

275<sup>th</sup>  
Founders' Day



1716 - 1991  
Palmer, Massachusetts

# In The Beginning Through 1799

Step back into time and imagine Palmer as it was 275 years ago. Picture the land empty of buildings, clear of roads, pristine and undeveloped. Listen to the sounds of the woods, streams and meadows — peaceful and calm with only the music of the birds and the rustle of the deer, beaver or raccoon interrupting the stillness.

The beauty and abundance of this area was known to the early Indians; the history of our town lands in their time remains much of a mystery although a few hidden clues were left by them. The fishing weir in Three Rivers suggests that this area, with its extensive water resources, was used as a major fishing site especially in the spring when the salmon swam upstream to their spawning grounds in the cool ponds. In the autumn, the rugged upland areas provided excellent habitats for wild game while the oak and chestnut groves supplied a source of winter nuts.

The area was crossed by three major Indian trails which carried the natives to and from their seasonal villages: the Bay Path in the south, the Nashaway Trail in the north and the Hadley Path which ran from the Indian village in Brimfield to the falls at Ware Village. These paths and a number of secondary trails were all busy travel routes first for the Indians and later for the Colonists. These Indian neighbors of our past were probably affiliated with the Quaboags; regionally they belonged to the Nipmuck Confederation a relatively peaceful group which numbered approximately 2,000 during the early 1600's.

In 1716 this peaceful area began its transformation. John and Sarah King left Boston with their year old son and followed the Bay Path until they reached an area of land nestled in the elbow of the Quaboag River. The first night was spent on a hillside near a spring. In time they built a log cabin by the side of a brook close to the Quaboag River (eastern South Main Street area). Other families followed coming from neighboring plantations of the Connecticut River Valley. Most of these early settlers were of Scot-Irish descent. By 1765 the settlement consisted of 75 families; 360 individuals in 60 houses.

The early families were farmers growing potatoes, corn, summer wheat, rye, peas, oats, barley (for malt), and flax. Extra crops were taken to Springfield by cart to be sold and shipped down the Connecticut River and loaded on ships for Boston. To supplement their income, families also made turpentine and tar from the pitch pines growing in the woods. From the flax women spun linen thread and wove the same into cloth which sold for a good price in Springfield.

On August 23, 1731 The Reverend John Harvey was called to be the first minister of the Elbow Tract Plantation, as this settlement was called. Three years later in 1734, the first meetinghouse was built at what is now

Old Palmer Center (junction of Rt. 32 & Flynt St.). Soon the tavern, the general store and the blacksmith's shop were built making the area the business center of the Plantation.

In 1735 the citizens of the Elbow Tract voted to send a representative to Boston to request that the settlement be made a town and be given town privileges including the right to send a representative to the General Court. However a 500 pound penalty needed to be paid to gain this right because the settlers had come to the area without the permission of the General Court and had illegally established the plantation. The settlers were unable to raise this large sum; it wasn't until 1751 that a bill was passed allowing the Elbow Tract Plantation to become a town. However by this time the government of Great Britain was becoming jealous of the Colonies and their growing power in the General Court. Consequently the Governor refused to sign the bill allowing the formation of another town. In 1752 the town again petitioned the Court, this time to be given the lesser status of a district by the name of Kingston in honor of the first settler. Unfortunately there already existed a Kingston, Mass; the Governor changed the name to Palmer in honor of his relative, Thomas Palmer Esq. who had recently died in Scotland. From that time on the area which had been variably known as The Elbows, Elbow Plantation, Kingsfield and Kingston officially became Palmer.

With the beginning of the Revolutionary War, the citizens voted to contribute to the war effort by raising money and arms. Twenty six men were sent into battle many under the command of Captain Sylvanus Walker in the regiment of Colonel Timothy Danielson. On May 10, 1776 Palmer was finally given full town rights and allowed to send a representative to Boston. At the conclusion of the war, the town settled into the business of building, growing and taking care of its citizens.

## Years of Growth 1800-1899

The 19th century was one of enormous growth for our town. Although it was farming that first drew the settlers to the valley in the 1700's, Palmer as we know it today was actually built and shaped by the mills and railroads that came in the 1800's.

Again it was the rivers that set in motion this century of growth. The Thorndike Company, The Boston Duck Company and the Palmer Co. harnessed the surging water power and built their huge textile factories on the banks of the Swift, Chicopee and Ware Rivers. The sleepy areas near these mills became the bustling villages of Bondsville, Thorndike and Three Rivers.

In 1839, along the southern border of the town, the Western Railroad (later to become the Boston & Albany) completed the laying of tracks connecting Palmer and the neighboring towns to the markets of Boston

and New York. The New London Northern Railroad, running from New London to Vermont connected Palmer with the water shipping ports to the south in 1850. This enabled the mills to both ship their finished goods and receive their raw materials at a competitive cost.

The railroads, by providing transportation to the area, supplied the mills with a steady stream of workers, many of whom were newly arrived immigrants first from Ireland and Canada and later from Europe. Between the years 1830 & 1850 the population of Palmer more than tripled from 1,237 to 3,974 residents. To house these new workers, the mills began a residential building program that would continue into the 1920's. In Bondsville alone more than 60 houses were built by the Boston Duck Company before it ended its operations.

The train activity in the southern part of town led to the building of a commercial, educational and residential center at the intersection of the rail lines; this settlement was aptly named Depot Village. In time the center of the town's business activity was transferred from Old Palmer Center to this area while government activity was moved to Four Corners, a more centralized location for the four villages.

New institutions were established in the villages to minister to the needs of the people. In 1847 the Congregational Church centered at Old Palmer Center since 1811 split into two divisions; the First Congregational church moved to Thorndike while the Second Congregational Church established itself in Depot Village. Both built new churches that same year. In addition, Methodist churches were built at Three Rivers (1837), Four Corners (1856) and Thorndike (1847). The First Baptist Church was built in Three Rivers in 1832; a colony of members moved to Depot Village and established the Second Baptist Church, building a new house of worship in 1854. In the second half of the century The Union Evangelical Church was built in Three Rivers (1877), The Advent Christian Church (1875) and St. Paul's Universalist Church (1880) in Depot Village.

Before 1850 the Catholic population had to travel to Chicopee for service. By 1851/52 services were held in Thorndike in the old dry-house of the Thorndike Mill twice a month. In 1854 the Old Congregational Meeting House at Palmer Center was purchased by the Catholics for their services. This was used until 1876 when a new church was erected in Thorndike. Until 1878 this church served all four villages of the town. However the growth in population soon made this church too small for the Palmer Catholics. The territory was then divided into three parishes — St. Mary's at Thorndike, St. Thomas' at Depot Village and St. Bartholomew's at Bondsville. St. Thomas's Church was built in 1878 and enlarged in 1888/89; St. Bartholomew's Church was built in 1879 through the efforts of Father Lynch. To minister to the special needs of the large French Canadian population in Three Rivers, a mission was begun in 1880 with St. Anne's Church being built in 1884.

The first schools in Palmer were scripture reading lessons taught in private homes. Later a series of district schools were established with the

residents of each district being responsible for the schooling in their area. By 1850 there were 13 school districts in Palmer each with their own school house and teacher. In 1851 the town voted to establish a High School which would rotate between three villages: six months in Thorndike, three months in Depot Village and three months in Three Rivers. In 1868 the high school stopped rotating and a permanent building was established in Depot Village on Park Street. In 1874 the curriculum was re-organized and a four year course of instruction was adopted. By 1888 the need for a new High School was so great that the town voted the sum of \$6634.93 to build a new school on the corner of Thorndike and Park Streets which opened in the spring of 1889 to the pride of all Palmer citizens.

To transport students in the outlying areas to and from school a vehicle called The Barge was used. This open wagon with long seats on either side was pulled by two horses; during the snowy months, the wheels were replaced by runners and it became a sleigh. To keep the children warm, bricks were heated and placed at their feet and blankets were wrapped around their laps. Even with this, the one and one-half hour long ride to school was very cold and uncomfortable in winter months.

The growing town of Palmer generated many new organizations, institutions and businesses by the second half of the 1800's. The *Palmer Journal* was established in 1850 with weekly publication. Both local and national news was printed as well as fictional stories and moral tales. The Young Men's Library Association established a lending library in 1878 and opened to the public with 922 volumes in 1879.

Organizations flourished during this era. In addition to the Thomas Lodge of the Free and Accepted Masons which was chartered in 1796, Palmer also supported the following associations: The Odd Fellows, The Good Cheer Rebekah Lodge, L.L. Merrick Post No. 107 Grand Army of the Republic, The Female Temperance Sewing Society of Thorndike, The Palmer Society for the Detection of Thieves and Robbers, Thorndike Lyceum, Thorndike Dramatic Club, Sons of Temperance, Eastern Hampden Agricultural Society, The Palmer Grange, The Tuesday Club and many other small social and political groups.

A number of small manufacturing concerns established themselves in Palmer and the villages. The Palmer Wire Company (1882), The Holden Woolen Mill (1883), The Palmer Iron Foundry (1874), The Soap & Candle factory in Thorndike (1846), The Hampden Hat Mill (1872) and Ridges Food for Infants and Invalids (1874) are just some of the industries that took advantage of Palmer's location and transportation facilities.

In 1891 Palmer built and dedicated one of its most notable buildings: Memorial Hall. Palmer sent more than 200 men to fight in the Civil War. Local troops served at Antietam, Fredericksburg, Blue Springs, Siege of Knoxville, The Wilderness Campaign, Spottsylvania, Gettysburg and many other skirmishes. The town aided in arming and equipping its men as well as providing for families left behind. Many Palmer men were wounded and records show that 22 were killed in action including three who died at Andersonville Prison. To honor these men, Memorial Hall

was dedicated to their memory.

As the century came to a close, Palmer continued to grow. The Springfield Street Railway ran its trolley lines to Palmer and beyond connecting the neighboring towns. The Electric Company began providing lights and power to the residents. A resort area called Forest Lake was drawing both local people and visitors from surrounding towns. Businesses were bustling and Victorian houses were being built. Palmer was on its way, full steam ahead, to the 20th century.

## Years of Change 1900-1991

The 20th Century promised wonderful things for Palmer. An industrial, residential and educational building boom spanned the first twenty five years of the 1900's. Six new school buildings were constructed or added onto: Park Street School (1900), Three Rivers Grammar (1907), Thorndike Grammar (1913), a new Palmer High School (1923) and Quaboag Grammar (1925) were all built during these years. Bondsville Grammar School received a new addition in 1924.

Many of Palmer's industries that are such an integral part of the town today were founded in that time period: Better Brush (1912), Jarvis & Jarvis (1920), Rathbone's (1905) and Metal Culvert (1907). Along with the textile mills, these companies provided employment for many hundreds of people. These people in turn built new homes and purchased their needs from the local merchants whose busy stores lined the commercial streets in each of the villages.

Railroad activity was at its peak in Palmer with five railroad companies serving various sections of the town. The Boston & Albany, The Vermont Central, The Ware River Line, The Athol-Enfield line and The Boston & Maine Railroad were all in operation; building had commenced but was never completed on the Hampden Line and the Southern New England Railroad (Grand Trunk). Each village was linked to its neighbors by a train line. Thorndike was served by one station while Bondsville and Three Rivers supported two. In Depot Village, the grandest station of all had been built by the B&A Railroad in 1883 at the enormous cost of \$53,000. Designed by Henry Hobson Richardson, Union Station as it was named provided services to the 30 to 40 trains that stopped there daily in the early 1900's.

With this tide of prosperity, it was no wonder that Palmer approached the 200th anniversary of the town's founding with great zest. In 1916 the citizens organized a day of celebration to be held on June 17th to honor John and Sarah King's settlement of the town. A crowd estimated at 10,000 braved a drizzle to watch the parade, listen to historical speeches and admire the decorated streets of Palmer. The celebration also included a ballgame in the afternoon and free moving pictures at the Opera House.

A Historical Pageant in the evening depicted life in Palmer from John King's time to 1916. The grand finale was a large fireworks display held on Thorndike Street to the delight of all.

However life soon changed not only for Palmer's citizens but for all Americans; World War I ushered in a new era. After the war the demand for textiles dropped while production capacity continued to grow. In addition the domestic market was changing with the increase in competition from cheap, foreign imports. The mills struggled to survive. In 1925 the Thorndike Co. merged the operations of their Thorndike and West Warren plants stopping production at their Thorndike location. All assets of the mill were auctioned off in 1926 including houses, industrial buildings and land. The stockmarket crash and the depression accelerated the financial deterioration of the textile mills. In 1933 the Three Rivers Mill merged with the Boston Duck Company in Bondsville to stave off closure. Unfortunately, the Company still could not survive and had to restructure. The Three Rivers plant was closed in 1936 and the equipment was moved down south to where labor, heat and energy was less expensive. The last hold out, The Boston Duck Company ceased operations in 1942 auctioning off its property and moving its equipment to a southern plant. A great era of Palmer's history had ended. The textile industry which had directed Palmer's growth for more than 100 years was gone as were the jobs of many of Palmer's residents.

Slowly new companies came to town and filled the empty mill buildings with equipment and jobs: Tampax (1942), Diamond National (1930) and many small independent businesses took advantage of the labor and space available in the villages.

Although many people left the area during this time, those that remained continued to do their part in building a modern community. Four new churches were built in the first half of the century. Sts. Peter and Paul Church (1905), St. Mary's Episcopal Church (1924), St. Adalbert's Church (1917) and the new St. Thomas Church (1941) were constructed by their congregations. The Quaboag Baseball League was founded in 1924 and Legion Field was built in 1937. Thirty years after the first car was bought by a Palmer resident (a Knox Car owned by Henry Holbrook in 1903) the Tobiasz Brothers brought Palmer into the aviation age by building the Palmer Airport in 1934.

Other institutions began to change. Ma & Pa stores were replaced by supermarkets. The Trolley service was replaced by a bus service between the villages later to be displaced and put out of business by the automobile. With the closing of the mills and the increase in automobile and truck transport, the railroads began a slow decline; in 1960 passenger service was discontinued in Palmer and the Station was sold.

In the 1960's Palmer suffered two major setbacks; Colorado Fuel & Iron moved its operations out west displacing 650 workers and in September of 1968, the Bondsville Mill complex burned to the ground putting another 400 people out of work. Again through the time and effort of Palmer's citizens the town was able to overcome the effects of these

events; a new Industrial Park was built and filled in Bondsville and new tenants were found for the Old Wire Mill Building. Although it took time, Palmer was able to recover and once again began a period of growth.

Palmer continues to change as it heads into the 21st century. New houses, industries and businesses are dotting our landscape; a new school complex is opening for our children. As we look back over the past 275 years the one thing that stands out in our history is the commitment of Palmer's citizens to the future of the town. Each generation contributed their best effort to make Palmer a town to be proud of. As we celebrate John King and his legacy, perhaps we should also contemplate what our contribution will be to the future of Palmer and how we can make a difference.

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