Gouverneur, and Norwood, for example, take advantage of the prescience of the early settlers who set aside open space in the center of their downtowns for public use. The stories of Potsdam's and Canton's greens are similar to that of Hopkinton's and their Yankee predecessors. (Village maps in the Beers and Beers (1865) *Topographical Atlas* and the 1885 lithographic prints of panoramic, birds-eye

views of both Potsdam and Canton by L. R. Burleigh of Troy, New York, clearly illustrate the layout of the greens and the several buildings around them.)

For each, Congregationalist missionaries first helped organize a congregation that decided to become Presbyterians a few years later. Each built their first church buildings on their greens in the 1820s, and each was soon to be surrounded by public buildings for school or government, churches of other denominations, and the homes of prominent families.

The Canton version of their green's history is even more like that of Hopkinton's. For the bicentennial of the Canton church, a member of the congregation wrote:

The first task was to find a suitable plot of land on which to build the church. Joseph Barnes and Silas Wright [the future Governor of New York State and United States Senator], who together owned a swampy field, which included much of the present public park and the church property, donated the land to be used for 'church purposes' and for a public common area.... The deeds for these two-and-one-half acres were conveyed to the trustees of the church on October 29 and



Children playing on playground in the town green, Town Hall behind, 2005. Photo by Mary A. Converse, Hopkinton Town Historian.

November 12, 1827. When the trustees took possession of the property, the land was little more than a marsh covered with stumps of trees and undergrowth.... For a number of years the entire property was maintained by the trustees of the church. Because the upkeep presented a major economic drain, and because some of the land was intended as a common area, officials representing the Village of Canton agreed to take over the maintenance of the park portion of the property. However, the trustees of the church retained the right to approve what organized activities were permitted in the common area. (Hornung 2009, 8)

Canton's green was also transformed from a field into a very attractive park by the end of the first century. The marsh was cleared and trees were planted. The Presbyterians' impressive granite structure, built in 1876 with a slate roof, two turrets, and a slender steeple, still dominates the park and the entire downtown streetscape of Canton. A large ornamental fountain and a Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) drinking fountain were added in the 1890s, as was a sculpture of a Union Soldier to commemorate local men who served in the Civil War, erected by the H. T. Martyn Post of the Grand Army of the Republic. This park has continued to be the site of many of Canton's most important and memorable community events, right up to the present.

## The Concourse of the People

In a description of the 17th-century village green in New Haven, Connecticut—one of the Puritans' first settlements and a model for many communities to follow—an author said: "The Green was designated not as a park or a mere pleasure ground but as a place for public buildings, for military parades, for the meeting of buyers and sellers, for the concourse of the people for all such public uses" (Blake 1898, 10). That was surely the intent of Roswell Hopkins as well. Although no complete records exist after 200 years, there is enough evidence from diaries, local newspapers, and oral accounts to conclude that his plan has been honored and maintained by Hopkinton residents all that time.



Celebration of Town of Hopkinton Bicentennial in town green, 2002. Photo by the author.

Elisha Risdon (1782–1851) first came with the Hopkins' men in 1804 and lived on a small farm there until his death in 1851. Educated in a Vermont academy, he was an active reader and prolific writer, keeping a detailed diary of his own and community life for over 40 years. Here are a few selections from many entries in his diary that refer to events likely held in the park:

September 4, 1815, This is training day. (278)

July 4, 1819, the American flag is hoisted on the green. Some firing of guns. (284)

June 14, 1833, Boys in village firing the big gun. (298)

June 2, 1835, The New York caravan of wild beasts passed this morning, exhibit at the village this afternoon. (319)

July 4, 1835, Guns are roaring today. Can hear them. (321)

October 2, 1837, Circus exhibition at the village. (340)

June 27, 1840, Boys all at artillery training in the village. (357)

September 22, 1840, Exhibition of two elephants and other foreign animals at the village. (358)

March 9, 1844, Exhibition at the village last evening. The fiddle a-going again. (373)

July 4, 1844, Cannons are roaring. (374)

November 5, 1844, Election day, have voted. Much noise and rough language to be heard. Several got intoxicated. The result will be anxiously awaited. (375)

July 4, 1846, The day is celebrated in several towns in the county. There is a collection in the village. (387)  
(Sanford 1903, 264–402)

Years later, John M. Harran (1904–1963) recalled social activities in Hopkinton during the years he was growing up, in the first couple of decades of the 20th century. He recalled ice cream socials during the summer, served by the Ladies Aid Society (LAS) of the Congregational Church. He said, "This usually brought quite a crowd and the LAS really cleaned up on it as everyone came, including the summer people [from Lake Ozonia]." He also remembered a traveling medicine show that would come to town for a week or two for several summers and set up in the park, concerts played by local brass bands, and traveling motorcades of politicians running for office, who gathered crowds and gave speeches (Harran 1962, 6–8).

For the last century, the park, church, and hall have continued to play vital roles in the life of Hopkinton as a community, year after year. Some activities were reported in local newspapers; many more are recalled in oral accounts from local people. Like most of the smallest towns in the North Country, Hopkinton never has had a weekly or daily newspaper. Some events or activities in Hopkinton would be reported in newspapers in Potsdam, Ogdensburg, or Massena, but several personal





Unveiling of National Register of Historic Places plaque for Hopkinton Town Green Historic District, 2019. Photo by the author.

diaries have turned out to be the most thorough and accurate reports. Many other events may well have occurred without any historical record of them.

Probably, particularly memorable for those who attended was a quick visit and a speech by former President Theodore Roosevelt in 1910, while on a tour of the North Country. Some other noteworthy mentions include a 1917 reception and picnic to honor “the boys of the town of Hopkinton who leave September 5 for training camps ... in the park if the weather is favorable. Dinner will be served at sharp noon. It is hoped Colonel Sackett of Gouverneur will be present to give an address at 2 o’clock.... Let us see to it that we give our boys a grand send-off, tho’ our hearts may be sad” (Burnett 2008, 538). According to an account in the *Ogdensburg Journal*, in August, 1934, over 500 people attended a barbecue served by the women of the Congregational Church, when “many tables were set in the park and a large number served at a sitting. The grounds were brilliantly lighted for the occasion” (*Ogdensburg Journal* 1934, 11). In 1955, the Fort Jackson Grange sponsored a community church service with Fr. Antonio Audet of Holy Cross Church in Hopkinton, and with ministers and a combined choir of Protestant churches in Hopkinton, Nicholville, and Fort Jackson participating. And on

July 4, 1977, the 100th anniversary of Holy Cross Church was celebrated in the park, with a Liturgy of Thanksgiving and a parish picnic, with many attending, joined by Bishop Brzana of the Diocese of Ogdensburg. More recently, the park has been home to community activities of all kinds—weddings, strawberry festivals, firemen’s barbecues and field days, annual town-wide summer festivals, and more.

If we take into account the many public events at the Town Hall itself, with occasional extra activities in the park, the list is much longer. From a sampling of newspaper notices and accounts, beginning as early as 1866, there are reports of voting, town meetings, public hearings, justice court, political caucuses, church suppers, pancake breakfasts, musical performances, school plays, and Christmas parties, as well as fiddlers’ contests, movie nights in the 1920s and 1930s, and dances of all kinds through the years. There was a women’s suffrage meeting and talk in the hall in 1915, a diphtheria clinic in 1936 during an epidemic, a coroner’s inquest for a murder that took place in the town in 1940, an impromptu V-J Day parade and celebration in 1945, and an emergency shelter with heat, electricity, and food for anyone who wished during the Ice Storm of 1998 (that lasted as long as a month for some).

On the weekend of July 20, 2002, hundreds of local people and visitors gathered in Hopkinton to celebrate the town’s bicentennial. Planners had gone all out to mark the occasion. Events ranged from a parade (with eighty entries!) to a chicken barbecue, from an ecumenical church service to a tractor pull, with the two days of festivities ending with a giant birthday cake and fireworks for a grand finale. Most of these events took place in the park (or the town hall, the church, and museum). In the years following the special anniversary, the Hopkinton Historical Group—volunteers interested in local history—continued to work with town officials to renovate the former Culver house on the west side of the park for a museum, with displays of donated artifacts and programs to interpret them. In addition, they have made several improvements to the park itself, including a gazebo honoring the memory of local veterans and a memorial walkway of locally quarried sandstone slabs.

When Town Historian Mary Converse first thought of nominating a local site for the National Register of Historic Places, she focused on the Congregational Church, with its well-documented history and prominent location in the community. After approaching officials of the New York State Historic Preservation Office, she was encouraged by them to nominate the green, church, and town as a historic district—a group of buildings or sites deemed historically or architecturally significant. With the assistance of Bill Krattinger, at the time SHPO’s program officer for northern counties, the nomination form was completed, approved by the state and national review boards, and officially placed on the National Register as the Hopkinton Green Historic District in 2013. In the summer of 2019, the historical group planned a celebration of the recognition, complete with dedication of a mounted plaque that reads, in part:

The park and buildings represent a distinct New England land-use pattern typical of settlers who migrated westward. By the early 1800s, utilization of such dedicated space had evolved from being simply a common or shared pasture for animals to serving as a permanent focal point for a variety of community functions.

The official notification referred to the district nomination as satisfying two criteria for the Register: historical significance for representation of community planning and development, and exploration/settlement and architectural significance for the two structures—church and hall—as examples of periods of architectural styles and building types (Krattinger 2013, 7).

## A Symbolic Landscape

For the people of Hopkinton today, their park is a place that they take for granted, because it is always been there, but it is also a point of pride for its simple beauty and benefit to all, which distinguishes their town from their neighbors' towns. The townsfolk may gather there these days for a pleasant afternoon of music and games for Summer Fest; to vote for town highway superintendent or President of the United States on Election Day; or for a reception following a local wedding or funeral, a monthly visit for seeking help from the food pantry, or a public hearing for citizens to voice their views, pro or con, about the construction of towers for a wind power farm in their neighborhood. Little do most realize that all that and much more are possible because of the foresight and generosity of the band of Vermont farmers who created a town and a town center in the wilderness, as their ancestors had before them. Just as Roswell Hopkins may have envisioned a couple of centuries ago, the tradition of public gatherings on common ground continues, "as the inhabitants think proper" (Sanford 1903, 121).

To put it in a larger context, Donald Meinig calls such a settlement plan—the green, the town hall, the church, as well as the library and the town office building—"a symbolic landscape"... a landscape form in some degree found well beyond its source region ... [embellish] a distinct kind of community and setting spread far beyond any local imprint" (Meinig 1979, 165).

Then he adds:

To the entire world, a steeped church, set in the frame of white wooden houses around a manicured common, remains a scene which says 'New England'... Such

scenes carry connotations of continuity of not just something important in our past, but a viable bond between past and present, of stability, quiet prosperity, cohesion, and intimacy... (Meinig 1979, 166)

American historian Joseph Conforti (2001) has noted that this plan for a village—with green space at the center set aside for use by all the citizens, no matter their backgrounds, beliefs, or status—is sometimes called "a model setting for the American community" (Rosenberg 2015, 278), the very essence of a democracy. It was, and remains today, a tradition and ideal transplanted to the North Country frontier and an echo of the New England past from which it came. ▼

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