

# Walking Tour

LEICESTER, MA



The Leicester Tennis Club on the Common, 1886, courtesy of the Leicester Historical Society.

All it takes is a little  
“Common” sense to  
enjoy Leicester’s  
historic town green.

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# Leicester

Marauding Mohawks may have been the reason the sachems of the Nipmuck tribe tolerated the initial English interest in the land along the banks of Kettle Brook. Hoping that a handful of white men might offer them some protection from nearby warrior tribes, the Nipmucks were friendly in their negotiations with the eight men from Roxbury, MA who purchased nine miles square in 1686. The price was 15 pounds, and it was a wise buy for the investors: at least three well-used Nipmuck trails crisscrossed at what would become Leicester center, and the land lay along a Boston Post Road, now Route 9.

In the Algonquin language, the region was called Towtaid. The first English settlers, none of whom were the original partners, built their first meeting house in 1719, and incorporated as Leicester – for Leicester, England – in 1722. At

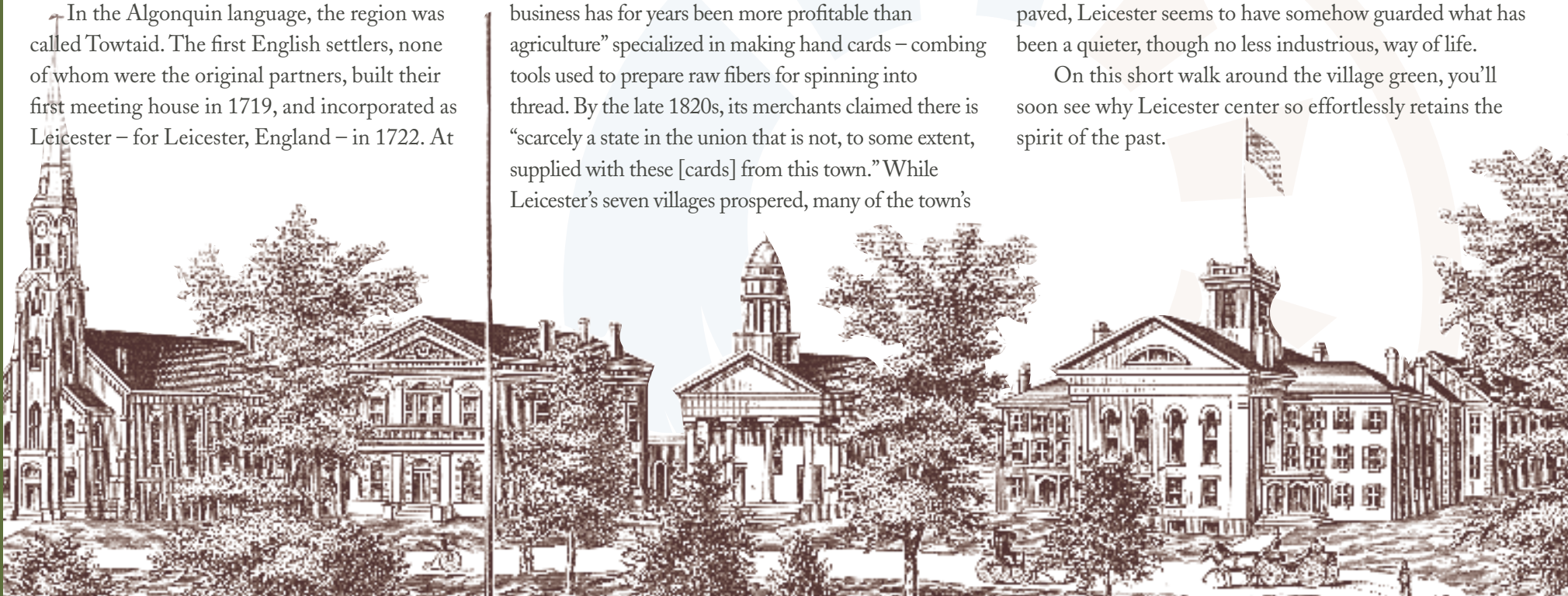
the same time that tracts of farmlands were being cleared on the town's rolling hills, small streams and brooks were being put to use to turn the waterwheels at numerous sawmills, gristmills and fulling mills. The population of Leicester grew to 1100 inhabitants by 1800 and there soon were more mill workers than farmers. This placed Leicester's earliest businessmen squarely at the forefront of the new nation's procession from "farm to factory" during the textile boom in the first half of the 19th century.

At the start of the Industrial Revolution, Leicester already had an important role to play. The town's small but efficient workshops, realizing that "mechanical business has for years been more profitable than agriculture" specialized in making hand cards – combing tools used to prepare raw fibers for spinning into thread. By the late 1820s, its merchants claimed there is "scarcely a state in the union that is not, to some extent, supplied with these [cards] from this town." While Leicester's seven villages prospered, many of the town's

farms, which were once expertly cultivated, had become "little better than mere wastes, where briars and bushes were the only productions of the soil."

When the pendulum of industrialization in New England swung in reverse in the mid-20th century Leicester's prime industries, like thousands of others in the region, closed. Some mills and worker housing were lost to fires and floods. Suburbanization after World War II changed the landscape further. Now that more than half of its area is reforested, the entire town reflects the character of its rural beginnings. While other early towns throughout the Blackstone Valley boomed every time a canal basin was dug, or a train station opened, or a new highway exit was paved, Leicester seems to have somehow guarded what has been a quieter, though no less industrious, way of life.

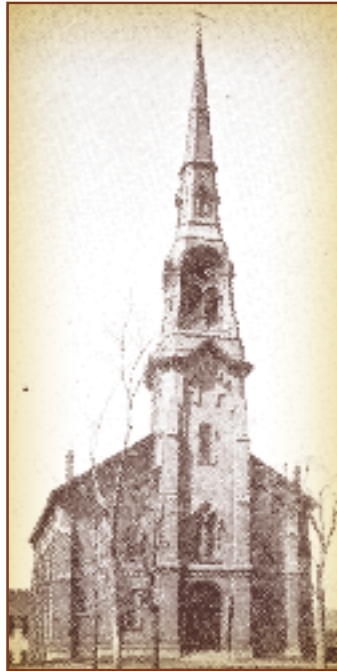
On this short walk around the village green, you'll soon see why Leicester center so effortlessly retains the spirit of the past.



# Walking Tour

## 1 Leicester Common

Town life was well anchored around the village green long before the Revolution. Strollers on the Common in the late 18th century walked past their favorite tavern on their way to the meetinghouse. Perhaps they stopped to chat on the steps of a store with a friend. Continuing on, they came to a newly founded private school, respectably housed in a former store and past several more stylish residences of the town's leading merchants and manufacturers. By the 1880s, the green was "much used in summer for lawn tennis, croquet and baseball



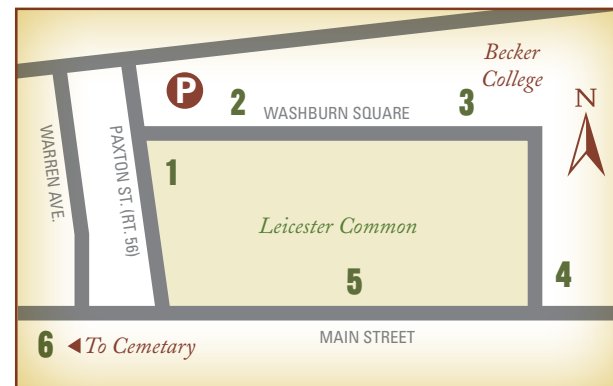
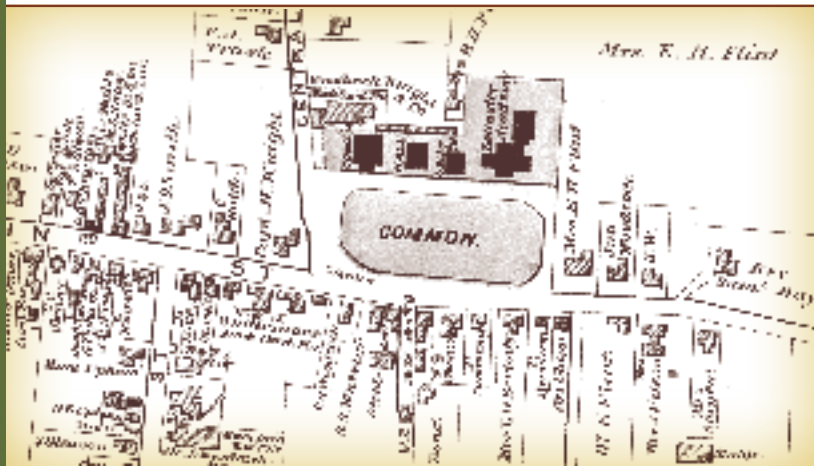
games," and even then had "a pleasant little grove on the East side." Cranking the clock forward to today, Leicester Center manages to exude an inclusive sense of community even now. The Common has that unmistakable aura of authenticity that the planners of America's "new towns" attempt, but more often fail, to duplicate.

From the walkway across the West corner of the Common, you have a good side view of the Becker College Administration building. The unadorned gable-ended back ell of the Hiram Knight house at

3 Paxton St. (Route 56) is most likely the oldest building on the green. The house is now used as the administration building of Becker College. The ell most likely dates from after 1767 and the newer part of the house dates from the 1840s.

Reuben Swan was the tenth individual to run a pub on this site, holding the license from 1781 to 1801. Swan is also known as a founder of Leicester Academy. More like clubs, taverns everywhere were cornerstones of colonial life for villagers and travelers alike. One D.A.R. historian colorfully described another nearby establishment as "a miserable rum-hole at the time it was wiped out by fire in 1882" not hesitating to add, "no respectable person was sorry to see it go." Continue along the North side of the Common to the Federated Church and the Town

Hall. On a side wall of the Federated Church is a stone tablet with four dates on it. Three are the dates of construction of the earlier meeting houses that stood on the Common. This church was dedicated in 1901. A tall spired church built in the 1860s might still proudly dominate the green to this day had it not been torched by a bolt of lightning in 1900.



LEICESTER, MA

# Walking Tour continued

Take a moment to look at the seal in the gable end of the Town Hall. It reads “Incorporated 1722,” but 1713, is the official date recognized by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Leicester did not receive tax-collecting powers until 1722. There are those who argue for the sake of history that the seal needs to have 1686 on it, the year of the original deed of purchase. Leicester Academy appears on the seal. In 1783, Sturbridge resident Col. Ebenezer Crafts along with other gentlemen from Leicester petitioned to charter a private school here. The next year, Leicester Academy opened in a former store facing the Common. It opened with four students, and by autumn, there were eighty pupils.



A brochure for the Leicester Inn that once stood on the Common, claimed it was located at “the easternmost point of the Berkshire Hills.” While this was a generous tweak of geography for the sake of catchy advertising, Leicester did enjoy a reputation in the early 1900s as a tranquil summer resort “free from malaria.” There were tennis courts, riding stables and a country club. The pamphlet suggested that guests might want to send their baggage ahead to the inn, so they could come by “electrics” all the way from Boston.



Leicester Inn

**2 Unitarian church (1834)**  
Leicester’s Unitarian Congregation gathered in 1833 and raised \$4,000 for their new meeting house by selling shares. The church looks much as it always has. A combination of three different elements – temple, tower and a traditional oblong meeting house – it nonetheless has a quiet confidence. It was spared a Victorian-era “remodeling” into something more ornate.

In a democratic nation that had just shunned the rule of monarchy forever, Greek Revival-style buildings became popular. Their precisely balanced forms seemed at the time to symbolize simple truths about equality and by association, freedom.



Unitarian church

*Continue on the North side of the Common.*

# Walking Tour continued



## 3 Becker College

Abundant historical records document the love of knowledge and learning among the inhabitants of early Leicester. The townspeople built their first school in 1738. Before then, the teacher had been going to three different locations to teach for thirty days at a time for a stipend of \$3.75 a month.

The founding of Leicester Academy in 1784 gave the town an unmatched respectability. Some claimed that Leicester's excellent schools were the reason why "intelligence was diffused throughout the community." Others believed that something in the "atmosphere of the place seems to foster intellectual acumen."

In 1937, the Academy burned down. Leicester Junior College purchased the land, and built here a few years later. It merged to become a satellite campus for Worcester's Becker College in the late 1970s.

Today, the Leicester campus includes 19 buildings, many of which are historic structures. With a co-ed enrollment of about one thousand students, Becker's areas of academic excellence are

business, education and animal and health sciences.

Perhaps no other structure is more closely identified with Becker College than the pump house. How interesting that a functional building was given such lavish architectural details.



Becker College's pump house.

*Continue straight from the Eastside of the green into the Becker campus, past the Swan Library.*

## 4 May Hall (960 Main Street)

This 1840 house was built by the first Unitarian minister in Leicester, the Reverend Samuel May and remained in the family for 126 years.

When asked by church leaders in 1846 to ease off on his impassioned discourses on the subject of abolishing slavery, May instead asked to be dismissed after a 12-year pastorate. Although he left his pulpit, he did not permanently leave town. Today the May house is owned by Becker College.

Samuel May (1810-1899) was born in Boston and graduated from Harvard in 1829. He was an ardent abolitionist, serving as treasurer of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. May's direct descendants claim that he made good use of the location of his country residence as a waypoint on the Underground Railroad. Since violating the Fugitive Slave Laws was not generally a matter people wrote copious personal



Samuel May

notes about, oral tradition is the only evidence that slaves fleeing to freedom in Canada hid beneath a trap door in May's now demolished barn.

## 5 Main Street:

In the 1890s, the Spencer trolley line ran from Worcester along old Main Street.

It took 30 minutes for anyone with a little leisure time and 15 cents to escape what had become New England's third largest city, and step off the streetcar into this bucolic country setting. The excursion was so popular that people sometimes overcrowded the cars, and one woman once complained of the crush, saying "I've waited till Sunday to have a pleasant ride, but I can't see where the pleasure comes in."

Stroll past many of the fine residences lining Main Street, most of which now house Becker College students. On your way you will see:

- *963 Main Street:* the Russell family home for generations, built in 1828, altered in 1867.
- *981 Main Street:* built in 1812 by Roswell Sprague, as a two and one-half story Federal style house, now much altered.
- *995 Main Street:* formerly Leicester Junior College's dean's residence, a classic Federal style brick dwelling built in 1813 by card maker David MacFarland.
- *997 Main Street:* also built by MacFarland as a store, it became a double-tenement house in 1835, then a one-family.
- *1003 Main Street:* built by Col. Thomas Denny, Jr., another card maker, as a double house in 1791, later converted to a one-family.

# Walking Tour continued

*As you reach the southwest corner of the Common, near the stone marker commemorating General Washington's visit to Leicester in 1775, turn right on the walkway crossing the center of the green back to the Town Hall parking lot. From the town Common, walk or drive .5 miles on Route 9 West, Main Street, to the Rawson Brook Cemetery on the right-hand side. Note that parking is not allowed on Route 9.*

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## Rawson Brook Cemetery

Entering the gate, turn left in front of the flagpole towards the farthest row of three- and four-foot tall slates. Compare the three headstones of Johnson Watson, d. 1770, Samuel Watson, d. 1778, and his wife, Margrat, d. 1780. The carver who did the effigy on Johnson's headstone detailed eyebrows and a nice bowtie. The figure on Samuel's headstone has wings carved right across the chest. The face on Mrs. Watson's stone hardly seems to be a portrait of her, and it has an

unusual zigzag hairdo. Note that the carver did not bother to polish away the guidelines he scratched to help him do the lettering on some of the stones. There are four Watson girls, none of whom married, buried in a row. Betsy, Sally and Clarissa all died in their twenties, and a child, Unis, died at the age of five.

Another grave worth noting is the plot of Col. William Henshaw, d. 1820, in the row behind and to the right of the flagpole. Read the large footstone, crediting him as "Founder of the Minute Men." In 1774, he recommended that men between the ages of sixteen and sixty years of age be enlisted and "ready to act at a minute's notice." When a call against the British came from Boston on April 19, 1775, it took the Colonel four hours to assemble his Worcester County Minute Men. His regiment marched into Cambridge the following day.

Besides the several hundred markers you see here, there are believed to be some one hundred unmarked burials. Several others were lost when Rawson Brook was dammed to create Sargent's Pond.

Pliny Earle (1762-1832) opened his carding mill in Leicester in 1786. Workers glued a calfskin panel pierced with rows of thousands of wire teeth onto one side of the thin wooden paddles. Many craftsmen were kept busy – carpenters, tanners, gluemakers, wire-makers, and also, women and children doing piecework assembly.

Earle and other Leicester manufacturers perfected machinery (some of which was powered by trained dogs) for piercing the leather and setting the wire teeth in "card cloth" used on the immense rollers of carding machines. Samuel Slater of the Almy and Brown Mill in Pawtucket sought out the ingenious Pliny Earle to solve mechanical problems he encountered in getting his early cotton carding machines to work properly.

Two of these hand cards were used as combs to untangle the fibers of a small tuft of cotton or wool (holding one in each hand and pulling across the teeth in opposite directions). Once the fibers were evenly carded, they were ready to be spun into thread.

