

Hamden, Connecticut: Land of the Sleeping Giant developed as an off shoot of the New Haven Colony which was founded in 1638 by Puritans fleeing religious persecution in England. Theophilus Eaton purchased land from indigenous peoples living in the area that became New Haven and which spawned Hamden.¹ Within a year of New Haven officially incorporating as a town (1784), Theophilus Goodyear and John Hubbard submitted a petition to the General Assembly calling for the incorporation of the town of Hamden.² At that time the town consisted of the Parish of Mount Carmel and “the region within the limits of the Seventeenth Military company of the Second regiment of militia”.³ The name Hamden is thought to have been suggested by Amasa Bradley whose colonial ancestor had served with John Hampden, in Oliver Cromwell’s Puritan army.⁴



Hamden Town Seal

Those who first claimed land in the nascent Hamden were landowners, not settlers. It is thought that David Atwater may have been Hamden’s first actual settler.⁵ Other names long associated with Hamden’s founding are Todd, Dickerman, Bradley, Ives, and Munson.

The founding of a town is a singular thing. In some cases, like New Haven, the civic organizations clustered around a central area and spread outward, towns and cities such as these often still have a Green. In the case of the town of Hamden, which never had a Green, the development was less centralized. In her *History of Hamden* Rachel Hartley acknowledges this:

It was not as easy for Hamden to set up the machinery of her separate government as it had been for New Haven and other shore and river towns of Connecticut ... Hamden began as outlying farms adjacent to New Haven Center, ... but they had no social or neighborhood activities in which to become well acquainted with each other and to begin the foundations for a cooperative society.⁶

As earlier stated, Hamden was formed from the Parish of Mount Carmel and a military district. It seems that the south end of town, that formed from the military district and bordering New Haven has developed a busy, commercial, and city atmosphere. Mount Carmel, towards the northern end of town, and its nearby neighborhoods have retained a more rural identity. Mount

¹ Rachel Hartley, *The History of Hamden: 1786-1959* (Hamden: The Shoestring Press, 1959), 10-11.

² Hartley, *History of Hamden*, 89.

³ William Phipps Blake, *History of the Town of Hamden: with an Account of the Centennial Celebration, June 5th, 1886* (New Haven: Price, Lee & Co., 1888), 51. Blake quotes the *Public Records of Connecticut*, October 1757, XI: 77.

⁴ Hartley, *History of Hamden*, 93.

⁵ Hartley, *History of Hamden*, 20.

⁶ Hartley, *History of Hamden*, 109.

Carmel “began” in 1732 when Joel Munson was granted acreage upon which to build a saw and grist mill in return for making a cut through “the Steps.”⁷ This extension of the traprock ridge today known as the Sleeping Giant limited travel north to pedestrian and horse traffic. Not only was this a hindrance to personal travel, but more importantly it prevented commerce to and from the port of New Haven. As “the Cut” was completed more folks traversed the area, settlement increased, a store was established, and folks began to identify with the area. Eventually area settlers became frustrated



“All that remained of Joel Munson’s Mill and Shop in 1938”



by their weekly obligation to keep the Sabbath by traveling the long distance to New Haven. They created the Mount Carmel Ecclesiastical Society in 1757 and began to petition to establish their own church, a petition that was granted in 1764.⁸ Had Hamden followed the path of many other developing towns and developed outward, the town might well be called Mount Carmel today. At the left an image of the Mount Carmel Congregational Church and Parish House.⁹

Folks began to settle further northward from New Haven proper into the expanse that made up the rest of the nascent Hamden, the former military district. As folks who had settled in these other areas were freed from the responsibility of paying taxes to the Congregational Church they often began to establish their own churches around which neighborhoods grew.¹⁰ Early industry (mills and the like), improvement of roads and the development of turnpike companies, convenient travel hubs like the Farmington Canal, particular taverns, geographic features, or simply an area in which a particular ethnic group settled also played a part in the growth of various sections of town.¹¹ It is interesting to note that Hamden although founded in 1786 did not

⁷ Photograph of Joel Munson Mill and Shop, 1938, MSS 43, Box 1, Folder C, Hamden Historical Society History Room, Sleeping Giant Archives, Hamden Public Library, Hamden, Connecticut.

⁸ Hartley, *History of Hamden*, 59.

⁹ Photograph of the Mount Carmel Congregational Church, n.d., Hamden Historical Society, History Room, Rachel Hartley Collection, Hamden Public Library, Hamden, Connecticut.

¹⁰ Hartley, *History of Hamden*, 55.

¹¹ Hamden neighborhoods include Whitneyville, named for Eli Whitney who owned much of the land in this area and his industrial complex; Pine Rock named for a geographical feature that purportedly served as a shelter for the Quinnipiac people; Highwood, until 1888 called Hamburg due to the large German population, then named for the tall trees in the area; Hamden Plains, a level area once the location of many farms; Dunbar Hill, named for Giles Dunbar who farmed and served as town hayward in the 1820’s; State Street or Eastside; Spring Glen, a residential area developed from the large dairy farm of James J. Webb just prior to World War I; Centerville, constructed in what can reasonably be considered the center of town at the intersection of Whitney and Dixwell Avenues; Mount Carmel named for the parish created in 1757 which alluded to a Biblical reference to Mount Carmel in the Holy Land; and West Woods, once known as Warnertown after the farming family that lived there. The West Woods information is from: Hartley, *History of Hamden*, 41; all other neighborhood background information is from: Kathryn N. Hammond and Hugh H. Davis, *Historic Hamden: a guide* (n.l., n.p., 1976?). Mix and Beecher Heights are listed as neighborhoods in Hartley’s *History of Hamden*, but she provides no background information.

have a Town Hall until 1888, two years after its centennial celebration.¹² Centerville House, a tavern owned by Jesse Goodyear, at the intersection of two major thoroughfares, Dixwell and Whitney Avenues, and various permutations of the same type of establishment served as the meeting place for town politics.¹³



These neighborhoods retained their identity for quite some time. The 1915 *New Haven City Directory* in many cases continues to list individual home addresses as Whitneyville or Mt. Carmel. The Federal Writers' Project publication *Connecticut: A guide to its Roads, Lore, and People* (1938) does not index Hamden, but rather Whitneyville, Centerville, and Mt. Carmel as they occur along Connecticut Route 10. Based on an informal query posted on a Hamden Facebook page (20 September 2018), today, many residents identify, some strongly, as coming from or living in a particular neighborhood, especially if they have long residency. Those who do not have 'deep roots' in Hamden, vary in their responses. Paul Saubestre, a frequent contributor to the site, noted that "Hamden is very unusual in that its town hall is not served by a PO with its name but by Mt. Carmel."¹⁴ David Gray Johnson, Hamden's Town Historian, noted in a private e-mail that "unlike many Connecticut towns of Hamden's size, we have always had three zip codes - perhaps a legacy of that distinction."

Early populations were of course sparse. The earliest record after the incorporation of the town was in 1790, there were 1,422 souls counted; by July 1, 2017 Hamden's population registered at 61,284. There was minimal influx of people into Hamden in the early years. By 1820 only 265 additional individuals lived in town, and the population took another 70 years to double to 3,882. The most significant increase in the number of residents occurred between 1920 and 1930 when the population jumped from 8,611 to 19,020. Up until 1920, New Haven's population grew eight-fold.¹⁵ The subsequent demand for workers housing increased; a need met by Hamden. After 1920, when Spring Glen developed into a residential area many professional and business New Haveners began the trek to the suburbs.¹⁶ Another fairly large influx of people occurred between 1950 and 1960 most likely the result of the so-called 'baby-boom' and

¹² Hartley, *History of Hamden*, 354.

¹³ Hartley, *History of Hamden*, 242. Photograph of the first Hamden Town Hall (1888-1923) from the collection of David G. Johnson, Hamden Town Historian.

¹⁴ Hamden, Connecticut: Land of the Sleeping Giant, "The Mighty Metropolis." Facebook page. Query posted September 20, 2018. Accessed September 20-24, 2018. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/180935665368800/>
Note: The query consisted of 2 questions:

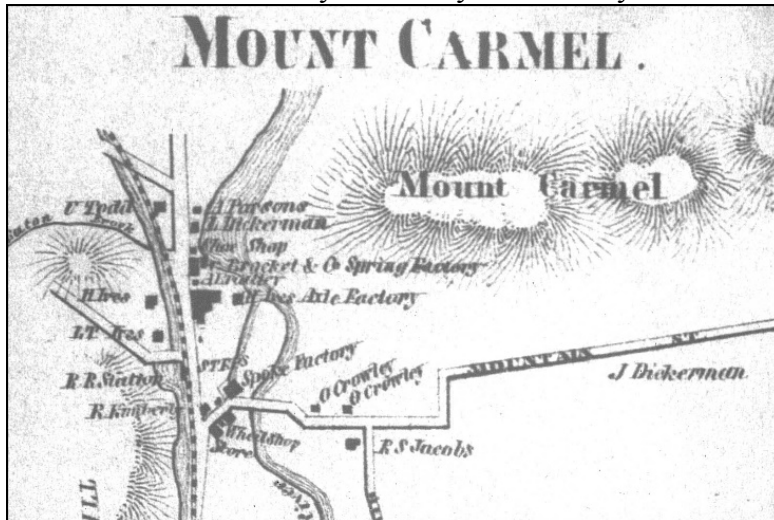
(1) Do you identify more closely as living 'in Hamden' or 'in one of the neighborhoods' (like Spring Glen, Dunbar Hill, etc.)?

(2) How long have you lived in Hamden?

¹⁵ Douglas W. Rae. *City: Urbanism and its end* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2003), 64.

¹⁶ Martha Mae Becker and Nancy Davis Sachse. *Hamden: Our Architectural Heritage* (Hamden: Hamden Historical Society, 1986), 4

Farming was the first and foremost occupation of the earliest settlers. It was the desire for land that prompted individuals to petition for inclusion over time in the nine Divisions of the New Haven Colony¹⁹. In fact, one of the motivations for areas like Hamden and North Haven to separate from New Haven and form distinct towns was the fact that the “intellectual horizons of a trader [New Haven dwellers] were different from those of a farmer.”²⁰ It didn’t take long, however, for entrepreneurial individuals to see the advantages of their proximity to the Quinnipiac River for trade, and the soon named Mill River for the erection of early saw, grist, carding, and fulling mills. It was on the southern section of the Mill River that Eli Whitney began to manufacture guns implementing his genius idea of interchangeable parts at the end of the current Lake Whitney. The early 19th century saw small industries grow along the Mill River,



the Mount Carmel Axel Works founded originally by Elam, Parson, Jason, and Henry Ives around 1833. They are credited with making the first machined iron axels in the country.²⁴ In the early 20th century, many industries left New Haven, migrating to the Dixwell Avenue area in Hamden because they needed more space.²⁵

²⁵ Becker, *Architectural Heritage*, 4.

In addition to the Mill and Quinnipiac Rivers which powered the growth of Hamden's industries as well as enabled easy transportation of people and goods, several other geographic features determine the character of the area landscape. Not the least of these are the looming red rock ridges that tower over New Haven Harbor, East Rock and West Rock; even locals forget that they lay partly in Hamden. The town would not be known as "The Land of the Sleeping Giant" without the presence of the towering traprock ridges that form the shape of a recumbent figure lying in repose. What is now known as Sleeping Giant State Park has been a popular picnicking and hiking destination since 1924. For long years before that the Quinnipiac people revered the Giant as a sacred place, and once settled, individuals who owned land parcels both small and large took advantage of the area accessing woodlots, pasturing livestock²⁶, and even planting a vineyard and selling wine. Remnants of the Farmington Canal (1828-1845) can still be seen, especially in Mount Carmel.²⁷ While ambitious, the canal did not provide the anticipated level of success anticipated by the investors; it was relatively soon replaced by the railroad.²⁸



The Hamden Historical Society partners with the Hamden Historic Properties Commission to



maintain the Lockkeepers House at former Lock 14 on the Farmington Canal Trail. The Society also maintains several historic properties: the home of early settler Jonathan Dickerman (photo on the right taken by the author, 2014); the Talmadge Cider Barn, dismantled and reconstructed by students from Eli Whitney Technical High School, and a cave purported to have been one of the many frequented by the Old Leatherman on his rounds.

²⁶ Town of Hamden Blue Hill Common Field Record Book (1804-1840). Hamden History Room, Miller Library, Hamden, CT.

²⁷ "The Farmington Canal near Mount Carmel in Hamden, early 20th century." Connecticut History.Org. Accessed September 28, 2018. <https://connecticuthistory.org/the-farmington-canal/>

²⁸ Richard DeLuca. *Post Roads & Iron Horses: Transportation in Connecticut from Colonial Times to the Age of Steam* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 118-119.

Probably the most impactful and unique contribution to United States history was made by Eli Whitney. The image to the right is a painting of the Whitneyville Armory in its day²⁹. While his invention of the cotton gin made it easier to harvest cotton, it also made cotton growing more profitable thereby robustly ensuring the continuation of slavery with ultimately destructive consequences. The concept of interchangeable parts in the gun industry, developed by Whitney, not only made production more efficient but also gave the North a decided military advantage over the South with foreseeable results.³⁰ This innovation continues to impact manufacturing today.

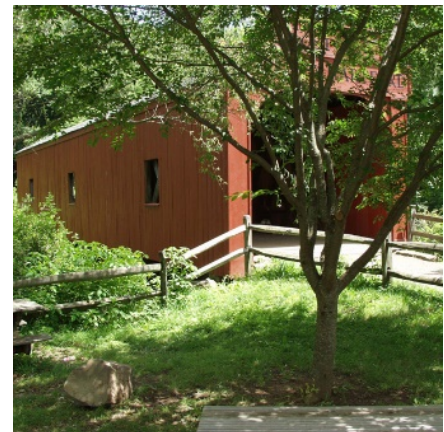


In the literary realm, Thornton Wilder, Pulitzer Prize winning playwright and author, made his home in Hamden between 1929-1975. Today the Miller Library in Hamden displays items from Wilder's study and the Friends of the Library host a writing contest for area high school students.³¹ Hamden can also boast of a United States Poet Laureate, Donald Hall who has been called "an American original",³² and Academy Award winning actor, Ernest Borgnine.

Ithiel Town and Alice Washburn, both architects, stand at somewhat opposite ends of the time line. Town designed and built the first truss bridge in the United States in 1823. Today it is reconstructed at the site of the current Eli Whitney Museum in Whitneyville.³³



Between 1919-1933, Washburn, a teacher and school administrator suddenly and with no training, began designing homes in a style called "Washburn Colonials" (at right).³⁴ These homes, which met the



²⁹ William Giles Munson, *Eli Whitney Gun Factory*. 1823. Yale University Art Gallery. Digital image accessed September 28, 2018. <https://www.eliwhitney.org/7/museum/historic-site>

³⁰ "Hamden's Story": an unauthored text on Hamden.com accessed September 28, 2018. <http://www.hamden.com/filestorage/7089/7093/7091/7121/18344/19838/XVII.DRAFTHamdenHistoryResources-draftforreview.docx.pdf>

³¹ "Hamden's Literary Legend," Connecticut History.Org. Accessed September 28, 2018. <https://connecticuthistory.org/hamdens-literary-legend/>

³² "Donald Hall," Hamden Arts Commission. Accessed September 28, 2018. <https://www.hamdenartscommission.org/hamden-notables/2018/5/2/donald-hall>

³³ "Ithiel Town," Hamden Arts Commission. Accessed September 28, 2018. <https://www.hamdenartscommission.org/hamden-notables/2018/5/3/ithiel-town>; Digital image of reconstructed bridge accessed September 28, 2018. <https://www.eliwhitney.org/7/museum/historic-site>

³⁴ "The Clive M. Hill House." Historic Buildings of Connecticut. Accessed September 28, 2018. <http://historicbuildingsct.com/tag/alice-washburn/>

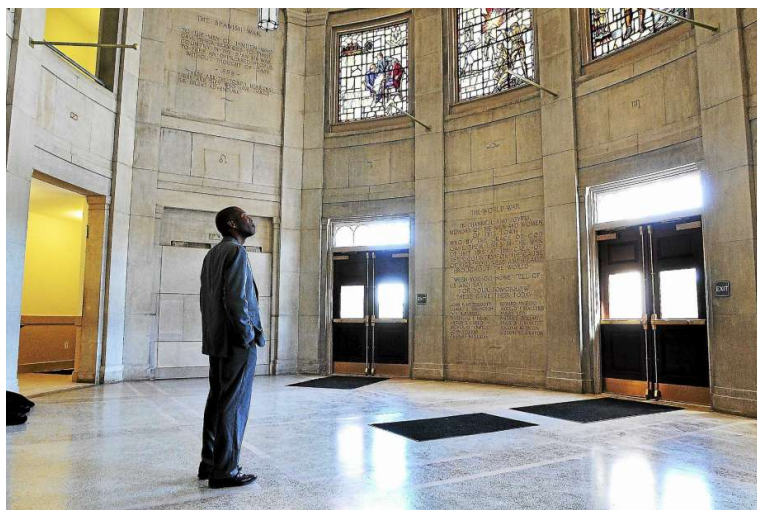
needs of nascent suburbanites ‘fleeing’ the city, can still be found in Hamden and surrounding towns.³⁵

Hamden has its notables, it also had some ‘firsts.’ Town Historian, David Johnson supplied that “Hamden was the home of the state’s first suburban department store (Sears – Aug. 1954 ... and the state’s first ‘shopping center’ (Hamden Plaza – Nov. 1955).” Hamden Plaza achieved further notoriety when the somewhat controversial “Ghost Parking Lot” was installed in 1978. Twenty cars from the Sixties were covered in tar; a nearby plaque instructed viewers that this was a display of *“two typical ingredients of a suburban shopping center, automobiles and asphalt, and transforms them into another frame of reference.”*³⁶



Ghost Parking Lot - James Wines & SITE - Hamden, CT - Environmental art - 1977

Hamden men and women served in all the wars that the country has experienced, and Paul Saubestre, one of the Town’s history enthusiasts who frequents the History Room at the Hamden Public library and posts regularly on one of the Hamden Facebook pages reports that



“the monument in front of Hamden Middle School lists all Hamdenites who ever served in the armed forces. In the rotunda of Town Hall [photo³⁷], the memorial lists all Hamden service members who died in wars from World War I through Operation Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan). This past Memorial Day a monument was dedicated in Honor Hill ... with five streets named for men who died in Vietnam. It is the largest group of

streets in town named for men who died in the same war.”

³⁵ Eve M. Kahn, “Still Mysterious, Architect Gets Her Due,” *New York Times*. March 1, 1990. <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/03/01/garden/still-mysterious-architect-gets-her-due.html> ; Juliana Hanley, “The House That Alice Built,” *The New Journal*. April 17, 2011. <http://www.thenewjournalat Yale.com/2011/04/the-house-that-alice-built/>

³⁶ “Ghost Parking Lot – Gone,” *Roadside America.com*, accessed September 30, 2018, <https://www.roadsideamerica.com/story/4491>; Image: “Ghost Parking Lot-National Shopping Centers-1977.” Accessed September 30, 2018. <https://www.siteenviroidesign.com/content/ghost-parking-lot-0> . Note: In the distance, another Hamden landmark, Hamden High School, a project of the WPA.

³⁷ Peter Casolino, “Hamden’s Town Hall Set to Reopen After Four Years of Work,” *New Haven Register*, September 7, 2013, accessed September 28, 2018, <https://www.nhregister.com/connecticut/article/Hamden-s-Memorial-Town-Hall-set-to-reopen-after-11397365.php#photo-13382685>



Perhaps the most singular event likely to evoke collective memory is the tornado that ripped through the northwestern end of Hamden on July 10, 1989.³⁸ Memories of that storm and the ones that hit Hamden this past May, 2018 will long be the subject of stories told, perhaps as folks gather at the Glenwood for their famous “dawwwgs.”³⁹



Learn more about Hamden:

- Hamden Arts Commission: <https://www.hamdenartscommission.org/>
- Hamden Historical Society: <https://hamdenhistoricalsociety.wordpress.com/>
- Hamden Land Conservation Trust: <http://www.hlct.org/>
- Hamden Parks and Facilities: <http://www.hamden.com/content/7089/7093/7091/7117/7204.aspx>
 - Brooksvale Park: <http://www.brooksvalepark.com/>
 - Sleeping Giant State Park:
 - Sleeping Giant Park Association: <https://sgpa.org/>
 - Sleeping Giant State Park: https://www.ct.gov/deep/cwp/view.asp?a=2716&q=325264&deepNav_GID=1650
- Hamden Public Library: <http://www.hamdenlibrary.org/>

³⁸ “Pictures: Hamden Tornado, July 10, 1989”, *Hartford Courant*, September 28, 2018, accessed September 28, 2018, <http://www.courant.com/courant-250/moments-in-history/hc-pictures-hamden-tornado-july-10-1989-20140108-photogallery.html>

³⁹ “Glenwood Drive-In,” *Connecticut Still Revolutionary*, accessed September 28, 2018, <http://www.ctvisit.com/listings/glenwood-drive>

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