

A poem written by Martha Burt Wright published in 1928, called Oakham.

In an old New England hill-town
A charming village lies,
Beautiful for situation,
It's canopy the skies.

On the hillside near the hilltop
A dear old homestead stands,
Overlooking its broad acres,
Its woods and pasture lands.

Just beyond the homestead, southward,
The street around the "Square"
To the eastward turns, descending
The slope beginning there.

On this slope, descending gently,
On both sides of the street,
Nestled in among the maples,
Are dwellings, homelike, neat,

Which extend down to the Common,
Bounded northward by the store,
And westward by the place where stood
The tavern, seen no more,

Southward by the library building,
Eastward by Memorial Hall,
And, standing by the graveyard,
The church, o'erlooking all.

With its tall spire pointing heav'nward,
And the old familiar bell,
Speaking often to the people
In tones remembered well.

But perhaps I am digressing
To speak now of the bell.
Just where stands the little village
I was about to tell.

By the store, the street runs northward,
Past several dwellings there,
Turns, and rising to the hilltop,
It thus completes the "Square"

And about it lies the village,
A quiet, restful spot,
Where the jarring sounds and turmoil
Of City life come not.

Martha Burt was born in Oakham in 1846, and married a young man named Henry Parks Wright who was also raised in Oakham. Henry went on to become the Dean of Yale College in New Haven, CT, but the family still summered in Oakham. We can thank the Wrights for helping to preserve our history through writings and their participation in the founding of the Oakham Historical Association, but that is only part of Oakham's story.

Oakham was incorporated as a district on June 7, 1762, which is why we are celebrating 250 years today. Prior to that time the area was known as Rutland West Wing, and had been a part of the Town of Rutland. The first settlers of European descent came to town just prior to 1750. Native Americans of course, had travelled these woods for perhaps thousands of years, with a main village just 5 miles away in Winimissit.

In 1761 a building was moved from Rutland to be the 1st meeting house. It was located near where the town hall is today.

By the beginning of the Revolutionary War in 1775, Oakham's population had grown to nearly 600 people. Oakham was strongly pro-revolution and many of the loyalists in town were forced to leave their property behind and flee to British strongholds in Boston and Canada.

In 1799, the 6th Massachusetts Turnpike was built between Pelham and Shrewsbury. This 43 mile toll road followed what is now, Old Turnpike Road, and remained in service until 1828; making travel to and from Oakham much easier and faster. Some might argue that it hasn't improved much since.

On Oakham's 50th Anniversary in 1812, war was brewing again. At town meeting, the Town of Oakham voted not to go to war with Great Britain, and twice in the same meeting, voted an abhorrence of France. When the war finally did break out, Oakham and New Braintree raised a company of 34 Grenadiers, who were sent to Boston to help prevent a British attack, lead by Captain William Crawford.

Oakham's first Post Office was established in 1813, in the home of Joseph Fobes on Old Turnpike Rd., the current historical museum.

The church was built in 1814, replacing the old meeting house. Thirty-one years later, in 1845, the church is raised and turned to face west, its current location. By raising the building, rooms were added underneath to be used as town offices. So while the country was established with the idea of separation between church and state, in the early 1800s there was little separation between church and town.

Oakham's 100th Birthday in 1862 comes during a bloody Civil War. Although Oakham had a population of less than 1000 citizens, nearly 100 of Oakham's finest men volunteer for service. One fifth of these soldiers would not live to see Oakham again.

The soldiers' that returned to Oakham formed a Soldiers' Union, and raised money, matched by the town, to construct Memorial Hall, built in 1874 and dedicated January 1, 1875. In addition to the town offices, the building served as a school for the next 100 years. Many of us here today attended school in that building, and a few remember a teacher named Miss Bothwell who taught in Oakham schools for over 50 years.

In 1887, the Central Mass Railroad, a branch of the Boston and Maine, opened, providing quick transportation for both people and goods throughout the East. A Depot in Coldbrook Springs helped this section of Oakham to grow and prosper. Coldbrook Springs at its peak had two hotels, a post office, a bowling alley, a store, a basket company and a large community hall with a market, a sawmill, a school and 35 homes.

The Oakham Historical Association is established in 1899, preserving many documents and artifacts from the early days of the town. We can thank men like the aforementioned H.P. Wright, and James and Charles Packard for their initiative.

After having a Library association for many years, and libraries located in people's homes, a new Library building, built with fieldstone from the farms in town, is completed and dedicated in 1908. A considerable amount of the funding is provided by descendents of Joseph Fobes and his family, who resided for over 100 years in the town.

Also in 1908, a great fire burns the Park View Inn, which was located on the west side of the common for well over 100 years. Along with the Inn, the store north of the common burns, replaced a few years later by the building now standing.

Oakham's 150th Anniversary is celebrated in 1912. The population of Oakham (~500 people) has been on the decline for years as people leave the farms and move to the industrial centers.

In the 1930s, as part of the Quabbin Reservoir construction project, the state decides to buy all of Coldbrook Springs in order to provide a clean watershed area for the upper Ware River. To create this watershed, all the buildings in the village are removed, all the residents relocated, and the Railroad Station dismantled. The Coldbrook Springs section of Oakham ceases to exist.

By 1962, Oakham's 200th Anniversary, the population has begun to rise again, reaching 600 residents. The celebration attracts thousands to town.

In the late 1960s, Oakham becomes part of the Quabbin Regional School District, and a new Jr/Sr High School is built in Barre. Prior to this, Oakham students attended high schools in several of the surrounding towns.

A new school is built in 1974, ending classes in Memorial Hall. This school is quickly expanded as more people are moving out of the cities to towns like Oakham.

In 1996 the Oakham Historical Association moves into its new museum, the former Fobes/O'Donnell home. The many items collected 100 years prior are now able to be preserved and displayed more prominently.

And now here we are in 2012, Oakham's 250th Anniversary. Oakham has lost most of its businesses and farmland and has settled into the 21st century as a quiet bedroom community. The population has

reached nearly 2000. Recreation has become Oakham's focal point with two campgrounds and an 18-hole golf course. While the population has increased, and the farms are gone, much of the town remains unchanged.

No traffic lights, no strip malls,

Oakham is still...

A quiet, restful spot,
Where the jarring sounds and turmoil
Of City life come not.

Let me finish now with another perspective on Oakham written by an unhappy student around the year 1830. I hope you'll find it as amusing as I do.

A Description of Oakham by Elijah Freeman Jr.

Oakham is a township of land 6 miles long and 5 miles broad; situated in the western part of the county of Worcester. It is bounded west by the towns of New Braintree, and Barre, north by the last mentioned town, east by Rutland, and south by New Braintree. The soil is very rich, and fertile, and productive of many kinds of excellent fruit.

The surface of the country is generally very rough and uneven. Yet at the same time, it is possessed of all the beauties of natural scenery. In passing through that place, it presents to the eye of the traveler, (very few of which ever pass through there however) a continuously varied scene, in which can be beheld all the beauties of nature.

It is well adapted to the person who would like to live in seclusion, free from the haunts, and visits of men; for the inhabitants are as destitute of sociability, as they are of everything else that is good.

The principal part of them are very ignorant; and some of them are even incapable of transacting the business which daily occurs, and which falls to the lot of the man in the humblest walks of life. They are a set of old misers who know no higher enjoyment, than to sit by their fire-sides, and to obtain money. They are as ignorant, even those that have passed the middle age of life, and their faculties are as little cultivated, and they are as incapable of improvement, as any one could be at any stage of life.

From 1050 human beings (they cannot be called decent respectable people, for at the first sight their figures are so uncouth any one would imagine them to be Demons from Hades) it is estimated that 700 of them are guilty of that worst of sins, intemperance. It is not strange at all, to behold at all times, numbers around the tavern, or the store, intoxicated. And this is so common that intemperance is even beheld with an eye of complacency.

With that, let's move on with the celebration....

From a viewpoint on the hilltop,
Beyond the valley's green,
On the neighboring hills, the church spires
Of many towns are seen.

To the northeast, old Wachusett
Comes proudly into view,
And, still farther north, Monadnock
Looms up in grandeur too.

And there are groves and woodlands
And pleasant pastures green,
On the hillsides, in the valleys,
The grazing herds are seen.

Like to mirrors on the landscape
The village just beyond
Glistening brightly in the sunshine,
Lies here and there a pond.

Though to some of us no longer
The homestead dear is left,
And to many friends and kindred
We now have been bereft.

Yet memories, sweet and precious,
Forever will abide
Of the loved ones who, now absent,
Here honored, lived, and died.

And the village, like a city
Which is set upon a hill,
Never can be hid, but radiates
Its widespread influence still;