

IV. BRIEF HISTORY OF NEW LEBANON – POST-EUROPEAN CONTACT

In 1756 James Hitchcock, a captain in the British army, stationed in Hartford, Connecticut, was led by Indians to a warm spring, called Montepoole, in the borderlands between Massachusetts and New York, to cure his skin disease, which had baffled his doctors. His cure, though temporary, brought others to the Spring. He returned on other occasions and moved here in 1776. Lebanon Springs was later to become a popular summer resort. This thermal spring continues to flow today, but the property itself is privately owned.

The first documented permanent settler came in 1764. John Wadhams, from Berkshire, Massachusetts, was hunting for his lost cattle when he came upon the Valley and decided to stay. His home was in the northeast section of town. The Town grew rapidly, first on the hilly lands, then the flats.

New Lebanon was established by an Act of April 21, 1818, which divided the town of Canaan into 2 parts. The new Town had 20,905 acres. The name was derived from Lebanon, Connecticut and given to the eastern part of town while it still was part of the King's district. The western part of town was called New Britain. Four main hamlets developed: Lebanon Springs, New Lebanon, New Lebanon Center, and West Lebanon. Mount Lebanon became the home of the religious group known as the Shakers. The first town meeting was held on April 6, 1819, in a private home in New Lebanon Center.

There were two major thoroughfares. One was the Boston to Albany stage route, which basically followed the path of the Wyomanock Creek. The other was the Harlem Extension Railroad, which paralleled the wagon road to Lebanon Springs, then turned north into Rensselaer County. There were railway stations in West Lebanon, New Lebanon, and Lebanon Springs, with good shipping facilities at each. The presence of flying cinders caused the Clark Bakery in Lebanon Springs to be the first in the country to ship wrapped bread, with each loaf being wrapped separately in brown paper.

Columbia Hall in Lebanon Springs opened in 1794, thirty-eight years after Hitchcock's first visit. It stood 300 feet above the valley. At full capacity it could service 400 guests. The historic register from 1820-1830 was signed by visitors including the Marquis de Lafayette, Henry Longfellow, Daniel Webster, and John Quincy Adams. It closed in 1900, its demise the result of social changes after the Civil War.

There were several manufacturing companies which grew with the town. Sawmills and gristmills were found in most areas of town in the mid to late 1700s. They were initially water-powered. Cornmeal from the Elm Tree Mill in New Lebanon Center was particularly favored by Teddy Roosevelt.

The most important manufacturing company in town was the Tilden Pharmaceutical Company, founded in 1824 by E. Gilbert (who learned the extracting trade from the Shakers) and Elam Tilden (a successful businessman). It was located on the Boston-Albany Turnpike (now Route 20). The plant began as an extract pharmacy

and progressed to producing standard medicinal products. Tilden's sons succeeded him until 1884. In 1961 it was sold to Textron Corporation, but the plant closed shortly thereafter.

The John Kendall & Co. Thermometer Factory was established in 1820 and produced both thermometers and barometers. It was the first company in this country to produce the tools that enabled them to provide consistent measurement of the current temperature.

Other industries included a woolen mill, about 1806, and a cloth manufacturer. From 1873 –1876 the New Lebanon Glass Works produced 5000 to 6000 green and blue bottles each day.

Jesse Torrey began the first lending library in the United States in New Lebanon in 1803 on what is now West Street.

Samuel J. Tilden, son of Elam Tilden, was born in 1814 in New Lebanon. He became governor of New York in 1874. He won the popular vote for the Presidency in 1877, by over 200,000 votes, but lost to Rutherford Hayes in the House of Representatives, where the decision was made by one vote after the Electoral College could not produce a winner. Samuel J. Tilden is buried in the Cemetery of the Evergreens.

The Shaker movement formed a prominent part of Town history. It began in France in the late 1600s and then became established in England. There they were called the Shaking Quakers because during worship services they would jump, whirl and shout for joy. Ann Lee joined them in 1758. After persecution in England, the sect emigrated to Watervliet, NY in 1774. They came to New Lebanon in 1780 at the request of several townspeople following a religious revival in the town. Mother Ann was expelled from the King's District (as New Lebanon was still known at that time) in 1783, and she returned to Watervliet, where she died in 1784. Her followers remained, however, and prospered. At its height, New Lebanon was the principal Shaker site in America, the center for eight "families" – one in Massachusetts, five in New Lebanon, and two in Canaan. Each "family" was a separate, self-supporting community of 50 to 80 people, with men and women treated equally. It was a celibate community, with men and women living separately, but in the same house. All who were able worked at one of the community industries, such as seed production, agriculture, furniture making, etc., or supported the community's daily life by washing or cooking. Children whose parents joined were educated and raised by the "family." In 1930 the remaining Shakers decided to sell their land and buildings to a boarding school. The last Shaker left New Lebanon in 1947, moving to the Shaker community in Hancock, MA.

The Shaker buildings on Mt. Lebanon are now used by the Darrow School, a private college preparatory school. Others are occupied by the Abode of the Message, a Sufi Community. The Mount Lebanon Shaker Community historical site has buildings from the North family open to the public. Further, The Old Chatham Shaker Museum

and Library will be restoring and moving to the large stone barn at the same site within the next few years.

There are many other historic buildings located in town as well, including the Gilbert House, the Elm Tree Mill, the churches, and the Union Free School. See Historic Sites Map.

The population of New Lebanon in 1875 was 2455, reflecting the prosperity it had enjoyed. However, the number of residents decreased each year, to a low of 1081 in 1930. Now easily accessible and located midway between Albany to the west and Pittsfield, MA, to the east, the current population has again increased to 2454. New Lebanon should continue to appreciate and protect its history, while moving forward into this new century.