

INTRODUCTION TO PLAINFIELD AND SEVERAL WRITTEN HISTORIES

The following material is all available at Plainfield's Shaw Memorial Library

The first written history of Plainfield was published by Dr. Jacob Porter in 1834 and still exist today in it's original form. Although I spent no effort in researching the personal history of Dr. Porter it would make for some great detective work if students would dig further into the historical records to find out who this man was, what his relationship to Plainfield was (I do know he lived here and was the town's first physician) and how he came to compile what is considered to be the premiere primary source on the history of Plainfield. The Plainfield Historical Society would be the place to start.

Dr. Porter was particularly interested in the geology of Plainfield in the 1800's and write with a certain fondness of it's "rich and diversified mineralogy". Porter refers to a Dr. Hitchcock in his history and this is the same Hitchcock who was a professor of Chemistry and Natural History at Amherst College who later published the definitive report on the Geology of Massachusetts, a book that is available in it's original 1841 copy at the Shaw Memorial Library. Lake Hitchcock was named after this great scientist. Perhaps these two were friends.

Porters work is written in the style of the times and expresses many of the viewpoints and values of the 19th century.

The next history was written by Charles N. Dyer in 1891 and although I've not included it in this guide offers an extensive genealogical history of 23 of the original settlers of

Plainfield. This would be a great resource for a unit on the early settlers, perhaps coupled with a visit to a local cemetery. Ms. Arvilla Dyer is a direct descendent of the author and would be able to supply a classroom with a wealth of knowledge not only on Charles Dyer but on the history of Plainfield up until the present time. Ms. Dyer has been a great resource in compiling this guide and has many rich and colorful memories of Plainfield.

For the sake of time and space I have included only a few chapters and excerpts from Dyers book but advise teachers to read it in it's entirety to get a full view of the history and early settlers of Plainfield. You may be pleasantly surprised, as I know I was, to learn of the many highly educated, highly motivated folks who first chose to settle Plainfield and helped create the community that exists today.

Next we have somewhat of a historical travel log. It was written by Plainfield resident Harold S. Packard for a Western Hampshire Highlands booklet published by the Western Hampshire Board of Trade in 1912 and takes the reader on a journey through the town of Plainfield. This article gives a good ides of what life was like in this period focusing on industry, merchandising and points of interest in what appears to be an attempt to draw visitor to the area. It offers great advertisements from the area that children may find amusing showing articles that people of these time were interested in buying. Children will be amazed to learn that a town which today has one store and a tavern was a bustling place at the turn of the century. This article would be helpful when discussing industry and it's impact on Plainfield.

The next article is a brief history taken from Historic Hampshire in the Connecticut

Valley by Clifton Johnson written in 1932. Johnson retells a story of the apparently rowdy rally held in town for the presidential campaign of 1840. "The war cries of the Whigs were "Tippicanoe and Tyler too! and "Log cabins and hard cider!". On the occasion of one of the rallies a specially constructed wagon 30 feet long was used, that carried 90 persons and was drawn by 13 yokes of oxen."

The following article by Thomas T. Packard in 1964 has a good 1845 census report on production in Plainfield which gives an example of just what was produced in town. Packard also mentions the devastation caused by the hurricane of 1938 and I have included a brief explanation of this disaster.

The last article in this section was included in a 1987 Open Space plan and was written by Ms. Priscilla C. Dyer and brings the reader up to date on some not so distant history. Also included is a chart on population growth which shows that at one time in the mid-1800's Plainfield supported twice the population that currently reside here. This fact could lead to some interesting discussions in the classroom as to why the children may think there were more people in town during this period. Why did they leave and where did they go? (Many choose to move to the Ohio area in what was a mass exodus of New Englanders mainly for economic and religious reasons.) What was the impact on the residents that stayed behind? Today there are many interesting cellar holes left throughout the woods of these abandoned homes and businesses that would be an interesting field trip. The Town Clerk has mapped out many of these cellar holes.

As you will noticed I have included very little on Plainfield's history since the early

1900's. The reason for this is simple, not much has been written on this time. Fortunately for us there are still many folks in Plainfield today who have lived this history. It is vital to future generations that these histories are recorded for posterity. These folks are our grandparents, aunts and uncles, neighbors and their stories will bring children back to the sights, hopes, dreams, textures, smells, sounds and events of this century. It would be wonderful if, as we enter the 21st century, we involve our children in the process of recording and celebrating this history. In hopes of this I have included an article on one way to record history. Most of us remember bedside stories told to us by our grandparents or parents. We've all heard bits and pieces of neighbors war stories or how hard times were in the Great Depression. What was life like on a commune or the hardships of coming home from Vietnam? How has food changed, fashion and art or communication? Putting together units on reconstructing and gathering history makes children feel connected to the past and helps make it real and interesting.

Another interesting activity, more appropriate for the older grades, would be to create a visual museum of sorts. Students could photograph houses and views throughout town and try to match them up with photos from the past. Or how about photographing everyday objects and comparing them with yesterdays artifacts. You could take this one step further by creating a virtual tour of Plainfield on the computer that could go on the schools and towns web site. It is important for children to realize that todays sites and events are their own children's history. This project would also show children the links that connect the past with the present and future.