

CHAPTER IV

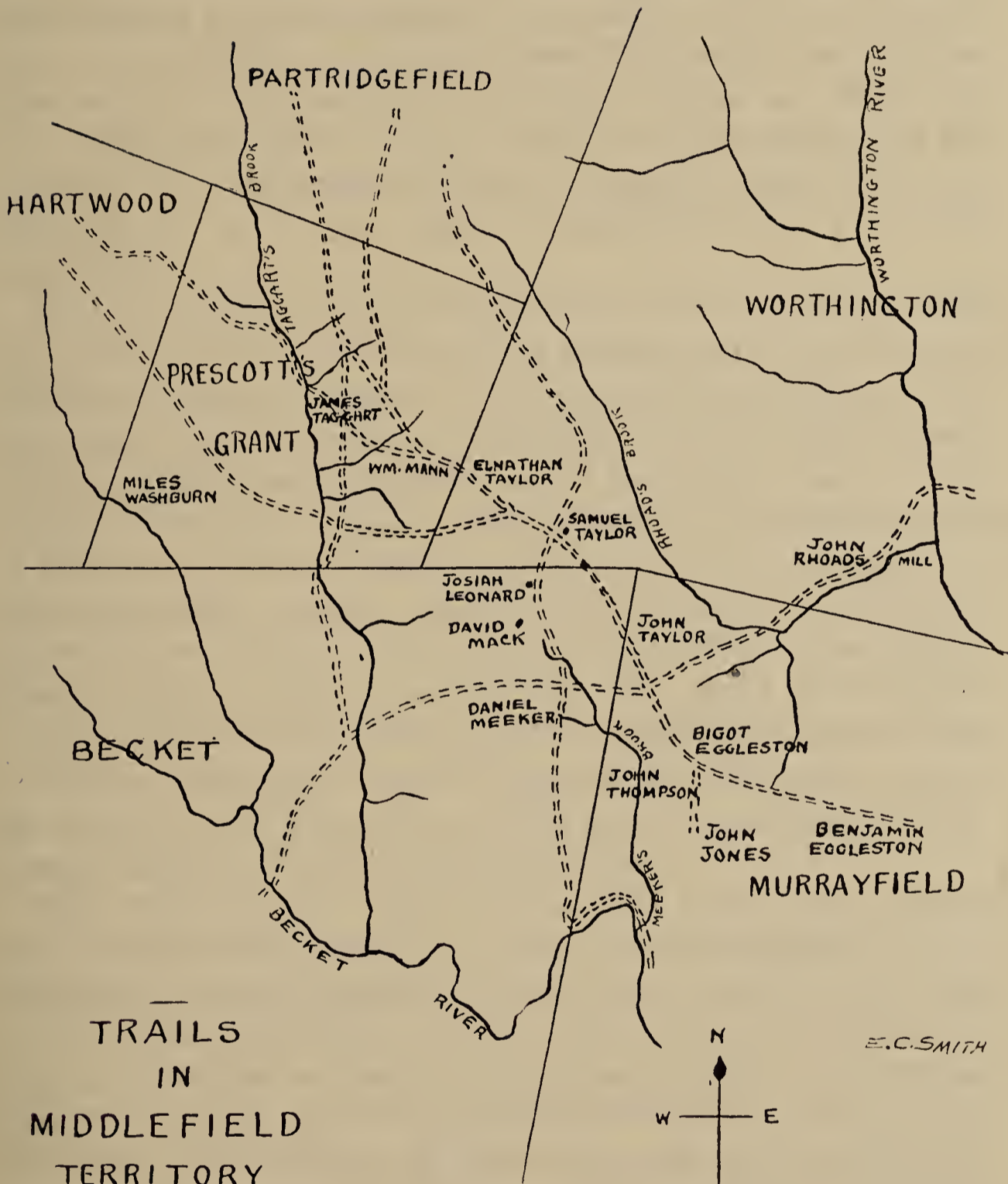
THE PIONEERS AND THEIR TRAILS

THE first signs of civilization in the Middlefield region came, no doubt, soon after the founding of Pittsfield when its pioneers made their way through "the Greenwoods" to shorten the distance between this frontier settlement and the towns of Westfield and Springfield from which they originally came. It may not have been until the beginning of the Hartwood plantation, now Washington, in 1760, that a definite trail northwest across the central ridge was blazed by the early settlers there who came from Hartford and vicinity. Before the establishment of Murrayfield, Worthington and Partridgefield the main path from Westfield seems to have led over "Westfield Mountain" and through what is now the hill-town of Montgomery down to the "Westfield River Branches" where Huntington village is now situated.

As early as 1760 there were settlers here on small private grants, some of whom were squatters from Blandford, and it was from this locality that the first settlers in Middlefield territory came. From such meager indications as can be found travelers from this point to Hartwood seem to have followed up the valley of the Middle Branch to the Den Stream, climbing westward and northward along this tributary. A study of the county records and early road surveys leads to the conclusion that this trail crossed the central ridge in a northwesterly direction, passing just east of the horsesheds of the Highland Agricultural Society, and meeting the location of the present highway to Hinsdale at the Charles Wright farm half a mile north of the Center.¹ From here it continued across the upper part of the bed of the former Reservoir and on in the same direction over West Hill to Hartwood.

For convenience this path is called "the squatters' trail," as the first settlers in the Middlefield country were squatters pure

¹ Where G. E. Cook now lives. (1924)



and simple and they were able to develop their new clearings by the use of this trail without the necessity of climbing over the Moose Hill range on which Murrayfield Center was established. It was not destined, however, to become a permanent thoroughfare. The formation in 1762 of the townships of Murrayfield, Worthington and Partridgefield eventually led to the development of new trails by travelers between their centers and between them and the older settlements at Becket Center and Hartwood over which town roads were later laid out which superseded the earlier trail. The portion crossing Prescott's Grant, however, was laid out as a town road by Middlefield, but was early abandoned.

As the map facing page 62 will show, most of the other trails just mentioned are represented in a general way by the present highways across the township. The most striking exception is the path from Becket Center to Worthington Center which crossed the West Branch some distance west of the present road at "the Switch." It then continued northeast over the southern slope of West Hill to Factory Brook, and, turning east, it climbed over Johnnycake Hill, passing near the present house of Arthur D. Pease and continuing to the Den and the valley of the Middle Branch where it met a road coming down from Worthington Center. Travelers from Becket to Partridgefield branched north at Factory Brook, and followed this stream to the upper part of the Reservoir bed where there is still an old road leading to the county highway toward Hinsdale and Peru.

With these trails in mind we come now to the actual settlement of Middlefield territory. So far as can be learned the first inhabitants were the Taggarts,² James, John and James, Jr., who in 1769 sold their lands near the present Norwich Bridge and took up residence on Province land near the head of the former Reservoir through which the Hartwood trail led. It seems probable that before selling out they had made some preliminary clearing at this spot. The Taggarts were immediately followed by a neighbor from Norwich, William Mann, who took up four hundred acres of Province land adjoining the Worthington west line—somewhere on the slope west of the Charles Wright farm already mentioned. It was not until 1771 that this Province

² See Appendix A, page 353.

land lying between Worthington and Hartwood was granted to the Prescotts, and though the tract was soon sold and redistributed to prospective settlers, the first legal claimants to the land did not arrive until 1777. Before this date, Miles Washburn, who had purchased Taggart's land in Norwich, also established himself on the Grant, laying claim to two hundred acres on West Hill which extended from the east brow of the ridge to Coles Brook on the west.³ This frontier community was early known as "Taggartstown."

As the Middlefield territory formed a part of the same general range of hills as that on which Murrayfield Center was located, it became more accessible from this direction as the Murrayfield citizens gradually extended their roads toward the northwest corner. The growth of settlement can therefore be traced from the south to the north along the early trails, spreading out gradually to the east and west. Each new comer cutting a path to his lot was not only providing for his own home, but was making it possible for another pioneer to advance still further into the forest.

About the time when the squatters had first settled on Prescott's Grant, the northward growth of Murrayfield had reached the North End, or what is known to-day as the Holcomb Hill region. By 1770 Benjamin Eggleston, of Windsor, Connecticut, had pushed on to his lot near the foot of Gordon's Hill as the northerly slope was called, just inside the present Middlefield line, and others from the same town or from Enfield soon followed in his footsteps. Two years later his father, Bigot Eggleston, had settled on the adjoining lot to the north, while John Thompson and John Taylor⁴ located on the lot beyond near the Becket line. It is impossible at this late day to discover where the log houses of these earliest settlers stood, but they were probably not far from the present highway.

About 1774, John Jones, of Enfield, Connecticut, purchased a lot west of the Egglestons near Collins Hill. The path which he made to his lot is now an abandoned road running southwest

³ An unidentified cellar hole 300 yards southwest of the farmhouse, now owned by Mr. Drozd, may have been the site of his house.

⁴ Taylor may have lived at the Field place, a few rods north of the A. D. Pease house.

from the present Chester Center road near its junction with the road leading east to Glendale Falls. Jones sold a portion of this lot to Ebenezer Babcock, of Coventry, Connecticut, which is still called the "Babcock Lot." Samuel Jones, brother of John, and the most influential of this early group in the northwest corner of Murrayfield, purchased some of Bigot Eggleston's land on the main road.⁵

The first man to settle in the adjoining corner of Becket was Daniel Meeker, formerly of Blandford and Murrayfield, who located about 1774 on the cross trail from Worthington to Becket Center about half a mile west of John Taylor's.⁶ He purchased several lots toward the west and had the largest farm yet established on Middlefield territory. The portion of this cross trail between his house and the Murrayfield trail, by which he traveled to what is now Chester Center, was known as "Meeker's Road" and was much used by other early settlers in the Becket section in reaching their lots. The brook running south down the mountainside to the West Branch and roughly dividing the Becket section from the Murrayfield section was early known as "Meeker's Brook."

Settlement in this region would have been much more difficult had not John Rhoads, of Voluntown, Connecticut, located on the meadows above Glendale Falls about 1772.⁷ Rhoads made immediate use of the water power for a sawmill and gristmill, and the foundations of this first mill established on Middlefield territory can still be seen near the highway at the head of the Falls. Rough paths were soon beaten to these mills by the settlers along the Murrayfield trail which later became town roads. The most important of these at first was the trail from Becket Center which crossed the Murrayfield-Partridgefield trail at John Taylor's on its way to the Den. Along it between Taylor's and the mill located four sons of John Rhoads, William, Joseph, Isaac and Silas. The crossing of these trails at Taylor's marked the beginning of the community known to-day as the "Pease District" and was destined to become a center of considerable activity.

⁵ Jones built the original gambrel-roofed house at the George Bell farm where Ovid Eames lives. (1924)

⁶ The Andrew Meacham farm, owned by Mr. George Millot. (1924)

⁷ Near the Clark B. Wright place.

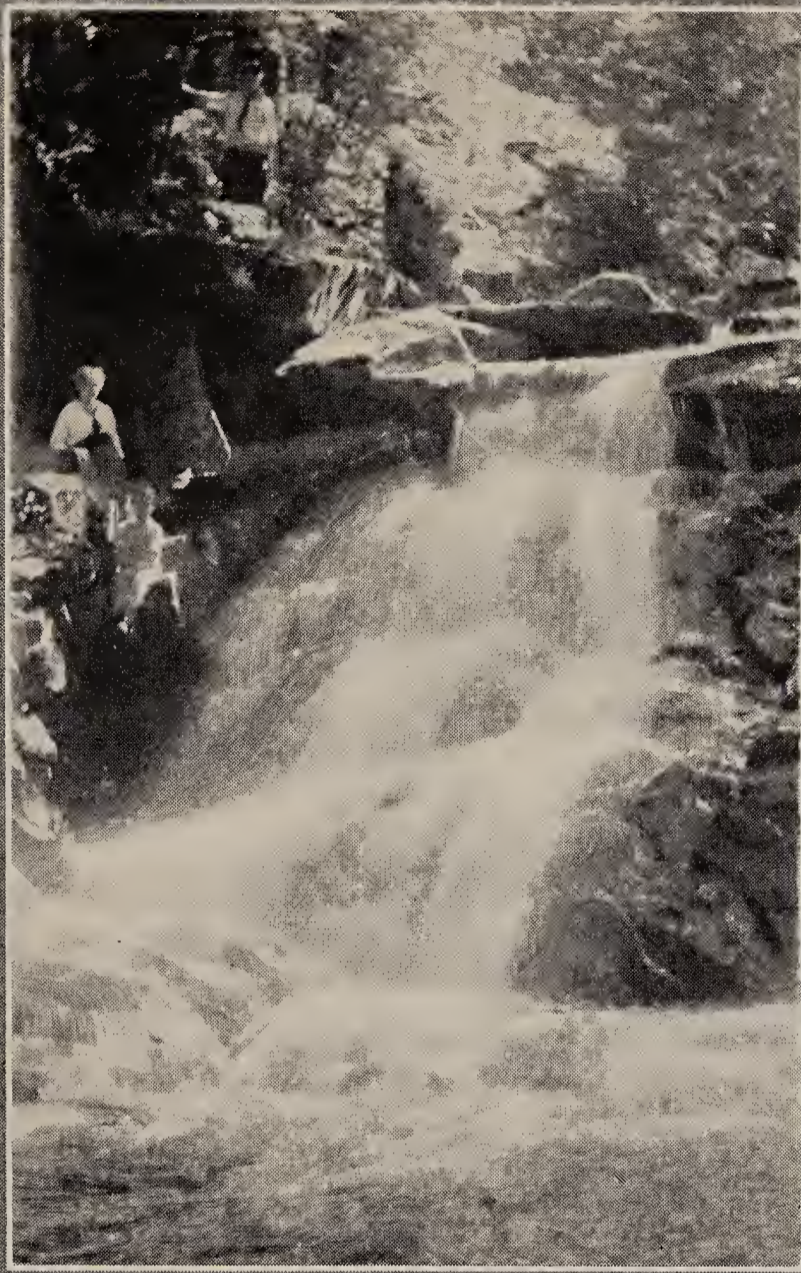
Few of the names of these early settlers are familiar to Middlefield people of the present day, or were known even to their fathers. In only one or two cases have their names been permanently attached to the places where they lived. Like the squatters, they were frontier adventurers who built only log houses and cleared only enough land to make their property salable at a profit to a more solid type of pioneer.

The first settler whose family was permanently connected with Middlefield was Samuel Taylor, the former Pittsfield pioneer, of whom mention has already been made. Taylor purchased most of the land surrounding what is now the Center, then in the extreme southwest corner of Worthington and bordering on William Mann's claim on Prescott's Grant. With his six stalwart sons, all of whom were in the Revolution, he did much to clear the land in this locality. His house was built on the old Squatters' Trail half a mile east of the Center. About 1773 his son, Elnathan, located along the trail a half mile further northwest, where a younger son, Lewis, succeeded him after a few years.⁸ Most of the land on which the Center now stands was purchased by Moses Orcutt, of Tyringham in 1776. His log house was probably along the trail between the Taylors near the Ambrose Newton house.⁹ He sold out the following year to Robert Cochran, of Blandford, who improved the property before selling it intact to Joseph Blush, of Bolton, Connecticut, in 1783.

That this region was for a short time a typical frontier country where the few settlers sometimes felt themselves free and away from the restraints of the law is indicated by the records of the Court of General Sessions. Samuel Taylor, for instance, sought to recover damages from William Mann for the theft in 1773 of four hundred feet of hemlock boards and also for assault and battery, alleging that said Mann "set upon him with force and arms and clubs" and "did beat and wound and grievously abuse him" so that "his life was despaired of." Daniel Meeker also sought the aid of the court to recover from John Rhoads who had promised in the same year to deliver five pounds worth of hemlock boards by a certain date and had failed to do so. In

⁸ The Taylor place, just north of the Center where the Wayside Lodge now stands. (1924)

⁹ Now the summer home of Miss Kate W. Smith. (1924)



GLENDALE FALLS
FOUNDATIONS OF RHOADS' MILL

each case justice seems to have been tardily administered, as it was several years before the plaintiffs were awarded their damages.

Most of the pioneers already mentioned were men of seasoned experience, but in 1773 an adventurous young man of twenty-two, on returning to Connecticut from a trading trip to the Indians on Lake Champlain purchased a lot in the northeast corner of Becket a short distance south of Samuel Taylor's land. This man was David Mack, of Hebron, Connecticut, the forerunner of many other young men from his own and other towns. After boarding with his neighbor, Taylor, for one season while cutting a path to his lot and building his log house,¹⁰ he brought his wife and baby to the new home in 1775, making the arduous, and at times perilous, journey in the usual conveyance of the time,—the ox cart.

Before the year was out Mack had a nearer neighbor in Josiah Leonard, of West Springfield, who settled on the lot between him and Taylor.¹¹ Leonard also brought a wife and baby, but the latter did not survive the rigors of pioneer life. The small gravestone in the back part of the lot marks the first death among the early families, and a parcel of land containing her grave was later set aside to form the first cemetery for the community.

Up to 1775 nothing had been done by the townships of Murrayfield, Becket or Worthington, to aid their settlers on the Middlefield ridge in the way of roads. As early as 1772 Hampshire County, recognizing the need of a better route to Pittsfield, had surveyed a road from Norwich to Hartwood, apparently over the squatters' trail to Prescott's Grant. Nothing came of this, however, probably because there was no prospect of getting a road across the Grant, which lay in Berkshire County.

In 1775 Murrayfield and Worthington took steps to connect their distant inhabitants with their centers in order to give them their rightful opportunity to attend church and town meeting with as little inconvenience as possible. Murrayfield built a road from the Eggleston's to John Taylor's near the Becket line,

¹⁰ His permanent house, built in 1781, is probably the oldest house in Middlefield and is now (1924) owned by Rev. J. B. Clark.

¹¹ The "Parsonage Lot" where the Mack Graveyard and Memorial are located.

while Worthington made a path from what is now "Smith Hollow" almost directly southwest to Samuel Taylor's. The present highway from "Blossom Corner" to the turn into the north road near the cemetery is the only portion of this old Worthington path now in use. A road was also built from the top of Glendale Falls down to the river and up the east side of the valley for the benefit of John Rhoads and the other Worthington citizens who desired to have access to his mills.

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But the greatest need of the people on the central ridge still remained,—a through road from Murrayfield to Pittsfield, including particularly a connecting link across the corner of Becket. As the counties had done nothing to this end, a concerted movement by the towns seems to have been determined upon by the handful of citizens on the Middlefield ridge who were most interested. In the annual meeting in March, 1776, Josiah Leonard and others petitioned the town of Becket to construct a highway from the Becket line near his house across the corner of the township to meet the road from Murrayfield. At the annual meeting in Worthington held at the same time Samuel Taylor headed a similar petition to continue the proposed Becket highway northwest to the Prescott's Grant line,—presumably passing Taylor's house and over the existing squatters' trail.

Josiah Leonard

In Becket, Leonard's petition received favorable consideration,—probably because the proposed section of road gave Mack and Leonard a good connection with the outside world through Murrayfield,—thus avoiding the necessity of building them a long road to Becket Center. But in Worthington the town had already been to considerable expense the previous year to build a road from Samuel Taylor's house across the valley to Worthington Center, and this fact probably accounts for the rejection of Taylor's petition. The proposed new piece of road no doubt seemed to the town fathers on the distant Worthington ridge as likely to benefit outsiders rather than the town as a whole.

The next few years saw the arrival in the Becket section of settlers who branched out into the level land west of the Mur-

rayfield road, making use of Meeker's road to take them as far possible into the forests which covered their lots. A number of these men from Hebron settled in the Johnnycake Hill region, and may have worked together in clearing paths to their house sites prior to building and bringing their families. The fact that John Taylor is styled "Landlord" in an early road survey before the days of through travel would suggest that he made a business of boarding pioneers while they were establishing their homes.

The first of this group from Hebron was Elisha Mack, the father of David, who located a half mile south of Meeker's house on the east slope of Johnnycake Hill.¹² On the adjoining lot to the west near the top of the hill was the house of John Ford.¹³ Malachi Loveland settled west of the hill. After a year or two Ford sold his lot to Benjamin Blish, of Bolton, Connecticut, and penetrated west of Loveland into the valley of Taggart's Brook, building the first sawmill and gristmill on this stream. Solomon Ingham chose a lot north of Johnnycake Hill, a half mile west of Meeker's. Asa Brown settled a half mile west of David Mack,¹⁴ and in 1779 Aaron Goddard, of Simsbury, Connecticut, pushed on beyond him to Taggart's Brook, becoming the first settler in what was later Factory Village.¹⁵

That there was need of a connecting link from Murrayfield to Partridgefield for through as well as local travel is indicated by a petition of Murrayfield citizens to the General Court in 1779 for a bridge across the Westfield River at Norwich, in which it was stated that on the roads which met at the ford where the bridge was desired "there was much travelling to and from the state of Connecticut from the upper towns and also from the state of Vermont as well as from this state."

The difficulty of getting a road across Prescott's Grant which had held up previous attempts to construct a through road along the central ridge, was avoided by laying a road around it. Murrayfield built a road from Landlord John Taylor's to the

¹² Where Charles Combs lived.

¹³ The abandoned homestead on this lot was probably built by Captain Elisha Mack who purchased land from Blish.

¹⁴ Near the Dolman farm now occupied by W. J. Adams. (1924)

¹⁵ Lived somewhere on the meadow near the present schoolhouse.

northwest corner of the township; Partridgefield built one to its southeast corner, while Worthington built the connecting link across its corner. A roundabout route to Pittsfield and Albany was thus effected by 1779.

The present highway running north on the eastern side of the central ridge¹⁶ follows substantially the route of this first through road. Unlike the previous roads, this one was put through territory where there was no one living, and hence was not the result of any local demand. Its construction was important, however, as it opened up the Worthington section for settlement.

But this road did not satisfy the need of a road to Hartwood and Pittsfield along the western side of the ridge where most of the settlers lived. Josiah Leonard and others accordingly petitioned the county for such a road, utilizing the existing highways in Murrayfield and across the corner of Becket, and constructing a new stretch of road from the Becket line across the corner of Worthington to the Prescott's Grant line,—in the location of the present highway through Middlefield Center. The petition quaintly brings to light a neighborhood controversy over the location of this road, when it states that this way was "considerably used and found very convenient, excepting a small part of said way in Worthington has been altogether stopped and fenced up by Persons living thereon so as they and all Travellers are altogether shut out from any public road."

"The Persons living thereon" were none other than Robert Cochran and his family, and their object in blocking up this short cut across their land was evidently to compel the squatters and other travelers to use the original trail, which, as already stated, ran east and north of where the Cattleshow Grounds are now, passing Samuel Taylor's house. This is made clear by a rival petition of Samuel Taylor and others that the county road be laid in this location. But Leonard's petition was acted upon favorably before Taylor's could be considered, and the County Road was established where it is at the present day.

It was in this same year of 1779 that the project of forming a new township from the adjacent corners of Becket, Murrayfield and Worthington began to take shape. This movement would

¹⁶ North from the A. D. Pease farm passing the cemetery to the Peru line.

also have included Prescott's Grant had it not been that only one or two of the purchasers of lots had arrived on the ground at this date. The initiative, therefore, came from the people in the northeast corner of Becket for whom no roads had as yet been built to connect them with their own center. The leader was David Mack, who, having gained a thorough knowledge of the country as a hunter, was competent to map the boundaries of the proposed new town. Calling a meeting of all his neighbors, including those living across the line in Worthington and Murrayfield, he received hearty support for his project, with the result that petitions were presented for action at the three March meetings, requesting that their sections be set off to form a new township.

The petition of the seven citizens of Murrayfield, headed by Samuel Jones, voiced the general sentiment in its statement that "living so remote from the middle of the town makes it very tedious attending any town business, especially the preaching of the gospel." Unfortunately just at this time the hill towns were being drained of their resources in support of the Revolution, and favorable action on these requests meant a diminution in the amount of real estate and personal property available for taxation. It is not strange, therefore, that the movement came to naught.

The condition of the people in the Murrayfield corner was improved, however, by the establishment of school districts throughout the town. This section was called the "Eggleston District" after the first settlers, and the log schoolhouse built in 1780 near the junction of the County Road and the road to the "Den" was probably located on their land. This was the first schoolhouse built on Middlefield territory. Samuel Jones, who represented the Eggleston District on school committees, must have done some good work for the town, as he became one of the selectmen in 1781.

In Becket the proposition for ceding the northeast corner to form a new township received some serious consideration, probably because the town had spent very little money to give the settlers the roads which the other sections of the Middlefield Ridge had been given. The committee appointed did not report until November, but they did recommend that all the land east of

Taggart's Brook and north of the Westfield River be contributed. The ill success of the project in the other towns no doubt caused the matter to be tabled indefinitely.

The agitation of the "Northeast Corner" citizens, however, had the beneficial effect of rousing the town to its duty of building roads which would connect them with their center. Moreover, with their gradual increase in numbers they had acquired enough political influence in town matters to secure these advantages, as is indicated by their representation among the town officers in 1780. Elisha Mack was one of the selectmen, David Mack, a surveyor, while Daniel Meeker and John Ford were chosen deer reeve and hog reeve respectively for the district.

During this year three roads were laid out in the northeast corner of Becket. The most important of these was the highway from Becket Center which crossed the Westfield River some distance north of where the Middlefield railroad station now stands. The abutments of the old bridge can still be seen. Continuing northeast over the West Hill Ridge, it crossed Factory Brook at Ford's Mills and wound up and over the steep slope of Johnycake Hill to Elisha Mack's farm, doubtless following the trail that the settlers had made down to Ford's Mills. From here the road was continued across lots in a northeast direction to meet "Meeker's Road" by which a connection was made with the County Road and the Partridgefield Road.

This highway not only gave the northeast corner people a direct road to Becket Center, but by joining the other roads at John Taylor's gave Becket its first direct connection with Worthington and Partridgefield, setting in motion new currents of travel in all directions. This meeting place of roads began to grow rapidly in importance. It had no doubt been considered as the center of the proposed new town which had been planned for the previous year. With the rapid increase of settlers after 1780, this neighborhood seemed to have a future, and it began to assume the characteristics of a village.

The most significant development was the building of a tavern in the angle between the County Road and the Partridgefield Road between 1780 and 1784, probably by Enos Blossom, a native of Barnstable, Massachusetts.¹⁷ Eliakim Wardwell, a shoe-

¹⁷ Now owned by A. D. Pease. (1924)



ENOS BLOSSOM'S TAVERN

OLIVER BLUSH'S TAVERN

maker and saddler, located a short distance south.¹⁸ Bezaleel Wright, the first physician, lived a little further south on the County Road. On the Partridgefield Road, John Taylor's place was purchased by Ephraim Sheldon, of Enfield, Connecticut. A quarter mile further north was Elijah White, a cooper by trade.¹⁹ Eli Skinner set up a blacksmith shop opposite the

Eli Skinner

tavern somewhere on the Becket Road which he operated for a few years. Thomas Root, of Enfield, settled a little west of Blossom near Meeker's Brook, and may have been the originator of the tanning industry later carried on by his son-in-law, John Metcalf, at this place.²⁰ James Nooney, also of Enfield, an active buyer and seller of lots in this region, lived south of Blossom.²¹

The new Becket road brought more settlers into the Johnny-cake Hill region. Benajah and Elkanah Jones of Hebron, John Pinney of Windsor, and David Carrier settled on the south edge of the hill overlooking Mt. Gobble and the Westfield River Valley. To the west were Joseph Cary, of Williamsburg, Oliver Bates of Hebron, and several families of Cheeseman, in the vicinity of Walnut Hill, the south slope of which was early known as "Cheeseman's Hollow." Further north was Barzillai Little,

Barzillai Little

of Bolton, Connecticut, who was, with exception of Elisha Mack, Jr., perhaps longest a resident in this section. North of the Becket Road was Amasa Graves, of Williamsburg, the ancestor of many families of this name in Middlefield.²²

It should be borne in mind that by 1780 the corners of Murrayfield and Becket were fairly well populated before the Worthington and Prescott's Grant regions had really begun to be settled. The chief reason for this was that continuous roads had to be built through the former sections to make the latter accessible. Shortly after the building of the Partridgefield road on

¹⁸ The Metcalf house now owned by Mrs. Pearson. (1924)

¹⁹ The Elbert Pease house where Mr. Pierce lives. (1924)

²⁰ Near the Dyer house on road to Chester. (1924)

²¹ Perhaps near H. S. Pease's house. (1924)

²² Built the house now owned by Harry E. Pease. (1924)



HOUSE OF WILLIAM TAYLOR

HOUSE OF AMASA GRAVES

the east side of the central ridge, a group of pioneers, mostly from East Windsor and Windsor, Connecticut, began taking up the land thus made available, and this road was for some years known as "Windsor Street."

Nearest the Murrayfield line on this road were Simeon Booth and John Damon.²³ A short distance further north lived Captain Timothy Allen.²⁴ On the neighboring lot was one of the most prominent of this group, Captain Timothy McElwain, whose large, square homestead, built some years later, is now occupied by descendants of the fourth and fifth generation. Matthew Smith, of East Haddam, purchased the land adjoining, and his well built house, which has sheltered several large families of descendants, is likewise owned by a great-grandson. Further north lived three more Windsorites, Justus and Israel Bissell, and last, but by no means least,—Ithamer Pelton, a competent builder of churches and houses, whose own residence until within a few years bore testimony to his skillful workmanship.²⁵ Across the Worthington line in Partridgefield settled Job Robbins, of Ashford, Connecticut, and Joseph Russ on land later ceded to form Middlefield.

On the eastern ridge between the Den Stream and the Middle Branch of the Westfield the only residents prior to the incorporation of this land into Middlefield were living along the old road to Worthington running northeast over the ridge. These were Elijah Dix, James Kelley and Samuel Woods.²⁶ After the incorporation of Middlefield came the establishment of "Ridgepole Road," running north and south along the crest of this ridge. Among the more prominent families which settled here about 1788 were those of Israel Pease, Erastus Ingham, and Calvin Smith,²⁷ all of them progenitors of many of these names in Middlefield. It was ten years later that Captain Nathan Wright, of Chester, the first of that name, purchased the meadows in "The Den" where his descendants have lived ever since.

After the County Road from Murrayfield to the Prescott's

²³ Lived near the Sweeney place.

²⁴ On the site of the Babson Cottage.

²⁵ Last occupied by the Chamberlain family.

²⁶ Dix near Lester Root place. Kelley near Cottrell.

²⁷ Israel Pease at Harvey Root place now owned by Frank Chipman. (1924) Erastus Ingham just north. Calvin Smith at Cottrell Place.

Grant east line had been established, the prospects for settlement within this tract became brighter. Most of the lots had been sold to residents of East Haddam, Connecticut, prior to the Revolution, but that struggle had delayed their coming. Then, too, the lack of a town government and the uncertainty regarding the establishment of roads and a church therein must have deterred some from emigrating.

The first settler on the Grant who was a purchaser of a lot was David Bolton, a large land owner of Murrayfield, who purchased several lots of the East Haddam owners. About 1777 he built a house near the brow of the hill west of the Center, north of the present highway to "Blush Hollow," giving the region the name of "Shady Grove." This detail seems to classify him as a real estate operator, moving from town to town and buying and selling lots during the boom periods. Bolton was not deterred by the fact that his home lot lay within the land claimed by William Mann, and later events justified his action.

Bolton had an advantage over the East Haddam purchasers in that he had an opportunity to make a thorough inspection of the properties before buying. The lots were apparently laid out by Arnold on the map to contain approximately fifty acres each regardless of the topography of the country. While they all looked alike on the plat, some were apt to be practically worthless. Bolton purchased one of these on the highest table land in the county between Robbins and Dickson Hills, situated at least two miles from the end of the County Road and reached only by a steep climb. An early purchaser was found in Henry Lamberton, of Palmer, who located there in 1779. This site proved so inconvenient, however, that in spite of later town assistance in establishing a road to it, Lamberton and subsequent owners gave up the attempt to make a living there, and both site and road were abandoned at an early date.

General settlement began in the Grant about 1780, coincident with that in the Worthington section. As in the other localities, clearings were first made along the paths already cut. On the Partridgefield trail continuing the County Road settled James Dickson, the first of the East Haddam Colony to arrive. He built his house²⁸ on a slightly lot a half mile northwest of the

²⁸ The Orrin Pease place owned by Judge Birnie. (1924)

present Center. A year or two later his son-in-law, Uriah Church,²⁹ located a short distance farther north, and north of him, John Newton,³⁰ of Colchester, Connecticut. Many of the descendants of these three pioneers were Middlefield residents. Still further north lived Captain Alexander Dickson, a son of James.³¹ Another son, John, the great-grandfather of the noted educator and diplomat, Andrew Dickson White, located on the east side of the central ridge near the Partridgefield line.

John Dickson

Other East Haddam people settled on what seems to have been a trail to Hartwood leading directly west of where the Center now is, the location of which has been followed generally by the present highway to the West Hill. On the south side of this trail at the brow of the hill, located William Church, a brother of Uriah, and a builder of repute. The lot adjoining on the south was purchased by Enoch Crowell,³² of Yarmouth. Continuing west on this trail, John Smith³³ located in the valley near Taggart's Brook. On the level land on the top of West Hill were John Spencer and Elihu Church. Further south on the ridge and away from the trail lived William Taylor, son of Samuel of the Worthington section, whose house³⁴ is probably the oldest of those now standing on the Grant.

On the original trail to Hartwood leading northwest across the meadows, the presence of the Taggarts discouraged settlement. Nevertheless Joseph Dickson, a third son of James, settled at the south end of their possessions, and Daniel Spencer Emmons near the north end. The Taggart's right to the premises was sustained in the courts, but they finally sold out to the owners of the lots and removed from town.

The other squatters were not so fortunate. William Mann was sued first by the Prescotts and later by James Dickson, backed

²⁹ The Gardner house. (1923)

³⁰ Where the Sternagle family lives. (1924)

³¹ The Wanzer place.

³² Where Ralph Pease lives. (1924)

³³ The Jesse Pelkey house. (1924)

³⁴ Where Mr. Eden lives. (1924)



HOUSE OF DANIEL LEACH

HOUSE OF JOHN SMITH

by David Bolton and William Church, but he was able to defer action by obtaining a survey showing that there was an excess of land in the grant over that shown in the original survey of the Prescotts. Mann put in a claim for this excess, but as he left the Grant within a short time, he appears to have been dispossessed. Miles Washburn, on West Hill, was similarly sued by John Spencer, the purchaser of land from Arnold. Washburn won the first decision but lost in the appeal and departed for New York State.

In the region of the later Center there was no particular development until after the incorporation of the town. It was, in fact, one of the most sparsely settled portions of the Middlefield territory. East of the ridge Thomas Blossom settled near Samuel Taylor as late as 1787. The fork in the road near the site of his house is still known as "Blossom Corner." About the same time Bissell Phelps, of Hebron, Connecticut, settled half a mile northeast on the Worthington road³⁵ where he was succeeded in a few years by Dr. William Coleman. West of the ridge Daniel Chapman, who was the original owner of the Charles Wright farm, was the only new-comer not already mentioned.

Curiously enough, the Joseph Blush and Lewis Taylor farms, which together covered most of the land on which the Center was later built up, have remained practically intact to the present day in spite of the strip of small lots on either side of the main street; for over a hundred years both farms were, and one of them still is, in the possession of their descendants or blood relatives. Blush built his new house on the County Road just south of the point where it was met by the Squatters' Trail from the southeast and by the trail coming up the slope from the west. As will be seen later, its location made it play a prominent part in Middlefield history.

As the number of settlers on the Grant increased, it became evident that some step must soon be taken to give them a town government. Surrounded by the unsettled sections of other townships, these hardy pioneers had to traverse the hills and dales of their own tract before reaching the rough roads to the various centers. If a citizen in the Eggleston District of Mur-

³⁵ Where Ralph Bell now lives. (1924)

rayfield complained of the distance from their Center, which averaged four miles, we can imagine the opinions of the Prescott's Grant inhabitants who lived at twice that distance from the same village, which was their natural connection with civilization.

This situation presented a new and more favorable opportunity to push the project of a new town, the plan now being to use Prescott's Grant as a nucleus to which would be added the adjacent sections of the neighboring townships. To accomplish this, state action was required, and David Mack offered to go to Boston to present the case to the General Court, and to pay the entire expense of the trip in case he were unsuccessful. This proposition received hearty support from practically the whole population, sixty names being signed to the Petition for Incorporation, which was entitled, "Petition of Prescott's Grant and Others,"³⁶ and was dated September 22, 1781. The petition set forth that:

"All the persons who are settled on said lands live at a distance of five miles and some at much greater distance from the meeting house in their respective towns on which account many of your petitioners have for several years been obliged either to carry these families the distance above mentioned in rough roads or to educate them without any of the advantages of public institutions, except in some few cases in which they have been able to procure preaching among themselves 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 that those of your petitioners that live in the tract of land called Prescotts Grant not being annexed to no towns have no Priviledges as other towns have nor ever can have till that August Body the general Assembly of the Commonwealth Incorporates them and allows them the Priviledges of other towns"

As a result of Mr. Mack's efforts the General Court appointed a committee of three to repair to Prescott's Grant and environs, to meet committees appointed by the towns concerned, and to report at the next session. The committee arrived in December, 1781, and reported favorably on the matter the following February, but the General Court voted that it "lie till next session."

On March 12, 1783, the Act of Incorporation³⁷ was finally passed, declaring that the inhabitants of the southwest corner

³⁶ See Appendix B.

³⁷ See Appendix B.



CAPT. ALEXANDER DICKSON'S TAVERN

ASA SMITH'S TAVERN

of Worthington, of the northwest corner of Murrayfield, the northeast corner of Becket, the south side of Partridgefield and a part of Washington, and Prescott's Grant were thereby incorporated into a town called Middlefield, which was to be annexed to Hampshire County. Instructions were given to John Kirtland, Esq., of Norwich, to choose "some principle inhabitant to warn the new citizens to assemble and elect officers and transact the necessary business for starting the town's new life. Kirtland fittingly chose Benjamin Eggleston, of the Eggleston District for this honor, as he was the first settler on Middlefield to acquire his land by purchase.

A new era thus dawned, full of much promise for the future prosperity of the dwellers in the Middlefield hills and valleys. While one set of problems had been solved, it was gradually realized that the artificial creation of a town presented a whole series of questions to be considered, which could be handled successfully only by the hearty co-operation of all the citizens. How these scattered settlers, laboring under many difficulties, finally built up a community life of their own, will be told in the following pages.