

History of the Town of Chatham

The Town of Chatham was formed in 1795, out of parts of the Towns of Kinderhook and Canaan to become the largest town in Columbia County. It has retained this distinction even after minor portions were given to Ghent and Austerlitz in 1818. It was named in honor of William Pitt, Earl of Chatham, a British parliamentarian who was sympathetic to the colonists' position during the Revolutionary War.

While the area had long been home to Native Americans, the southern part west of the Kinderhook Creek was settled beginning in the early 1700s by newcomers of Dutch origin moving from the Hudson River area. The parts east of the Kinderhook Creek were taken up by settlers of English origin coming through the mountains from Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut. Some of the latter had title issues which were finally resolved by act of the Legislature after the Revolutionary War.

The overall area, which later became the Town, grew rapidly as a farming center beginning in the second half of the eighteenth century. There were also mills established along the Kinderhook, Valatie Kill and Stony Kill Creeks, which produced grain, flour and lumber, and then fulling, satin and cloth materials. Local industry was stimulated by the coming of railroads beginning in the 1830s. A specialty developed for the Town in mills producing paper products.

The start of the 1900s saw the cresting and then decline of the small farms. Later railroad lines running through the Town decreased to one line, Conrail passing through to and from Massachusetts. The mills gradually closed due to competition from other places. With these declines formerly rich and productive farmsteads became attractive to city dwellers as second homes.

Remarkably agricultural nature of the Town has remained to the present with many acres devoted to growing feed for domestic animals. In escaping urban sprawl the Town's hamlets (Old Chatham, East Chatham, North Chatham, Malden Bridge and New Concord) have retained most of their original housing stock and distinctive charm. The Village of Chatham has developed into a vibrant small town for both residents and visitors. Existing entities in the Town such as The Shaker Museum, PS 21 and others provide continuing cultural activities.