

ALLINGTOWN IN FIVE CENTURIES: A HISTORY AND APPRECIATION OF ITS PEOPLE, CULTURE AND INSTITUTIONS¹

Welcome to the community that is **Allingtown** which had its beginning 1641 when the first settler led his cow over a newly constructed footbridge spanning the **West River**. Today, you will have the option of visiting that same spot and several dozen others important and notable to the community's formation and development. Six walks (one better accomplished by bicycle) have been prepared, they will be previewed at the conclusion of this presentation.

However, you may not be able to complete one or more of these tours today, all of which begin and conclude here where you are, at the Allingtown Green, but would still like to come away today knowing more about this district village. This talk has been designed to give you an overview of the community since the time before that founding citizen of New Haven brought his animal in to graze in the undisturbed meadows between the big hill and the wide patch of wetlands, with a river in the middle of it. So, if you are curious about Allingtown and have 15 minutes of time, please continue listening. Even if you are planning to take on one or more tours, this talk will serve as a good introduction to some of what you will be able to experience on the walks you will be able to complete later.

Native Americans made this area their seasonal home. A band of the Quinnipiac Tribe, a smaller nation with ancestral ties to the larger and better known Pequots and Mohicans, would come to the area often, likely timing their stays to times when the fishing and harvesting of

¹ Note, this essay is intended as the script for an audio presentation for visitors to the Allingtown Park Green) who may or may not be undertaking a tour on this visit. As such it is both an introduction and a "stand alone" piece. It is recommended for all.

oysters were optimal. This pocket of land adjacent to the shoreline of Long Island Sound, as we settlers call it, offered a combination of favorable conditions to the Quinnipiacs. There were woods, providing shelter, fuel, game and plant edibles. The marshes contained more food, especially shellfish and plant fiber for various uses, while the river and nearby sea gave opportunity for larger catches of fish, such as netting the bluefish which to this day annually arrive in New Haven Harbor in late summer.

The Quinnipiacs and their new neighbors had no conflicts for most of the first century after the arrival the English Separatists, but, in another example of a very common story, the expanding group of English settlers began to want exclusive control throughout this part of the colony. By 1755, a time when the Seven Years war was underway throughout New England and other colonies, the Quinnipiacs were expelled. As in so many other cases, this began for them a series of sad retreats west that went on for some time. There are Native Americans today in the state of Wisconsin, who can trace their ancestry back to the first citizens of Allingtown.

At first, Allingtown was not Allingtown. It had the accurate and practical tag of **West Farms**, befitting of the land usage you are already familiar with. West Farms was shared property. It belonged to all of the founding families of New Haven, in much the way collectives or communes have for centuries. A town council made up of Freeman, aka full and propertied citizens, administered to the land's management. This included a gradual awarding of plots of land to Freedman with sound record of achievement and a good plan of what to do with the property they were to acquire. West Farms was divided by the New Haven city fathers into sections. "Suburb's Quarters" was the name given to the section that was to become Allingtown. Here, by day, would travel residents of New Haven, to grow crops and tend to their

milk cows and other farm animals. They brought back their bounty to the town, much as truck farmers do today, although not for quite some time in Allingtown.

As pieces of Suburb's Quarter began to be allocated off to people with surnames of Gilbert, Painter, Hotchkiss, Candee, Clarke and Bristol, one name stood out. A freeman by the name of Roger Alling III, established a homestead and a blacksmithing business about ½ mile west of the bridge. Though the exact location of the first Alling residence is not known, it is somewhere close by to where you are at this moment. Given that the three roads which border this triangle, though unimproved, were already built and traffic bearing, it was, early on, a good area to establish a service business for both locals and travelers. One of these three, the road that crosses the West River and goes on up this hill, in 1673, became the route taken by a horse and rider mail service established between New York City and Boston. As a result, the name given the route along many of its miles was the **Boston Post Road** which it is often called today, although it has acquired other names as well. The first rider came down the hill and went on by towards the West River to the east and New Haven beyond it. Standing here, you would have seen him. This mail service began a traffic pattern that grew many times over, up until 1958, when Interstate 95, two miles south of here, opened. For almost 300 years – as, using one of its other names, U.S. Highway #1, it carried the bulk of wheeled traffic between southern New England and all continental points west. In total it ran from the Canadian border to Key West Florida. It cannot be known for certain if any of these riders made use of the established blacksmith shop on the Post Road as they came through. If they had done so, original resident and proprietor Roger Alling III, would have welcomed their business. *You can learn more of the Post Road's history on Tour 1, Part 1.*

It cannot be said with certainty that Allingtown was named for Roger, the smithy, as he was but the first of many Allings to live and work here in the 17th and 18th centuries. So many Allings that it's likely the name Allingtown came into common usage as the place where you could easily find an Alling if you needed one. Certainly, the records show a lot of the community held acreage was allocated to members of that family. For those who may be interested in the name Alling itself, it began in England as an alternative spelling for *Allen*. Apparently, only one Alling came to the colonies from England, our Roger III, so anyone named Alling in the United States whose family dates back two centuries or more, is a descendant of Roger and some of the many Allings who later called the eponymous community home. One thing to keep in mind on your visit today and any subsequent ones, is that the Allings, their neighbors and the village they founded were part of an egalitarian society of working-class people, and hard working at that. The overwhelming majority, beginning with the blacksmith Alling, spent their lives trying to improve their present and prepare the way for their family's' future.

By the conclusion of the century in which it was founded, some 60 years before, the small community of Allingtown was serving its original purposes, as a place for the Qunniapiacs to gather, hunt and fish and for the newer residents to graze, gather (sea grass, mainly) grow and harvest crops and lumber. All with Allings being first among equals.

If Rip Van Winkle had been a resident of Allingtown and slept through the first three quarters of the 1700's, he probably would have been relieved to hear that nothing too exciting had happened while he was resting. Like its parent, New Haven, the village was expanding, but, in the same way that it had over its first half century. Forest Road, the Boston Post Road and the road that led south to the lower sections of West Farms, were all attracting more traffic, and a

steady pace of building was taking place in Allingtown, but growth here lagged that of those center and shore sections to the south. The Quinnipiacs had been forced to leave, hardly something we are proud to recognize today. Generations more of Allings and other descendants of the first wave progressed with some newer arrivals mixed in.

The 1770's were dominated throughout the 21 colonies (some rebelled, some didn't) by the Declaration of and the War for Independence. The conflict came to Allingtown on July 5th, 1779. We will not be saying too much about it here, as the story is fully told on Tour 1, Part 2, The Campbell Monument, a walking excursion up the hill you stand near the base of known now as Milford Hill. Conducting a series of raids on the Connecticut coast was the idea of the English Governor of New York, General Tryon. The major theater of the war had been shifted to the southern states, that's where Washington and his army were, and Tryon wanted to keep the pressure on the rebelling residents of Connecticut. The English were conducting a series of raids upon the Connecticut shore towns. New Haven was the target on that July day and all three sections of the settlement called West Haven, as the area was becoming known as, were involved. Allingtown very much so. In fact, so was the very spot of land you are occupying at this moment. Landing three miles to the south, at Savin Rock the seaborne British regiment of 1500 royal footmen marched up Savin Avenue and, after causing harm to persons and property in the center section of West Haven, continued up the then called 4th Avenue to its intersection here with the Boston Post Road and Forest Roads. At this stage of the day's events, the British lost their second-in-command, Adjutant William Campbell, to wounds suffered when he went up the hill a short way and was shot by a militiaman. Earlier that day, Campbell had performed a rather gallant action in saving the life of an American resister back in the center of town. This

merciful act, followed in hours by Campbell's death, is what resulted, sometime later, in the renaming of 4th Avenue to Campbell Avenue and the placement of a monument on Milford Hill.

Hear and see more about this day on Tour 1, Part 2.

For two centuries the English village remained populated by the descendants of the first arrivals. They kept to their original purpose, exploiting what the land would allow. Small plantings of crops, tree harvesting and pastureland upon the hill; a bit more concentration on crops and orchards on the sloping shelf down to the marshes, where fishing, crabbing and harvesting sea grass were the sustained pursuits. In the middle of the 19th century, Allingtown saw its first substantial growth of mainland European immigrants. Germany had its share of upheavals in the 1840's and 50's and many of the affected immigrated to the United States, settling in many places. German surnames begin appearing on property and census documents in Allingtown, soon after. But its character remained the same even as new streets began to appear and more lots showed dwellings upon them. Although it still had no more than four classrooms until the last quarter of the 19th century, the fact that a horse trolley was now running down the middle of the Post Road indicates activity was picking up. Perhaps that development was as visible from this park as anywhere in the community as human and materials traffic passed by, with some of the latter destined for use in local construction projects.

A resident of Allingtown in 1675 would probably easily recognize her community in 1875, for nothing revolutionary enough had occurred to change the landscape or the daily pursuits of the people, save the poor Quinnipiacs. That static situation was all about to change over the next half century, transforming the community. Part of it was Allingtown's role to play in national

developments. Industrialization was peaking, and factories needed laborers. Parts of Europe had not enjoyed healthy economies for generations, and, under liberal immigration policies, many came to the United States. Italy was one of those provider nations.

Italian surnames begin appearing on census rolls in 1890. Over the next 30 years at pace that became a tide, many immigrants from that Mediterranean nation continued to arrive, settling in neighborhoods near the center (the Park or the Green where you are, is considered the center, based on surrounding activity, not geographic placement.) First generation Italians tended to settle here with others from their same region, in some cases, the same towns. By 1930, Italian surnames were, by a good margin, the most common in city directories. As the first American born generation began to appear in significant numbers after WWI, the ethnic Italians began to be more present in the community, starting a large social club and running for public office, both, for the first time, in 1929. To accommodate them and others, some coming from New Haven and other regional communities, some from overseas, a host of new streets and houses upon them were constructed in the first two decades of the 20th century, turning Allingtown, in part, fully urban, and in, part, up on the hill mostly, suburban with still some rural pockets. The number of classrooms went up more than fourfold in a little over 30 years. Other nationalities joined the Italians in this boom, but, to give an idea of how much of an Italian flavor became present, you can consider this unusual but telling statistic. In WWII, Allingtown neighborhoods participated in a civil defense initiative to have volunteer block captains assigned to assist others in case of a civil emergency. In 1943, the roster of one Allingtown neighborhood, designated as "zone 5," contained 28 Italian surnames of both men and women volunteers. Non-Italian names numbered 27. The ration today, does not approach the 50%

level but Italian heritage is a strong part of the community, with some families now onto fourth and fifth generations.

It's important to note that, despite differences in time, motivation and approach, the original European English speaking populations and those from another part of Europe who came 250 years later, were of the same purpose, freedom to live their lives by their own direction.

Allingtown has always been a home not for those who have made it but, those who want to make it better for themselves. *Tour 2, Allingtown Center, Short Loop, will take you through a typical neighborhood of the middle 20th century period.*

Industry began to be a part of Allingtown life as early as the late 1880's when a brewery was opened at the southern edge of the district. At the turn of the next century, more industry followed, employing around 1,000 Allingtowners combined, including many women. They churned out a variety of goods from heavy machinery to stretch fabric for women's garments and similar material. There were rubber boats, velvet fabrics, perfumes, all this and more fitting into the space between the hill and the river. Second to making things was fixing them and keeping them running. Due, in part to the extremely busy, 24 hours a day, Boston Post Road, service stations (gas stations now) lined the road from the West River Bridge all the way up the hill and on to the next town. Perhaps a dozen and a half in a three mile stretch. So many, that sometimes, these were positioned side-by-side. In those times, all were locally operated. One thing that did help the traffic situation was the electric trolley cars that ran through Allingtown through the first half of the past century, taking many residents to work, shop and worship in New Haven. *Tour 3, Allingtown Center. Long Loop, visits the sites of many of the industrial enterprises of the community.*

Populations require services, of course. Allingtown's commercial heart lies on the Boston Post Road from its eastern end to the western outlet. It was centered right here near the Green. Except for an A&P outlet which arrived around 1930 and succession of drug store chains operating sequentially at one location, it was Allingtowner's taking care of Allingtowner's in such a manner that they are remembered today, even as the landscape they operated in has been disappeared. A full discussion of these community builders is part of *Tour 2, Allingtown Center, Short Loop*.

It is worth recognizing that Allingtown has never been self-governing, never more than an area or district of an established and chartered town. As it eyes 500 years existence, the village has been a part of New Haven, Orange and West Haven. Always at one end of these towns it was a part of, Allingtown has had to look out for itself some. One example was its having to start its own volunteer fire company. Lesser amount of service from the towns they were a part of had to be accepted, especially when as a part of Orange, a town full of farmers who didn't much care to pay taxes to light the streets of Allingtown and the other two West Haven districts. But, Allingtowners hung together and made it through.

A village oddity, especially for New England communities, often founded by the pious, was that the district had been home to but one church until very recent times. A small population until the European influx of 1890-1925, and the presence of many nearby established churches did not encourage the creation of new parishes. However, when the number of Catholics boomed in the early 1900's, a new Church, St. Paul's, was established for their worshipping, just outside of Allingtown, on First Avenue.

Today, Allingtown, is much changed in appearance, with the extensive presence of the University of New Haven and the near complete remake of the central business area around the Boston Post Road, now known officially as Orange Avenue. Yet, Allingtown still serves the same purpose it was put to by that anonymous New Havener looking for pastureland in 1640. This is a place where people who don't have much beyond desire and the commitment to work hard, come to live, some to do business here, but most with the idea and desire of moving up. That is a constant. It also applies to the university's function, as well. It now brings in motivated people from all over the world. Some of the land the University is built on was Alling family property at one time and all the campus sits in the village on property improved by prior generations of similarly minded settlers.

Please plan to take a loop tour today or soon. They all begin here at the Green and have some shared and some unique topics, explained on their start. For those who may have a special interest in sports, particularly baseball, you will want to complete tours 3 and 5. People curious to know more about the University of New Haven, should plan to take tour 4, for an introduction and pass through of the campus, but not a full tour which can be arranged through the university, itself. Thank you for listening and learning a little about the little community just beyond the West River.