

Brattleboro's Original Town Center and Ancient Route to Marlboro and Albany

BHS life member and local history buff Spencer Crispe submitted this article with photographs to us. Enjoy some very early Brattleboro history.

Most people aren't aware that the initial settlement of Brattleboro was where the Meetinghouse cemetery currently is today – at the top of Orchard Street, otherwise known as Meetinghouse Hill.

The earliest Brattleboro settlers wanted the town built upon a high hill from which a survey of the surrounding country enabled them to keep lookout regarding altercations with the Indians. Many towns in Windham County were originally located on high hills for this same reason – Newfane village was originally on Newfane Hill and Wilmington was originally on Lisle Hill, for example.

Central to what constituted the original settlement of Brattleboro at the top of Orchard Street was the Meetinghouse. The old New England Meetinghouse served numerous civic functions. It housed the social, intellectual and civil life of the community. This Meetinghouse was in use for town meetings as well as for public worship, being the only public building in Brattleboro for some



Part of the Old Albany Post Road site as it appears today. Note the field stones buttressing the roadbed. (Photo: Spencer Crispe, 2015)



Stone marker in Meetinghouse Cemetery pointing to where Albany Post Road was when the original Brattleboro settlement was on the hill. (Photo: Spencer Crispe, 2015)

years. Until 1772 business meetings in Brattleboro were held in private houses, usually in the house of Doctor Henry Wells. In 1773 the March meeting for the town was called at the Meetinghouse for the first time, and from this date to 1785 the house was in regular use, by both the church and town, for business meetings.

The English Church's custom of keeping the dead in a graveyard close to a Church was retained by the colonists for about forty years. The first burial in Meetinghouse Cemetery was Elizabeth Wells in 1765. It is the first marked gravestone in this region and is only two years younger than the oldest grave stone

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in Vermont – (1763, in the Old Bennington Cemetery.) From that grave going westerly there was only a trail, a footpath, then a bridle path, and not until 1774 was there an open road, just passable for an oxcart or sled, the only vehicle of transportation for Brattleboro's earliest settlers.

In Mary Cabot's *Annals of Brattleboro* she writes:

"...in 1768, upon Meetinghouse Hill from the north; whence, eventually, it [the road] went on westward, down across the northern part of the Miller farm to the S. S. Sargent place on Whetstone Brook; thence across the country west to Abel Stockwell's, now Hillcrest, on Ames Hill in Marlboro, and extended about fifteen miles from the Connecticut River into Halifax. There was no other road in that direction. A path extended from this road across the mountain to Albany."

The road leading from the original Brattleboro settlement on Meetinghouse Hill was part of what was originally known as the Great Military Road which went from Fort Dummer to Albany, NY. Later known



1774 diagram of the original Brattleboro town center on Meetinghouse Hill where the cemetery exists today. (Early Maps of Brattleboro, David Allen.)

as the Albany Post Road, this road precedes when towns laid out roads in their land records by quite a few

years. It is estimated that it existed as more of a bridle path around 1768 before being enlarged to a roadway around 1774. The Albany Post road was a different route than the Windham County Turnpike which began construction later in the century, even though some of the sections were the same. A significant portion of the Windham County Turnpike is today known as the Molly Stark trail or Route 9.

Today, near the facility building in the Meetinghouse Cemetery there is a large rock which bears the inscription "The Old Road to Marlboro and Albany, NY" and points to the back of the cemetery. I grew up near Meetinghouse Cemetery and live near there today. There is still some evidence of it having been an ancient road. Field stones are visible that early Brattleboro settlers positioned to support the roadbed.

The old town center on Meetinghouse Hill was abandoned in 1785 when a second Meeting House was built in West Brattleboro. The first Meeting House on Meetinghouse Hill had been in existence a little more than ten years when the settlers began seeking a new one. Several reasons contributed to this. The growing importance of the highway leading up to Marlboro pointed the Whetstone Brook a more convenient and practical location for early settlers. Additionally, farmers in and around the hills had the need for access to the river transportation.

Even though the village of Brattleboro being located on Meetinghouse Hill was short-lived, the historical importance of it as being the town center of Brattleboro is immense. It is marvelous to consider how the Albany Post Road from the back of Meetinghouse Cemetery headed westward to Meadowbrook Road, took early settlers to Marlboro and beyond, centuries ago.

—Spencer Crispe