

CHAPTER III

THE MIGRATION TO THE BERKSHIRE HILLS

THE secluded hill-town country of western Massachusetts, in the heart of which Middlefield is situated, would be classified to-day as one of the "abandoned farm" districts of new England. Foundations and cellar-holes of old homesteads are constantly seen along the winding thoroughfares between the scattered and sometimes untenanted farm houses still remaining. If one is enticed into the overgrown side roads which end deep in the wooded vales or high on the bare and seemingly inaccessible hill-tops, even here cellar, lane and barnyard are clearly outlined by the enduring stone walls, some of which have sunk to a level with the ground.

The full extent of the removal of the native population from this region, of which these landmarks are the evidence, has not been generally realized. The abandonment of the farms has usually been accounted for by the growing competition of the West in the production of grain, beef and wool, during the last fifty years, and the concentration of industry in the larger towns and cities. A great many of these cellars, however, have remained in their present undisturbed state for more than half a century, especially those which are remote from the main highways. They are the result of a much earlier emigration, beginning as early as 1790 and ending about 1830, during which many sons of pioneers, and even some of the pioneers themselves, after a brief stay in the rocky and wind-swept hills, pushed on to the more easily cultivated valleys of New York and Ohio which were then attracting large numbers of settlers. In the case of Middlefield, which has received no marked increase in its numbers through immigration since the days of the early settlers, this movement away from the farms has been going on with greater or less regularity for one hundred and twenty years.

Between the two seasons of marked exodus just mentioned, Middlefield was able to maintain for fifty years a stable popula-

tion averaging seven hundred twenty persons, or more than twice the present number of inhabitants of the town. During this time a considerable degree of prosperity in trading and manufacturing as well as in agriculture was enjoyed which reacted favorably upon the social and intellectual life of the community. The achievements of this period, however, of which the older inhabitants of the town have pleasant recollections, can be accurately estimated only by a full understanding of the underlying forces which impelled the pioneers to seek a livelihood in this rugged region and by an appreciation of the unique and difficult problems which they encountered and solved in organizing the town during the economic and political chaos which existed throughout and after the Revolutionary War.

This inquiry is the more necessary when we remember at the outset that the township of Middlefield was not established in the usual manner. Before the incorporation in 1783 its territory belonged largely to what are now the neighboring towns of Becket, Chester, Worthington, Peru and Washington. There was also an independent tract enclosed by them known as Prescott's Grant. It was not until all these lands had been well settled under the direction of different groups of proprietors, that the dwellers in Prescott's Grant and the bordering portions of the adjacent towns, feeling the need of better highways and a more accessible political and religious center, initiated the movement which led to the incorporation of Middlefield. The history of the people who formed the town, therefore, begins with the history of the towns of which they were formerly citizens.

The map facing page 28 shows where these sections of former townships lay with respect to the later boundaries of Middlefield. The large northeastern portion of the town, including Middlefield Center, was the southwest corner of Worthington. The smaller southeastern quarter was the northwest corner of Chester. The large southwest quarter, including the land directly south of the Center, was the northeast corner of Becket, as indicated in the previous chapter. Prescott's Grant and the smaller portions on the west and north contributed respectively by Washington and Peru occupy the northwest portion of the township. For convenience we shall hereafter designate each of these ceded sections by the name of the town ceding it.

The first portion of Middlefield territory to be granted by the Province for settlement was the southwest corner originally belonging to Becket. This township, as we saw in a previous chapter, was first known as No. 4, and was established with three others as a result of the General Court's measure of 1735, for the ultimate purpose of defeating by colonization the claim of New York to all Massachusetts territory west of the Connecticut River. It was the intention to have these townships adjoin one another, two on each side of the Albany road leading from Westfield to the Housatonic Plantation through what are now Blandford, Otis, Sandisfield and Tyringham. No. 4, however, on account of the resurvey mentioned in the preceding chapter, was finally located to the northward at a considerable distance from the only channel of travel. Moreover, the other three townships which are to-day included in Sandisfield, New Marlboro, Monterey and Tyringham, were contiguous to settlements already well established either in Massachusetts or Connecticut, while No. 4 was practically surrounded by wilderness at the outset. Fortunately the township of Blandford, which was begun just at this time, touched No. 4 at its southeast corner and brought it eventually into communication with the rest of the world.

There was little demand for lands in the hill country at this period. After the waste of the Indian wars the activities of pioneers did not extend beyond the Connecticut and Housatonic Valleys. The unbroken forests which stretched to Canada were still inhabited by tribes who were always ready to attack the Massachusetts settlements at the instigation of the ever hostile French. Although the lands of No. 4 had been divided and allotted by Joseph Brigham and the other proprietors at a meeting in Marlboro in August, 1737, few were willing to make actual settlement. The situation as it existed in 1743 is well shown by the petition of the three settlers to the General Court asking that the proprietors show cause why their right to the grant should not be forfeited on account of the expiration of the period set for performing the conditions of the grant and the great hardship which had arisen by the neglect of the other grantees. Although the petition was granted, the outcome of the matter was no doubt deferred by the important events which soon followed.

In 1744 war with France broke out. Berkshire county was now a part of the frontier and was exposed to the dread attacks of the Indians and French as the Connecticut Valley had been in the former wars. Fort Massachusetts, which had been erected at what is now North Adams to protect the Housatonic Valley settlements, fell before an attacking force of seven hundred in 1746, and its defenders were carried captive to Canada.

Rudimentary forts were erected at Pittsfield, No. 4, and Blandford at this time, but the fear of the Indians was such that Pittsfield and No. 4 were wholly abandoned, while all but four families in Blandford fled to other towns for safety. A party of red-skins visited Blandford in 1749, but inflicted no serious damage.

With the peace of 1748 the pressure of emigration from Connecticut into the Housatonic became manifest. Pittsfield was repopulated largely by families from Wethersfield while men from West Hartford and Wallingford established Lenox. The menace of the French and Indians was still present, however, and in 1753 the final struggle for the supremacy of North America began. The following year Hoosick Falls, New York, not far from the Massachusetts border, was laid waste by a band of Schaghticoke Indians. Passing by Fort Massachusetts, a few of them attacked a house at Stockbridge, killing one man and a child. Exaggerated reports of these raids caused the temporary abandonment of Pittsfield and Lenox, but settlement was resumed as soon as troops could be furnished for their protection.

So far as is known, the only pioneer of Middlefield region who participated in these anxious times was Samuel Taylor, one of the earliest residents of Pittsfield. The story goes that one day when her husband was at work, Mrs. Taylor, seeing the Indians approaching the house, caught her infant child in her arms, mounted a horse and rode for her life. She escaped and joined her husband soon after. One version of this tale states that they were chased by Indians as far as Peru. At any rate, the family abandoned Pittsfield and chose a home on Middlefield hill-top where there was no danger of Indian attacks.

Although the war continued for several years, it was carried on in other sections of the frontier. That the danger of invasion of Berkshire county was considered as past is shown by the re-

settlement of No. 4 on a permanent basis in 1755, the new delegation of pioneers coming mostly from eastern Connecticut. Two years later the Hartwood plantation just north of No. 4 was purchased by families from Hartford and Suffield, Connecticut. Although these communities enjoyed a steady growth from this time on, it was fifteen years before the demand for cheap lands was sufficient to attract settlers to the remoter sections later ceded to form Middlefield. Before this happened, No. 4 and Hartwood were incorporated in 1765 and 1777 respectively under their present names of Becket and Washington.

With the capture of Quebec in 1759 and the downfall of French rule in Canada, the exciting cause of the Indian attacks which had harassed the Massachusetts settlements since the beginning of the century was now removed. The effect upon immigration, which had hitherto been greatly restricted, was immediate, and western Massachusetts offered an inviting field for homeseekers. As a result of the demand for land the General Court was able to replenish the depleted treasury of the Province by marking out ten townships in this region which were sold at auction in 1762.

Three of these townships contained land which later became parts of Middlefield. No. 2, which included Peru and Hinsdale, was purchased by Elisha Jones, of Weston, for 1,460 pounds, and was first called Partridgefield when Oliver Partridge, of Hatfield, became part owner. No. 3, which was bought by Aaron Willard for 1,860 pounds, was transferred to John Worthington, of Springfield, and Major Barnard, of Deerfield, and was named in honor of the former. No. 9, which included Chester and Huntington, though purchased in the name of William Williams for 1,500 pounds passed at once into ownership of John Murray, of Rutland; Abijah Willard, of Lancaster; and John Chandler and Timothy Paine, of Worcester. This township, incorporated in 1765 under the name of Murrayfield, was divided into an eastern portion called Norwich, (now Huntington), and a western section incorporated in 1783 under the name of Chester.

Enclosed by these three townships and those of Becket and Washington lay a tract of province land of some 2,600 acres which included the hills forming the upper valley of the stream

now known as Factory Brook.¹ This land remained ungranted for several years after the settlements in the neighboring towns were well advanced. In the spring of 1771, however, the appearance of surveyors indicated that this tract would soon pass into private possession.

These surveyors represented James, William and Oliver Prescott, to whom the General Court had granted the preceding year an amount of land in lieu of certain territory in the town of Groton, which their father, Benjamin Prescott, had lost by the settlement of the boundary line between New Hampshire and Massachusetts. The heirs had a choice of 5,880 acres on the Saco River in Maine, or 4,400 acres in the western part of the Province "provided they can find the same." As western Massachusetts at this time offered a more attractive opportunity for a ready sale of lands to prospective settlers, the latter offer was accepted.

By this time, however, there were very few large sections of Province land remaining. When their arduous task was accomplished, the surveyors found that the tract containing Factory Brook had an acreage of only two thirds of the amount granted. But they discovered at the northeast corner that the north line of Hartwood and the south line of Partridgefield did not quite adjoin, and that there was a narrow strip of land, scarcely a hundred yards wide, which extended four miles to another piece of ungranted land now situated in Washington. Even with this addition it was still necessary to survey a separate parcel of two hundred seventy acres further west in order to secure the total number to which they were entitled.

We can hardly imagine the difficulties which the surveyors must have encountered in determining the boundaries of a section so long and of such an irregular shape, especially in a region where the unbroken forest was relieved only by ledges, swamps and ponds. Worst of all, the north and south lines, seven miles in length, lay directly across the hill ranges and valleys which parallel each other in this vicinity. The running of the northern boundary, for instance, starting west from the Worthington town line near the beginning of the Den Stream,²

¹ See Map of 1775, facing p. 28.

² For full account see Appendix A.

necessitated a climb of three hundred feet in the first mile to the summit of Robbins Hill, the highest point of land in Hampshire County. In the second mile a drop of five hundred feet to Factory Brook was followed in the third mile by another climb of four hundred fifty feet to the present Washington town line, the remainder of the line traversing territory nearly as irregular.

In spite of the difficulties, the work was expeditiously performed. In June of the same year the General Court bestowed on the Prescotts the land as surveyed.³ Under the circumstances the provision that this grant should not contain more than 4,400 acres naturally went unchallenged. Later surveys, however, showed the area to be larger by over five hundred acres.

The Prescotts lost no time in disposing of their property. In December the large tract was purchased by William Spencer, of Sheffield, who immediately transferred the eastern quadrilateral now lying in Middlefield to Josiah Arnold, of East Haddam, Connecticut. In spite of its changes of ownership this property was commonly known as Prescott's Grant up to the time of its incorporation into the township of Middlefield.

Although Prescott's Grant and the neighboring townships were originally owned by men who lived mostly in the eastern part of the state, probably not one half of the actual settlers came from this locality. Partly on account of the topography of southern New England and partly for economic reasons the general movement of immigration from the coast assumed a northern as well as a western direction. Families in the Massachusetts coast towns, for instance, who were engaged in occupations connected with the prosperous sea trade, naturally moved northward to harbors along the Maine shore. But seafaring life had its dangers and hardships. George Conant, of Barnstable, moved to Becket, being afraid that his sons would become sailors, and perhaps his fellow-townsmen who came to the Becket section of Middlefield were influenced by the same motive. Emigrants from the inland towns in general preferred to move across the border into New Hampshire and Vermont rather than to take up the western lands of their own province across the Connecticut River which were less accessible and situated at a greater distance from their old homes and trading centers.

³ For full account see Appendix A.

An exception to this northern movement, however, is noted in the case of many of the Scotch-Irish immigrants who began to arrive in Massachusetts in 1718. As the Province offered them special inducements to locate on the frontier in order to assist in repelling the attacks of the Indians, a large number settled at Worcester from which town they spread to Rutland and other places in the vicinity. Farther west the towns of Blandford, Pelham and Coleraine were founded by them in the same manner. As the proprietors of Murrayfield all lived in localities in central Massachusetts where the Ulsterites had settled, quite a number of the latter, some of whom had friends or relatives in Blandford, were induced to purchase lots in the adjoining town of Murrayfield. There seems to have been no other organized movement of eastern Massachusetts families to the towns in the Middlefield region. There were, however, many individual settlers from many eastern towns who for reasons known only to themselves decided to try their fortune in the western hills.

But the great impulse for immigration into the hill country lands of western Massachusetts came from the farmers and tradesmen in the overcrowded inland towns of eastern Connecticut. The succession of Indian Wars had not only restricted the natural emigration of the rapidly increasing population of this region, but it had also driven back from the Massachusetts frontier into Connecticut many of the families of pioneers, some of whom were originally from eastern Massachusetts. By the end of the French and Indian War the only vacant lands lay to the north and northwest. Consequently many families moved up the Connecticut Valley to New Hampshire and the Grants west of the river which later became the state of Vermont. Some of the more adventurous pushed on to the New York frontier where the untamed Iroquois and other Indian tribes held sway. Others from Windham County and elsewhere formed the Connecticut-Susquehanna Land Company which purchased a large and fertile domain in the Wyoming Valley of Pennsylvania.

But those who did not wish to settle so far from their old homes could secure wild lands at reasonable prices in the comparatively nearby region of western Massachusetts. Moreover, the roads already existing in the Connecticut and Westfield Val-

leys, on which the trading centers of Hartford, Springfield and Westfield were situated, formed a convenient pathway to them for the larger part of the distance. The impression gained ground that the highlands were more healthful than the lowlands. But, even so, it seemed likely that the steepness of the hills and the narrowness of the valleys characteristic of this section would have prevented a large immigration had not the other portions of the northwestern frontier with their broader valleys been made less attractive for settlement just as this movement was gaining headway.

New Hampshire and New York now became engaged in a protracted controversy over the ownership of the land lying between them, known as the New Hampshire Grants, and even the validity of individual titles to land in this section was at times impaired. Under the leadership of Ethan Allen, settlers who had purchased lands from the New Hampshire government and were ordered by the British Privy Council to repurchase them from the New York authorities, resorted to arms to protect their rights. Not until the independence of the Grants was acknowledged and the state of Vermont formally recognized and admitted to the Union in 1791 were these problems entirely solved.

In the Wyoming Valley, even before the Revolution, attacks by the Indians and destructive civil strife between the Connecticut and Pennsylvania pioneers who both claimed the land led many stockholders in the Susquehanna Company to dispose of their shares. Among these were several Middlefield pioneers, such as Obadiah Rhoades and James Dickson. Another stockholder, Giles Churchill, got no further than Orange County, New York. His son, Elijah, returning to Connecticut, later chose Middlefield as his home.

With the coming of the Revolutionary War the repressive influences upon immigration caused by former wars was again repeated. Once more a hostile power ruled in Canada, threatening the northern provinces with invasion and inciting the Indians to make attacks on outlying villages. The expedition of Burgoyne in 1777 disrupted the settlements in northern New York, while in the central part of the state the fierce border warfare between the Patriots and Tories, in which Indians were employed on both sides, drove the frontier nearly back to the

Hudson River. The climax came in Pennsylvania in 1778 when a force of British, Tories and Indians descended upon the ill-fated Connecticut settlements in the Wyoming Valley killing the greater part of the four hundred colonists and ravaging their farms and villages.

As these scenes of bloodshed and ruin followed each other, the peaceful wooded hills of western Massachusetts must have appeared more and more attractive to those in Connecticut who were forced to seek cheaper lands or whose relatives had encountered ill fortune or death on the western or northern frontiers. Protected by the towns of the Housatonic Valley, the mountain communities to the east were comparatively free from danger of British or Indian attacks. Titles to land were not clouded. It is not surprising, therefore, that the stream of immigration, flowing steadily toward this region during the war, increased greatly at its close, as the soldiers, released from military service, shouldered the axe in place of the gun and moved with their families to localities already made familiar by military expeditions.

That this movement toward Berkshire and western Hampshire Counties was quite general is shown by the fact that all the townships bordering on Prescott's Grant, as well as the Grant itself, received an influx of settlers at about the same time. The earlier settlers paid less than a dollar an acre for uncleared land. Samuel Taylor, for instance, paid about one hundred dollars for his two hundred sixty-five acres which included much of the land within a half mile radius of what is now Middlefield Center. So low were the prices of frontier lands generally that farm values in Connecticut were seriously affected. In East Haddam the decline was reported as twenty-five per cent, and in Voluntown as much as fifty per cent. This meant a substantial loss to farmers whose only source of wealth was their real estate, and it undoubtedly hastened their removal to the cheaper lands. Many lots in Becket, particularly in the northeast corner, were sold in Hebron, Connecticut. Josiah Arnold found a ready sale for his Prescott's Grant land in East Haddam. Residents of East Windsor, Enfield and Somers purchased many of the lots in the northwest corner of Murrayfield and in the adjoining corner of Worthington.

That religious difficulties at home exercised some influence in this emigration seems not unlikely. The profound effect of the Great Awakening brought about by the preaching of Edwards and Whitfield, particularly in eastern Connecticut, led to the formation of Separatist churches in most of the communities from which Middlefield pioneers came. As the members of these churches, like the Baptists, were compelled by the aid of the state law to contribute to the support of the ministry of the standing order who wielded the political power, much ill feeling was engendered among the different sects. Within the church of Rev. Timothy Edwards father of Jonathan Edwards, in East Windsor, the strife was so bitter that no sacrament was celebrated for a period of three years. Such was the religious atmosphere in which the founders of Middlefield grew up and from which some of them no doubt sought to escape.

But whatever the reasons for emigration, the territory of Middlefield, which in 1770 had only two families, and by 1780 about thirty, was suddenly taken possession of during the next ten years by nearly a hundred families representing six hundred individuals, a number nearly equal to twice the present population of the town. By 1790, then, Middlefield was so well settled that forty families, including squatters, speculators, and those who loved the free range of wilderness, had pulled up stakes and moved on to less civilized regions farther west. The hardy, home-seeking farmers and artisans following them felled the virgin forests, made roads over the hills, and built out of their field stone, the walls which have been the admiration of less sturdy descendants. Nearly all of the prominent families of Middlefield date from this period.

It would seem that at this point the town had already received more inhabitants than could carry on successfully the raising of cattle and sheep which required a considerable range of pasturage; yet by the year 1800 about sixty-five more families had arrived. Land values must have risen considerably during this boom period, inasmuch as forty families sold out to the later comers, seeking cheaper properties in other directions. The numerical loss thus sustained, however, was counterbalanced by the natural growth from the intermarriage of the families of the earlier settlers, since the population of Middlefield rose

to its maximum of eight hundred seventy-seven inhabitants at the threshold of the nineteenth century.

An examination of the sources from which Middlefield settlers came reveals some interesting facts.⁴ The selling of the lots in towns of eastern Connecticut might suggest that the majority of homeseekers came from this locality, but such is hardly the case. While about one hundred fourteen pioneers did come from Connecticut, as many as eighty-seven came from Massachusetts towns, indicating that some of them had purchased their lots from Connecticut owners.

There seems, however, to have been a marked difference in the character of the immigration from these two sources. The settlers from Massachusetts towns with one exception, came singly, or in twos and threes from many towns scattered throughout the state. The Connecticut people, on the other hand, came largely in colonies from a fewer number of towns. East Windsor, Enfield, East Haddam and Hebron together furnished seventy-three settlers, while the neighboring towns of Colchester, Bolton, Somers and Preston contributed twenty-four more.

It can readily be seen that in the formation of a community life out of people more or less unknown to each other at the outset, it could hardly be otherwise than that the Connecticut leaders, backed by their circles of friends, should be elected to office in preference to the Massachusetts men, who, coming from widely separated towns, had no following among the people of either state. Of the seventeen selectmen chosen between 1783 and 1800 thirteen were from Connecticut and four from Massachusetts, while between 1800 and 1830 all were of Connecticut origin but one. Every town clerk and representative to the General Court during this period was either a Connecticut man or a descendant of one. In important church and town committees the same situation existed. It was perhaps this solidarity among the Connecticut settlers that explains the fact that as the years went by they formed three fourths of the permanent residents of Middlefield.

The year 1800 marks a turning point in Middlefield history as regards movements of population. Up to this date the immi-

⁴See Appendix F.

grants greatly outnumbered the emigrants, but after that date the wave of incoming settlers which had suddenly flowed over the hills and ravines ebbed almost as suddenly. No more desirable land remained to be occupied in this region. On the other hand, large tracts of farm lands in New York, Pennsylvania and Ohio, were being exploited for settlement. These could be purchased by home-seekers at reasonable prices, and were found to be more fertile and more easily tilled than the New England soil.

These conditions explain why only two dozen or so new families ventured to try their fortunes in Middlefield during the first decade of the century, while nearly a hundred families emigrated. Even this considerable loss was neutralized in large measure by the remarkable increase in the families of the older residents, as the census of 1810 records a decrease of only fifty-five inhabitants from the number in 1800. By 1820 about ninety more young men and families had left town, causing a net loss of sixty-seven persons at the end of the decade. By 1830, however, the emigration had decreased appreciably, and the town maintained a normal average of over seven hundred inhabitants for the next fifty years.

Like the other towns in this region, Middlefield not only provided a permanent home for such adventurous pioneers as were able and willing to labor incessantly for their livelihood, but was besides a temporary haven of refuge for a large number of families during the days of the Revolution and its turbulent after-effects. Of the nearly two hundred settlers who came to Middlefield before 1800, about two thirds moved away after a stay ranging anywhere from two to twenty-five years. It is not strange, then, that there are distributed to-day throughout the Middle West a very large number of people whose ancestors at one time or another lived on the Middlefield hills, although this fact is often unknown both to themselves and to the present day citizens of the town.⁵

⁵ For details see Appendix F.