

The Thumbnail History of Needham

That's 320 years in fewer than 1000 words, so buckle up!



The Old Center, at the intersection of Nehoiden Street and Central Avenue, circa 1870. The picture shows (from right to left) the First Parish church, Revere Hall (the retail and meeting block), the Central (Brick) School (behind the trees), and the Israel Whitney house (built 1830; now 961 Central Avenue). The town center was located here to take advantage of the main coach roads. This is one of the oldest known photographs of Needham.

Prior to the arrival of the Europeans, the area of Needham lay within the territory of the Massachusetts, an Algonkian-speaking tribe related to the Wampanoag and Nipmuc. Artifacts excavated near the Charles River banks in Needham showed that Native American communities had lived here for nearly 9000 years. The landscape was temperate forest, rich in a variety of smaller game – deer, beaver, rabbit, turkey – as well as plentiful fish in the rivers and plants for food and tools. Rivers such as the Charles were ideal for hunting, fishing, and gathering during the warmer months.

The European settlement of Needham began in the 1630s as a part of the large Dedham Grant. Needham began as Dedham's North Parish, the land north of the Charles River. The land that later became Needham and Wellesley was purchased from tribal leader William Nehoiden in 1680 for 10 pounds in cash, 40 acres of land, and 40 shillings worth of corn.

The early settlers made their living as farmers. Farming in Needham has always required some ingenuity. Tucked into a loop in the Charles River, Needham ground is low-lying and damp. The familiar English crops - wheat, barley and rye - could not thrive in Needham's poor soils. Even

Indian Corn, a staple of the new Massachusetts Bay Colony, had limited success. Instead of grain, therefore, Needham farmers relied upon the products more suited to their riverside lands – garden crops, hay, pigs, and especially cattle. They also gathered produce from the river, including reeds and alewife.

By 1711, settlement had spread far enough that the weekly trek (8+ miles!) to Dedham for church services had become a hardship. There were about 250 people living in the North Parish, enough to justify the establishment of a new town/parish and a town government. The Farmers' Petition seeking a new parish was granted by the General Court on November 6, 1711, and the new town was given the name Needham, after the English village of Needham Market (a neighbor of the English town of Dedham). The First Parish church and the center of the new town were located along the coach routes, at the intersection of Nehoiden Street and Central Avenue. The parsonage, the cemetery, the meeting hall, school, post office and tavern were all located there as well.

Needham remained a largely agricultural town until the mid-1800s. In the 1830s, the first rail line was laid through West Needham, from Boston to Worcester, greatly increasing residential settlement in that part of town. In 1853 a second line (Boston to Woonsocket) was laid, connecting East Needham to Boston. Denied access to the town center at Nehoiden Street, the rail line was diverted southward into the largely-empty Great Plain. The presence of the railroad drew both businesses and residents away from the old town center and toward Great Plain Avenue and the surrounding streets. The Baptist and Congregational parishes also placed their new churches there. In 1879, the First Parish church was lifted up onto rollers and moved to its current location on Dedham Avenue, firmly establishing Great Plain Avenue as the new town center.

Rail access to Needham was extended not only for travel purposes, but also to accommodate the "Back Bay Fill." Starting in 1859, gravel was transported to Boston to fill in the Back Bay for residential use. For nearly 25 years, more than 1200 freight cars per day were loaded with gravel dug from the area that now forms the Industrial Center and the Route 128 interchange. Also in the 1850s, Needham began to see the development of industry, especially in Needham Heights. Knitters from the English Midlands, displaced by economic changes in their own country, migrated to Needham and the surrounding towns to reestablish their businesses. The most famous of these was the William Carter Company, which today still produces fine knitwear (though no longer in Needham). By 1890 there were more than 15 large companies (and numerous small ones) manufacturing knitted garments in Needham Heights. Throughout the late 1800s, the demand for labor in these factories brought an influx of new immigrants to Needham – not only from England, but also from Ireland, Italy and Poland.

Farming continued to be important in the local economy. By the late 1800s, the main agricultural goods produced in Needham were poultry, flowers, and dairy products. There were at least eight large commercial dairy farms in Needham in 1900. Flowers were grown for the Boston and wider market. The most famous greenhouses were those of Needham's "Pansy

King", Denys Zirngiebel, on South Street. Zirngiebel was also the grandfather of the artist NC Wyeth, who was born and raised in Needham.

Needham suffered a setback in its growth in April 1881, when West Needham voted to separate from East Needham and form the new town of Wellesley. Their successful vote was the seventeenth attempt to effect this separation, reflecting long-standing disputes between the two sections of town that dated back into the 1700s. The separation reduced the land and population of Needham by about half.

The farming and knitting industries sustained Needham's economy through the beginning of the 20th century. By the 1920s, however, both began to decline and the Needham Board of Trade began to market Needham explicitly as a residential suburb. There was ample land, and good train and trolley service to encourage urbanites to make the move to a fresher and more comfortable lifestyle. Then in the 1950s, Needham businesses began to shift toward new industries and technologies as the construction of Route 128, "America's Technology Highway," carried the intellectual capital of Boston's universities out to the land-rich western suburbs and created a hub of technological innovation. The Needham Industrial Center, built on the land stripped for the Back Bay Fill, was the first such business/industrial center in the country. The Franklin W. Olin College of Engineering, America's newest and most innovative engineering school, was dedicated in 2002.

Needham continues to change. The attraction of local colleges, high-tech businesses, and accessible transportation has enriched the cultural diversity of the town. Development in the business center along Route 128 continues to attract new corporate clients. The town is rapidly becoming a destination for dining and entertainment. Even some long-standing traditions have changed, as Needham voted a few years ago to allow the sale of liquor, after a ban of nearly a century. Needham today is primarily a residential suburb of Boston. Ready access to the city and to the western part of the state is a boon to both businesses and residents. Its fine schools, attractive real estate, and strong sense of community keep Needham vibrant and growing into its fourth century.