

Introduction



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Bridgewater, New Hampshire

The town of Bridgewater is located in southeastern Grafton County, with its eastern boundary serving as the county line between Grafton and Belknap counties. Situated between the Pemigewasset River and the eastern shores of Newfound Lake, Bridgewater enjoys spectacular views of the lakes and mountains. The higher elevations that run through the center of the community provide large unfragmented blocks of land with significant natural resource value to the community. The town is bounded on the west by Newfound Lake. To the north is Plymouth, the regional center, and Interstate 93 passes along the eastern edge of Bridgewater through the towns of Ashland and New Hampton. The town of Bristol is to the south. US Route 3, one of the major north-south roadways in New England, passes through the northeast corner of Bridgewater, and NH Route 3A passes through the western portion of the community serving as the Town's main thoroughfare.

Historical Perspective

“And soon the dense forest will become farmland and the farmland will become forest”.

ISAIAH (27:195h)

This statement reflects the environmental history of Bridgewater from 1750 to 1950. Settlement of Bridgewater, then called New Chester, began in 1753. At that time, a group of 50 men bought a tract of land west of the Pemigewasset River containing approximately 30,000 acres. They found a mature conifer forest where white pines three to four feet in diameter were common, frequently marked for “His Majesty’s Fleet.”

The original lots and range lines for the Town of Bridgewater were laid out in about 1765. Lots along the Pemigewasset River comprised a first major subdivision where settlers witnessed great log drives from northern New Hampshire forests. It was within this 1765 subdivision that colonists and citizens built homes and worked rocky farms in a harsh climate. The stone walls they built with oxen and hard work stand as monuments criss-crossing the hillsides and lining our roadways. Robert Frost, who later frequented the Bridgewater Hills, described in “Mending Wall” the spring ritual still practiced here of replacing stone upon stone after winter's upheavals.

The area granted in the mid-eighteenth century was called New Chester and contained the modern towns of Bristol, Alexandria, Hill and Bridgewater. In 1788 the town of Bridgewater was separately incorporated, and in 1819 Bristol withdrew from Bridgewater to form its own community.

Bridgewater's population grew rapidly in the late 1700's and by 1810 stood at 1,100. A startling out-migration followed, when fertile farmlands opened to the west, textile mills rose to the south, and the gold fields drew men and women around the Horn. During the first one hundred agrarian years, the forest land was almost entirely cleared and turned to sheep grazing and self-sufficient family farms.

The first rough road through the area allowing passage by horseback was built in 1766. Teams of oxen passed over this road at a slow pace during the summer seasons. The road system gradually extended from the geographic center near the Bridgewater Town House. However, by 1892, some of the original and best-built roads across rugged terrain were already abandoned or had fallen from use. By this time the town's population had decreased by some 800 souls, due in part to the separation of Bristol, but to a larger degree because farm families left their homes to seek livelihoods in factories to the south or on land to the west.

Shortly after World War II, Bridgewater experienced a second burst of population growth and land development. The expansion accelerated with the industrial re-development of the southern half of New Hampshire and the rebirth of the tourist industry in the Lakes Region and White Mountains.

The Master Plan

The Bridgewater Planning Board published a Master Plan in 1981 with an update in 1989. These documents combined the thinking of the Planning Board and its Advisory Board for the Master Plan as well as interested citizens with regard to managing growth and future development in Bridgewater. The Lakes Region Planning Commission helped provide maps and tables for the reports.

As a means to publishing a master plan in the year 2000, both seasonal and year-round residents were invited to attend hearings on drafts and measures proposed for *Master Plan 2000*. A community survey was mailed to more than a thousand property owners in the town and 472 of these were filled out and returned. Descriptions of community features and a land use inventory were updated. Combining this information, the Board developed a profile of community goals and needs and translated this input into *Master Plan 2000* as a means for dealing with future land development, town services, and other concerns bearing on the common good.

A master plan is flexible in nature and should be re-evaluated regularly and updated at least every five years as new trends and needs are recognized. It should be understood that a community master plan *recommends*, and that these recommendations directly relate to the town's Capital Improvement Program, a document guiding budget planners in the community. Note that *implementation* of the master plan can be brought about only through organizations of the townspeople and through our democratic town meeting system.

The purpose and description of master plans were changed considerably by legislation effective July 14, 2002. It was recognized by the legislature "that growth and development are changing the look and feel of New Hampshire, against the desires of most citizens." The newly enacted legislation was designed to provide more definitive guidance in planning and managing future growth, not only within a municipality, but within the region as well. This new legislation changed both the required and recommended sections of a master plan in New Hampshire. The 2006 Bridgewater Master Plan now includes the required vision and land use sections in accordance with New Hampshire RSA 674:2.

The master plan is a public record. The master plan gives legal standing to the implementation of ordinances and other measures by the Planning Board. The purpose of the master plan is to set down, as clearly and practically as possible, the best and most appropriate future development of the area under the jurisdiction of the Planning Board. The master plan should aid the Board in designing ordinances that preserve and enhance the unique quality of life and culture of Bridgewater and of New Hampshire. The master plan will then guide the Board in the performance of its duties in a manner that achieves the principles of smart growth, sound planning and wise resource protection.