



Becket History

1765-2015

Becket, Massachusetts

250th Anniversary

1765-2015

Drag the scroll bar or use the arrow keys to change the slide, ESC to exit.

Plantation Number Four

The town of Becket was originally named plantation “Number Four”, one of four granted between the Connecticut and Housatonic Rivers in 1735.

Plantation Number Four

It originally measured 8 x 4 miles as created by the Massachusetts General Court providing a group of proprietors ownership and full powers to establish a government and to distribute land.

Plantation Number Four

However, the lack of a good east-west road and disturbance in the Massachusetts frontier, caused by the French and Indian War in the late 1750's, delayed permanent settlement until 1755.

Plantation Number Four

The earliest settlers of Becket traveled the Native American trail through the Green Woods from Blandford down the present Bonny Rigg Hill Road.

Plantation Number Four

Before gaining official town status, Plantation Number 4 was required to construct a sawmill (1740) for cutting logs into lumber and a gristmill (1753) for grinding grains into flour and feed.

Both mills were built along Walker Brook near today's Route 20, 3 miles from Old Becket Center.

Plantation Number Four

The natural advantages of the Becket Center site offering timber, land for grazing and agriculture, as well as water power for industry overcame the Walker Brook area for settlement.

Plantation Number Four



The settlement of Becket Center required the construction of a Meeting House for religious and public gatherings; the purchase of a burying ground (1756) was also vital.

Plantation Number Four



First Meeting House Monument

The bronze plaque on the face of this Becket granite boulder, reads “The First Church of Christ in Becket organized Dec. 28, 1758 Near this Site Was Erected the First Meeting House 1762-1764 Dedicated in Memory of the Founders September 1936”.

Plantation Number Four

The community was served by two churches, both centrally located in Becket Center: a Standing Order Congregational Church, as required by law, formed in 1755 and a Baptist Church formed in 1764.



The town was incorporated on June 21, 1765.

Becket Center Historic District

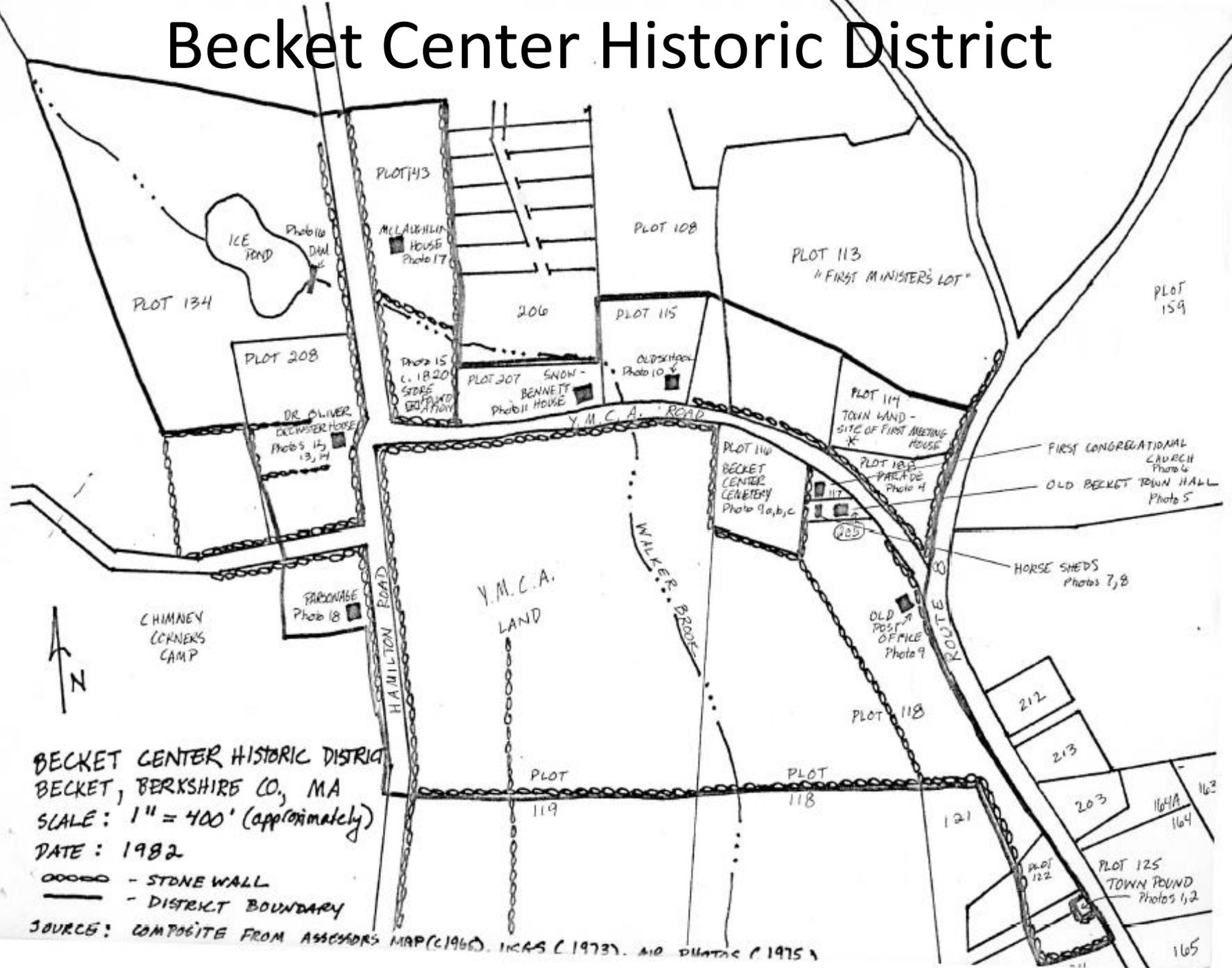
Becket Center's Historic District played a major role as the town's main settlement center from 1756 to the 1840s.

It was both the spiritual and political center of the frontier community.

Becket Center Historic District

The district created in 1982 covers approximately 40 acres of gently rolling land, containing 9 buildings, 1 structure, 3 unexcavated historic archaeological sites [tavern, store, tan yard], a parade ground and a cemetery.

Becket Center Historic District



Becket Center Historic District



First Congregational Church of Becket (1850) replaced the Second Meeting House (1800) on this site. The 7 stall horse shed (1802) was built to shelter horses and carriages during the day-long church services.

Becket Center Historic District

In 1788, the members of the Congregational church found it difficult to raise money for the support of the minister by taxation as people were questioning their religious support. After great effort and debate an attempt was made to raise funds by donations. The 58 contributors to this fund were incorporated as the first Congregational Society in Becket in 1798.

They were one of the first groups in the country to use this model, still in use today, to support their church.

Becket Center Historic District

In 1812 the second Meeting House was presented with its first bell made by Paul Revere & Son. Later it was cracked and recast when 100 silver dollars were added to the molten metal giving it a sweeter sound.

The rare Revere bell is still in use in the First Congregational Church. It is believed to be the only one in Berkshire County.

Becket Center Historic District



The 165 year old Greek Revival style church has stained glass windows and an antique pump organ. In 1908 a tin metal ceiling and walls were added.

Becket Center Historic District



Becket Center Historic District

The Old Town Hall (1890) was built after the town arsonist burnt down the previous (second) town hall/meeting house on the site of the present First Congregational Church of Becket. Town meetings had been held here from 1891 to 1940 when the new Consolidated School opened in the village.

Now known as **Guild Hall** it has been used since 1950 by the First Congregational Church for Sunday School and the Parish Hall.

Becket Center



Becket Center

The Town Pound (1768), was built to hold animals who had become a problem or that were illegally wandering around loose in the “Open pasture.” It was located at the southeast end of the public land, measuring 40 feet square and 6 feet high.

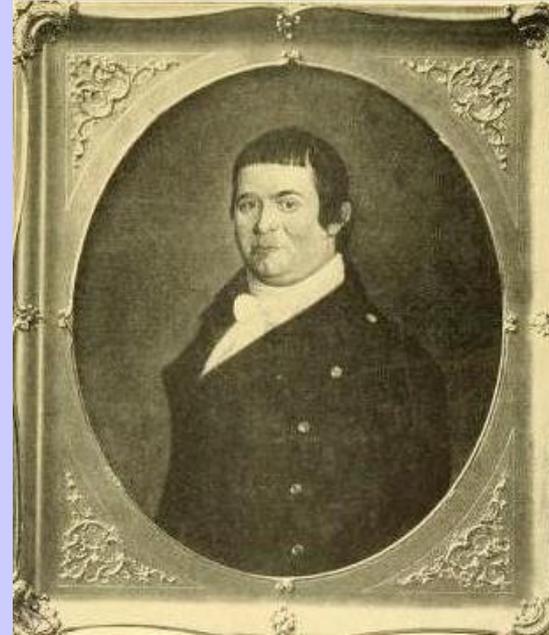
It still stands today almost 250 years later, as a monument to the workmanship of Becket’s pioneers.

Becket Center

Much of the Center had been cleared for agriculture and the charcoaling industry; now brush and forest have grown back. Today old stone walls clearly reveal the agricultural nature of the early occupation.



Becket Center Historic District



Dr. Oliver Brewster (1760-1812) was a direct descendent of William Brewster of the Mayflower, Becket's first doctor, a Revolutionary War surgeon and deacon of the Congregational Church. He was buried in the Becket Center cemetery.

Becket Center Historic District



Dr. Oliver Brewster House (1786) has an ornate front door, wooden beams, paneled wood walls, drywall foundations, central stone fireplaces, deep cooking hearths, ovens in the kitchen, and a spiral staircase.

In 1973 the MA & RI YMCA obtained the house.

Becket Center Historic District



McLaughlin House (1790) built for a relative of Dr. Brewster. It is a large 2 ½ story wood farmhouse, a twin to the Brewster House. Both houses are located on Hamilton Road and are the earliest buildings still standing in the Historic District.

Becket Center Historic District

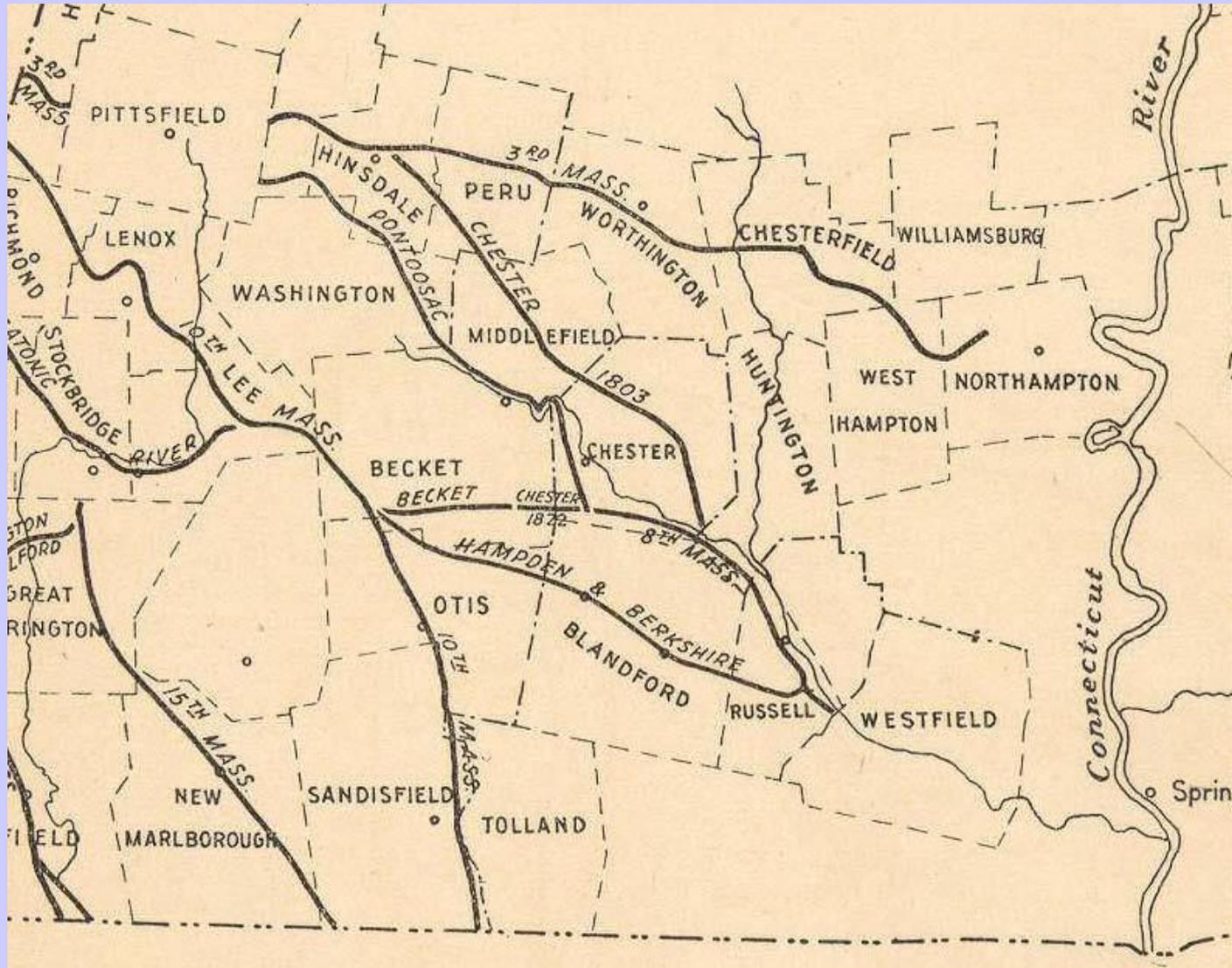


Cellar hole of Williams Store (about 1820) is across the road from the Dr. Brewster house, on the northeast corner of Y.M.C.A. and Hamilton Roads.

Becket Center Historic District

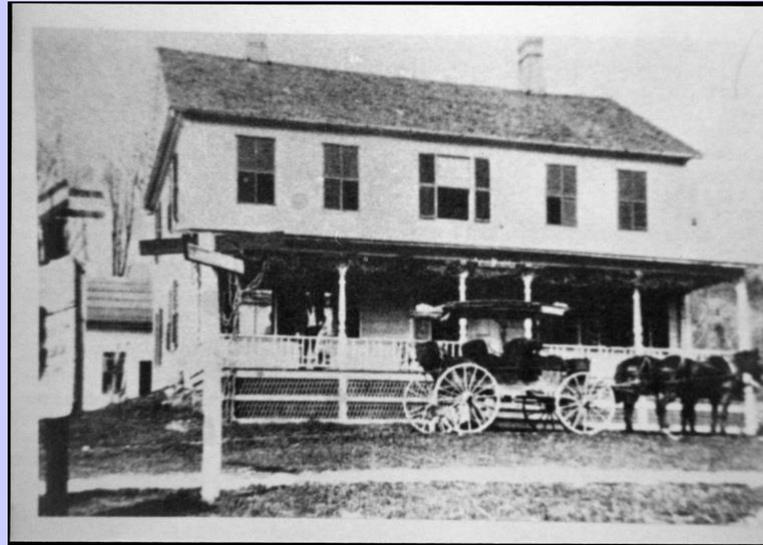
Becket developed on the major travel route between Boston and Pittsfield/Albany. The first turnpike, a road with a toll gate, opened in 1800. Present day Routes 8 & 20 follow the early turnpikes which were built throughout the town from 1800-1820.

Becket Turnpikes



Scanned from F.J. Wood, *The Turnpikes of New England*, published in 1919

West Becket



Baird Tavern (built about 1790) is the best example of an old 18th century tavern in Becket. It was a toll gate house on the Farmington River Turnpike (built 1800), at its junction with the Becket Turnpike (built 1803). The toll gate raised money toward the cost of maintaining the turnpike.

West Becket



Baird Tavern (cont.)

The second floor was a ball room in stage coach days, used for meetings and dancing. Under the arched plaster ceiling dozens of bottles were inserted to improve the acoustical properties. It was used as the West Becket post office at different times between 1824 and 1891.

Becket

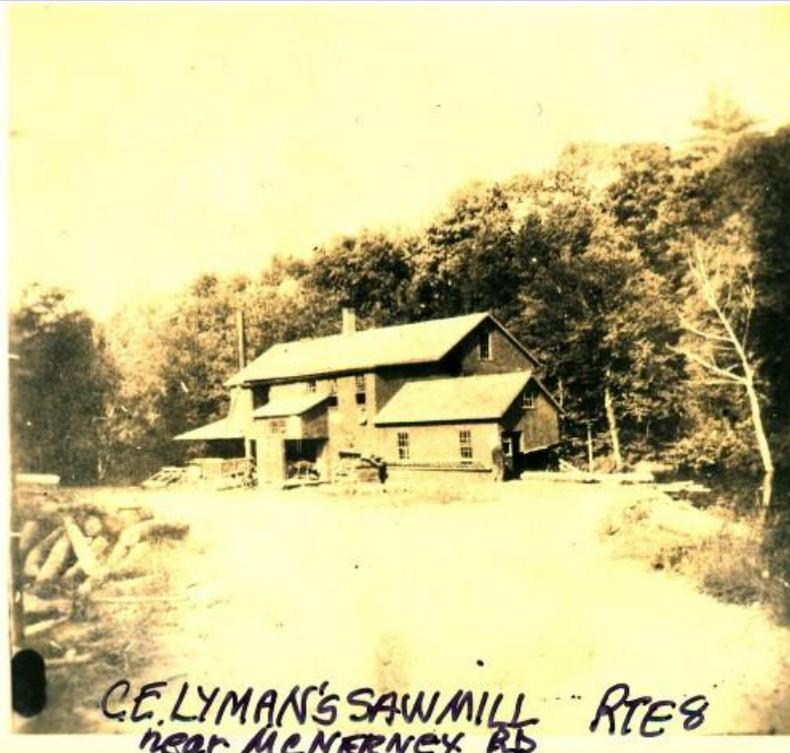
Becket's industries in the early 1800s reflected the large amount of timber in the area. The number of sawmills, grist mills, tanneries, and fulling mills increased. Fulling mills used water to beat and clean cloth, shrinking the fibers to make the cloth denser or fuller.

At one time 18 sawmills operated in Becket, producing about 2 million board feet of lumber annually.

Dish Hollow

In 1820 two new mills opened south of the North Becket Village near McNerney Road. The area was named Dish Hollow for the mills which turned wooden bowls. Soon two more mills, making wooden chairs, also opened in the area.

Dish Hollow



The C. E. Lyman Sawmill, maker of wooden coat hangers, was located near McNerney Road and the North School House. It was washed away in the 1927 flood. Stone remains of a mill foundation are still visible today along RT. 8

North Becket



In 1840 Becket's town center shifted from Becket Center to North Becket Village as the Western Railroad expanded from Springfield to Albany, bringing development to the Village.

Becket's railroad stations were built on Depot Street, the first in 1842. The last station closed in 1952.

North Becket

During the 1840s business interests saw the advantage of the location and processing plants clustered along the eastern bank of Yokum Brook, near its meeting with the West Branch of the Westfield River.

North Becket

The largest of these were tanneries, first established in 1841. Animal hides were made into leather by soaking them in a bath with tanbark made from trees.

This operation was purchased and expanded by William Claflin and J.W. Wheeler in 1848, tanning 50,000 hides of leather each year.

North Becket

The tanning process required large quantities of hemlock bark. The operation thrived until the material became scarce and the businesses closed in the 1880s.

After Becket's large lumber supplies were depleted small cottage industries such as basketry and paper and silk mills became established.

North Becket Village

A major change to the village came in 1927 when the Claflin-Wheeler Reservoir dam broke, flooding the Yokum Brook area east of Main Street. Destroyed in the flood were the primary industrial establishments of the Village: the Berkshire and Becket Silk Mill, the Ballou Grist Mill, and the W.D. Ballou Basket Works. Also among the losses were homes and stores.

A deep gully 300 feet wide and 30 feet deep was cut during the flood.

FLOOD OF 1927



FLOOD OF 1927



Aerial View of Becket, Mass.
After The Flood November 1927

FLOOD OF 1927



A hero of the flood, Telephone & Telegraph agent P.B. McCormick, stayed at his post warning Village residents to get to high ground after the dam gave way at the Wheeler Reservoir. The office, in his home on Main Street, was flooded. The water took out the corner post of his front porch.

FLOOD OF 1927



FLOOD OF 1927



Paul Revere of Becket

J. Clinton Ballou, owner of the Wheeler Dam, the Ballou basket shops and a home destroyed by the flood, was a hero who saved many lives.

FLOOD OF 1927

Saved Many Lives

To Clinton Ballou is given much credit for the saving of many lives. With other men he was on duty guarding the dam throughout the night before the tragedy and when he saw that the dam was giving away he immediately moved quickly to warn the people.

"I saw the water starting to break through," said Mr. Ballou in an interview, "and turning my automobile around in the highway, which already had become flooded I raced the flood to the village and beat it by about 10 minutes.

"That ride was one which was surrounded by danger at all times. I never drove a car so fast in all my life. I blew the horn of the machine continually and here and there saw people rushing from their houses and into their automobiles to make their way to the hills. The roads leading to the highlands in that section were well filled.



The Berkshire Evening Eagle November 5, 1927

FLOOD OF 1927



"I drove my car up a hill when I was sure that everybody had been warned, either by myself or by Howard P. Smith, P. H. Tobin, Frank La Montague and Albert Jacobs who were with me, or Mr. McCormick of the telephone exchange.

"Standing there on the hillside I watched the waters rush down upon the village, sweeping away everything within reach. My mill went down as though it were a pile of boy's blocks. My business and my home gone. I thought, 'There goes \$50,000 worth of buildings, machinery and furniture.' I remarked to my friends."

The Berkshire Evening Eagle November 5, 1927

FLOOD OF 1927

Rescued from Tree
Frank Prentiss also lived alone. It was said in Becket yesterday that Mr. Prentiss was taken down the stream on the roof of his home and deposited in a tree from where he was rescued. He lost all his possessions.

The Berkshire Evening Eagle November 5, 1927



FLOOD OF 1927



A Dog's Tale

Clinton Ballou's police dog, was caught in the flood and after much effort finally landed on the shores of the enrushing current. The dog didn't know what to make of it and wandered around the village all day yesterday looking for the home in which he had spent many a happy hour with his master.

Cat Came Back!

The cat located in the Gerald Mullin home was missing yesterday morning but it returned yesterday afternoon, wet and bedraggled. It is thought that the animal was carried through the flood for some distance before it finally landed on solid ground. After being bathed and combed a little, the feline looked quite presentable. Mullin's dog was in the swim for a while but escaped.

The Berkshire Evening Eagle November 5, 1927

North Becket Village

Native ash timber, and later canvas, was used to make baskets of all sizes. The upper Ballou basket shop was destroyed in the flood of 1927.



The M.E. Ballou & Sons lower basket factory barely survived the flood.

North Becket Historic District



Pat Tobin worked in his basket shop in the old Higley Apothecary after the Flood of 1927 destroyed the W.D. Ballou Basket Works (today the site of Ballou Park).

North Becket Historic District



Ballou Basket Shop Complex Drying Shed (about 1860) This is one of the few buildings on the east side of Yokum Brook that survived the flood of 1927, and the only building of the Upper Ballou Basket Shop complex to survive. It was located behind the basket shop and used for drying baskets.

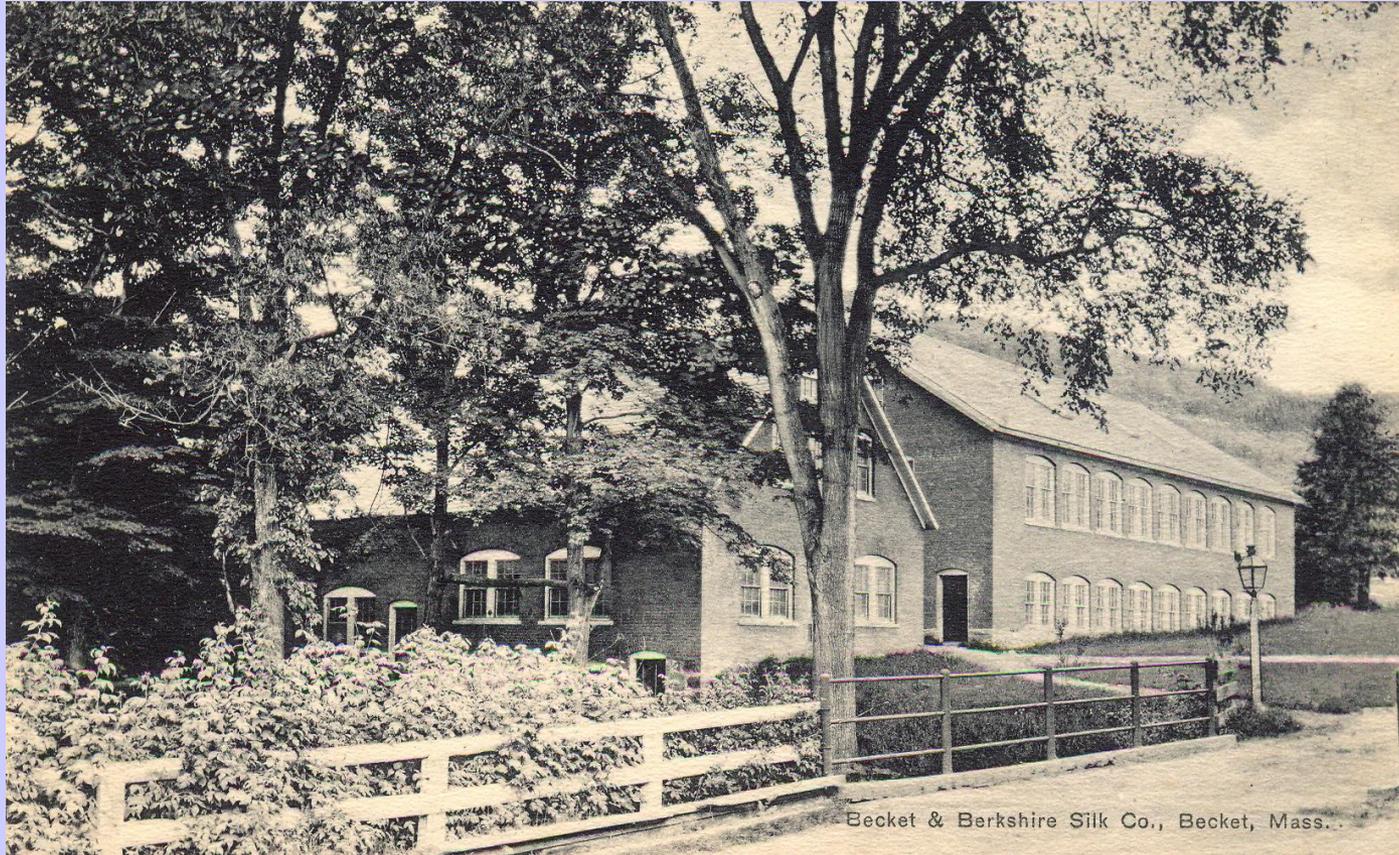
North Becket Village



About 1885 Becket's first silk mill for manufacturing pure silk thread was established. This quality thread was used for sewing, embroidering and crocheting.

The thriving industry employed over 80 people, many of them women who commuted on the train.

North Becket Village



The Berkshire and Becket Silk Company built the second mill in 1890 astride Yokum Brook. It was destroyed in the disastrous 1927 flood.

SILK MILL AFTER FLOOD & FIRE



One week after the flood the rest of the Silk Mill was destroyed by fire.



North Becket Historic District



Silk Mill Ruins

Today the foundation remains of the once thriving industrial center of Becket can be observed on the east side of Rt. 8, south of Ballou Park.



Becket

From the 1800s through the 1960s granite was mined from numerous quarries in town. Becket granite was considered the best granite in the United States for sand blast work. The granite was shipped all around the country.



GRANITE

Granite, a hard rock, forms when bits of [quartz](#) and [feldspar](#) are pushed up out of the liquid rock beneath the [earth](#)'s crust, so it's one kind of [igneous rock](#)



<http://scienceforkids.kidipede.com/geology/rocks/igneous/granite.htm>

Becket

In the late 1800s, interest in Becket's natural beauty led to its development as a resort area.



North Becket Village



People in the cities escaped to the peaceful atmosphere in Becket. In 1878 the Clafin House summer hotel opened in North Becket on the site of the present Becket Washington School. Guests could take the train to Becket or arrive by horse and carriage.

Becket



In 1903 the YMCA established a boys' camp around Rudd Pond and by 1916 at least 4 camps for children had been established in Becket, including Camp Greylock (above) on Center Lake.

Becket



Elaborate summer homes were constructed, like this estate built by a Boston banker. Later it was a seminary and residence for the Franciscan Fathers, and is now owned by the Kushi Institute.

Charcoal City



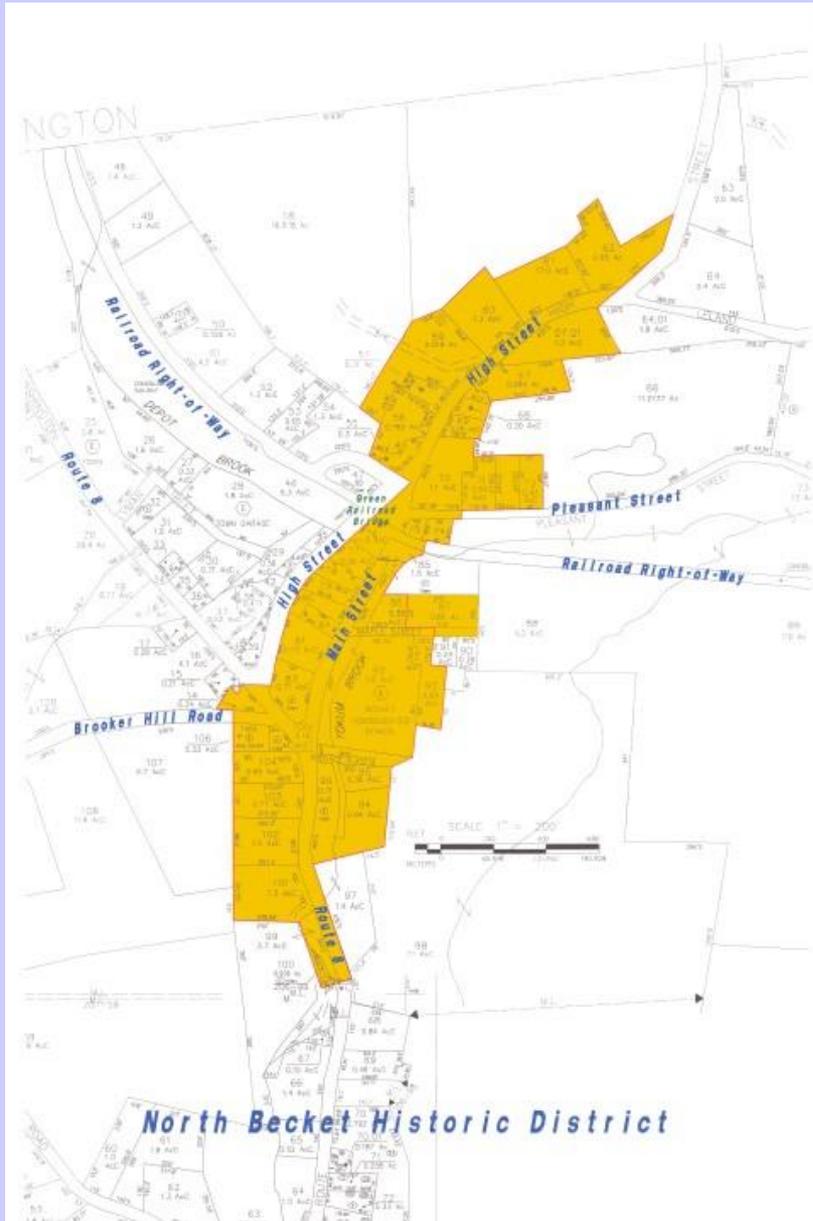
The area south of Bonny Rigg Corners was known as “Charcoal City” for the vast number of kilns in operation there.

Charcoal City

Why Charcoal?

In the 19th century cordwood was “baked” into charcoal. It was used for furnace fuel in blacksmiths’ forges to refine ores, or to heat buildings because it burned more slowly than wood and created a much greater heat. Becket charcoal was in demand around the world.

North Becket Historic District



North Becket Village

Historical District (1988)

Of the district's 47 buildings, 35 contribute to its architectural and historic value. Most were built in the 20 year period after the 1841 construction of the Western (later Boston and Albany Railroad) through the north of the town.

North Becket Historic District

**First Congregational Church of North Becket
(1850), Grange Hall (1944), Athenaeum (1964)**



North Becket Historic District

The First Congregational Church in North Becket was built in 1850 to provide easier church access for the Village residents, rather than traveling to the church at Becket Center. It also had the effect of stopping their youth from joining the more accessible Baptist village church built in 1844.

In 1926 the two churches joined to form the Becket Federated Church, choosing to worship together in the Baptist building.

In 1944 the Becket Grange purchased the building and in 1964 deeded the building to the Athenaeum.

North Becket Historic District

The Becket Athenaeum was begun in 1888 to maintain a library, reading room and museum and “to promote good education...good citizenship, and the general welfare.”

The first building was given by Miss Perkins, who wanted to remove a source of evil from the community and substitute a fountain of good. The building, a former saloon, was located beyond Main Street just over the railroad tracks, and was in use from 1888 to 1928.

North Becket Historic District



The second location, on Pleasant Street, was in use from 1928 to 1964. It was given by Miss H. Cerelia Snow, a prominent teacher, life-long resident of Becket, and an active library trustee who bequeathed her home to be used as the library.

North Becket Historic District



Bidwell Park (1929) The 1927 flood washed away the large Bidwell General Store and much of the land that had been located here.

The World War I Monument was dedicated here on Memorial Day, 1931. It was made from a 10 ton piece of Becket granite. The monument was moved to join the World War II Memorial in Ballou Park further south on Main Street in 1951.

North Becket Historic District



Ballou Memorial Park (1935) The Ballou family donated this Main Street land for a memorial park. It had been the site of the Ballou homestead and gristmill before they were washed away in the flood.

North Becket Historic District



Ballou Memorial Park (cont.) A hole in a rock believed to have been used by Native American's for grinding meal is at the rear right of the monuments and a gristmill grinding stone is near the Becket railroad station sign.

North Becket Historic District



Ballou Dam (1927) Originally built in the 1800s for mill power, the 60-foot long, 14-foot high dam was reconstructed in 1927 after the dam was washed away during the flood. When it was rebuilt it provided water power to a basket factory located on Maple Street until the mid-1960's.

North Becket Historic District



Yokum Brook Restoration Project (2003-2006) The Ballou Dam was removed to restore the natural flow of Yokum Brook into the West Branch of the Westfield River. The West Branch is the longest free-flowing river area in Massachusetts. The students of the Becket-Washington School raised Atlantic salmon and trout to be released into the brook to help restore the fish population.

North Becket Historic District



Mullen House (about 1845)

This is believed to be the parsonage for the Congregational Church across the street, now the Becket Athenaeum.

Jerry Mullen, long time railroad station agent for Becket, lived here for over 40 years. His daughter Eleanor, a long time Becket teacher, was the last resident. Her brother donated the house to the Town of Becket in 1994.

North Becket Historic District



In 2002, led by the Becket Land Trust, the **Mullen House Education Center** was formed.

The Becket Quarry Museum has exhibit space along with offices upstairs for non-profits. Baskets and quarry artifacts are on display in the original kitchen ell on the back side. A video, Turner diary and vintage railroad and quarry pictures are also displayed on the first floor.

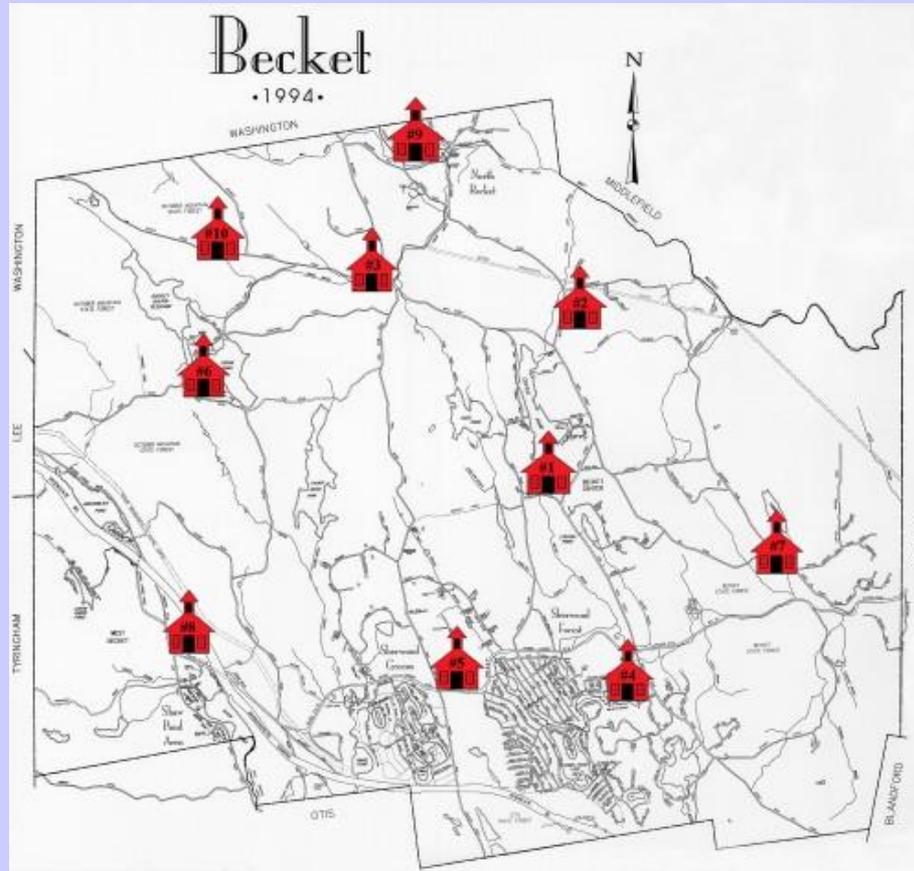
North Becket Historic District

Seminary Hall (1855)

The District 9 Village School was called Seminary Hall. The large school was built as the population of North Becket grew. It was in use until 1940 when the remaining little schools around town were closed and the Becket Consolidated School was opened.



Becket



In 1829 the number of district schools totaled 9. Classes were commonly taught 9 months out of the year. By the time the shift in population moved to North Becket Village with the railroad there were 10 schools in town.

Becket Schools



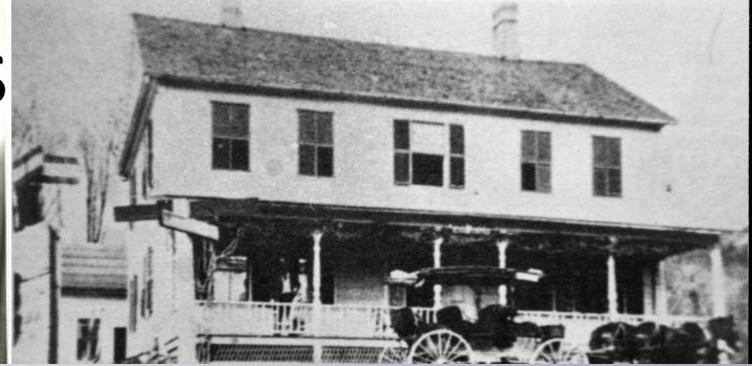
North Becket Historic District

The American Legion used the building from 1946 to 1975.

Since 1976 it has been home to the Becket Art Center of the Hilltowns, a non-profit organization. Their mission is to promote participation in the arts including visual arts, music, literature, sculpture, drama, crafts, quilting, painting, drawing, dance, writing and allied interests in the community.



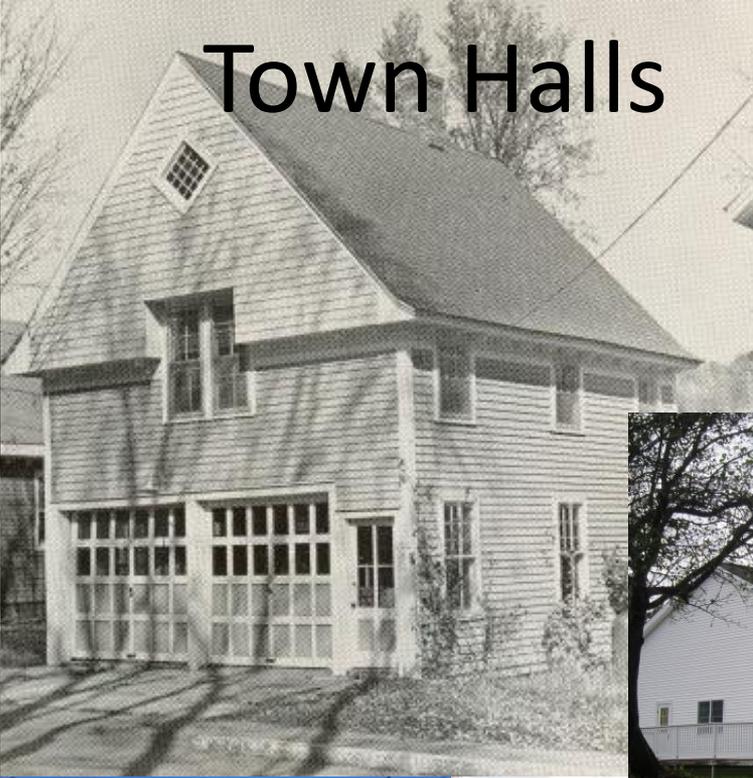
Post Offices



Main Street



Town Halls



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CREDIT

Created by Sandra L. Jarvis, member of the Becket 250th Anniversary Committee, for the students of Becket Washington School and for those who enjoy the history of Becket. May, 2015