

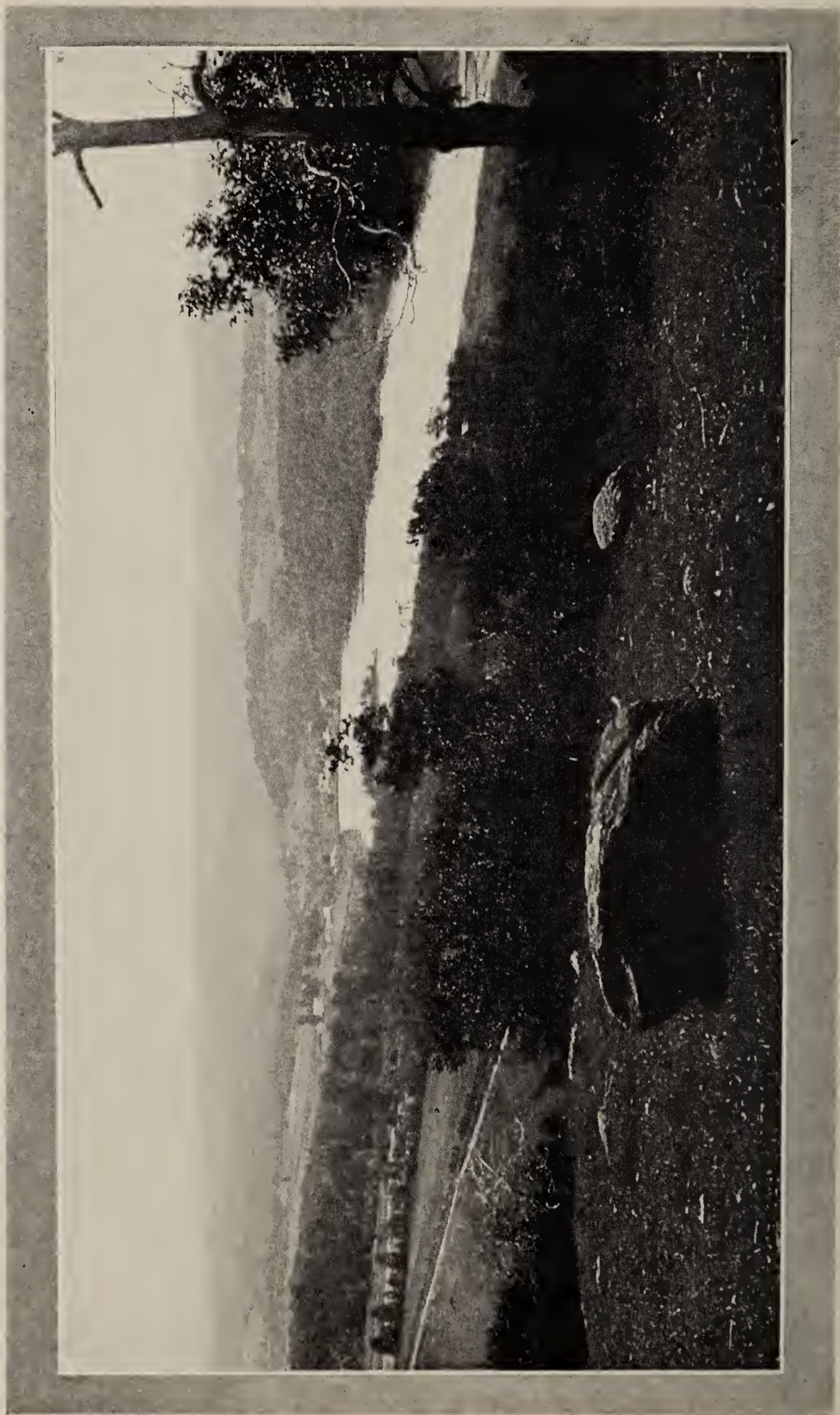
## CHAPTER I

### THE MIDDLEFIELD RIDGE AND THE TWO VALLEYS

**T**HE township of Middlefield, situated at the extreme western end of Hampshire County in Massachusetts, comprises an area of over twenty square miles of territory, which, like other sections of the Berkshire Hills, is a region of mountain ranges and river valleys. The deep and narrow valley of the West Branch of the Westfield River on the southwest border separates it from the township of Becket, while the Middle Branch, forming the eastern boundary, separates it from Worthington. Peru, occupying the northern extension of the ranges composing the Middlefield upland, joins it on the north. Washington bounds it on the west and Chester on the southeast.

The major portion of Middlefield township lies upon a high plateau, whose average elevation above sea level is about 1,600 feet, extending north and south between the valleys of the Middle Branch and the West Branch of the Westfield River. Though this plateau is comparatively level, sloping gradually toward the south, it rises in several distinguishable summits. At the southern end is Walnut Hill, looking down upon the narrow valley of the West Branch with wooded hills rising steeply from the very banks of the stream on either side. Johnnycake Hill lies just north of Walnut Hill, commanding a fine view of the western hills. In the northern part of the town the peaks of Dickson Hill, Pelton Hill and Robbins Hill rise to heights of 1,700 to 2,000 feet above sea level. These hills and Garnet Hill in the same range, just over the line in Peru, command some of the grandest and widest views in the Berkshire Hills, for from their summits one can look with the naked eye into five different states, an experience possible in few localities. Haystack and other peaks of the Green Mountains in Vermont are seen on the north. Mt. Greylock and Mr. Everett are clearly visible, occupying the northwest and southwest corners of Massachusetts, respectively, while between them, beyond many ranges of hills, on any clear





VALLEY OF FACTORY BROOK FROM DICKSON HILL, ABOUT 1898



day may be seen in the west the Catskill Mountains, seventy miles away in New York State. Hills in Connecticut are to be seen to the southeast. The peaks of Mts. Tom, Holyoke, and Nonatuck rise from the Connecticut Valley nearer at hand. On a clear day the observer can catch sight of Mt. Wauchusett, eighty miles distant in eastern Massachusetts and a little farther toward the northeast he can espy the outline of Mt. Monadnock in southern New Hampshire.

The surface of the rounded plateau is divided into subordinate elevations by three streams, which, flowing from northeast to southeast, parallel in general to the rivers which bound the plateau, create three minor ridges upon the surface of the greater one. A brook called Den Stream rises in the northern part of the township and flowing along the eastern edge of the high plateau finally turns east, and plunging down the mountain side forming the beautiful cascade called "Glendale Falls," joins the East Branch of the Westfield River in the valley. "Factory Brook," formerly known as "Taggart's Brook" or "Mill Brook," rises in the southern part of Peru, and flowing southward to join the West Branch of the Westfield River, separates the main portion of the high plateau on the east, from the West Hill, a range of hills running north and south, occupying the western portion of the township. Coles Brook, another considerable tributary of the West Branch, runs through the southwestern part of this region.

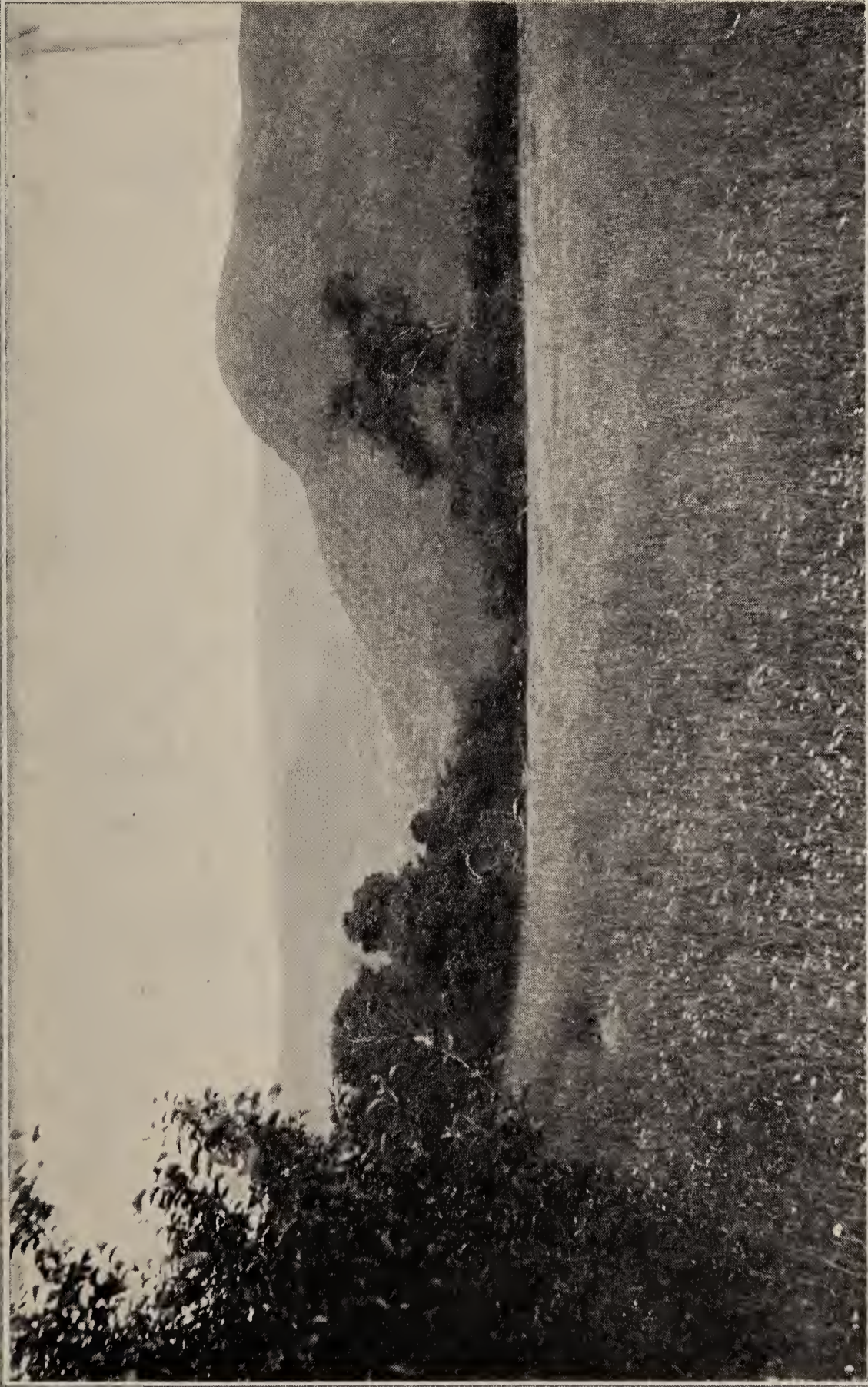
As will appear in a later chapter, the reason why the town of Middlefield was created at all, was the difficulty which the dwellers on the hill-tops experienced in trying to travel across deep valleys to the centers of other towns. The deep valley of the Middle Branch of the Westfield River, with steep mountain slopes on the east and west, was no inconsiderable barrier to traffic and travel between Worthington Center and the region west of Smith Hollow which then belonged to Worthington. When even to-day some of the dwellers in Middlefield think twice before driving to Worthington, having in mind the steep descent down Smith Hollow Hill and the hard climb up Sam Hill's road, what must travel in that direction have meant to the pioneers of 1773 when there was neither road through the forest nor bridge over the river? Two deep valleys with

their rapid mountain streams stood between Becket Center and the portion of that township which lay upon the southern part of the plateau. It was to these barriers to travel and transportation that the settlers referred in their petition for incorporation in the words: "The many disadvantages arising from the Roughness of the Roads Steep Hills and Rapid Rivers that are in the way to their respective towns are more than many of your Honours would think of." This condition of isolation and the failure to secure adequate highways to replace the rude trails which the Red Man made, led to the formation of a new township.

This rolling hill-country, with innumerable ledges of granite, gneiss and mica schist, with scant soil composed mostly of glacial drift full of stones, with only here and there narrow, level meadows beside the streams, was the land with which the pioneers had to deal. They found the land strong and fertile, stronger, some say, than the alluvial plains along the Connecticut River. The meadows along Den Stream and Factory Brook have at times been parts of successful farms, and several enterprising farmers have done well on certain sections of the hillsides. But the season for crop-raising is short among the mountains, and though agriculture has been the principal occupation of the inhabitants, the soil is better adapted to grazing, and for many years the raising of sheep and fine cattle was an important industry. Lumbering flourished so long as the native forests lasted. Quarrying was carried on for a time. The rapid mountain streams furnished adequate water power and several manufacturing establishments flourished for some decades along the valley of Factory Brook.

As we shall see, this territory began and for many years remained a region of scattered farms, without villages or communities. Later as trade developed and industries became localized, villages grew up at the Center on the plateau, at Factory Village in the valley of Factory Brook, which was also known as Blush Hollow, and at Bancroft by the Westfield River in the southwest corner of the town, locally known as "The Switch," where Middlefield Station is located. The southeast corner of the town came to be known as "The Den" or "Glendale," and the northeast corner had a little settlement in the valley by the Worthing-





MT. GOBBLE AND THE WESTFIELD RIVER VALLEY



ton River (Middle Branch), which from the names of its leading citizens came to be called "Smith Hollow."

But with the growth of manufacturing, stock raising and agriculture in the west, the wider fields and greater opportunities in that land of dreams beckoned to the adventurous spirits of the east. The rock-bound hills and severe winters had made life hard for the pioneers and the isolation of Middlefield made many wish for homes in less secluded and more favored regions. The railroad passed the town by, following the Westfield River instead of Factory Brook. Local industries languished because of competition and the lack of proper transportation facilities; and with the drawing away of the young people to the cities and to farms of the west, the town has in recent years become again a region of scattered farms, which are fewer in number than they were a century ago. But the beauty of the hills and valleys remains to delight the members of the summer colony, who find in the isolation an opportunity for rest, and in the hills and vales trails for an endless number of exhilarating rambles.