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Map 1. John Jordan's 1785 survey map shows the disbursed nature of early settlement in Buckfield. Over the next half-century, the town's business and cultural establishments were drawn to the center of town, which only then began to resemble the archetypal "New England village." *Map courtesy of the author.*

# BUCKFIELD: A GEOGRAPHICAL HISTORY OF RURAL DEVELOP- MENT IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY OXFORD COUNTY

BY NANCY HATCH

*In this article author Nancy Hatch presents a geographical and historical account of the town of Buckfield, Oxford County, Maine, that elaborates a model of center-village development constructed by Joseph Wood in his THE NEW ENGLAND VILLAGE, and a model of connected farm buildings, as constructed by Thomas Hubka in his BIG HOUSE, LITTLE HOUSE, BACK HOUSE, BARN. Hatch uses these models to explain how Buckfield responded to the growth of interregional agricultural markets in the mid-nineteenth century and to new architectural styles that appeared on the national scene in these decades. Ms. Hatch was a student at the University of Southern Maine at Lewiston-Auburn College when she wrote this paper under the direction of Professor Barry Rodrigue.*

**B**ETWEEN THE American Revolution and the middle of the nineteenth century, rural Maine's human geography underwent a number of important changes that helped define the way we conceptualize the state today. The contemporary landscapes of rural Maine are in fact largely a product of this period of the state's history, and particularly of the rapid expansion of agriculture and industry into inland and upland areas during and shortly after the Revolution. These frontier farms were at first largely focused on subsistence and home production, but this period did not last more for than a generation or two. As the young nation industrialized, particularly in southern New England, it placed new demands on northeastern farmers, and this changed the way of life and the organization of the towns and farms in Maine. The demand for lumber and lumber products added to the thriving commercial trade networks that the territory developed during the settlement

period and drew rural farmers into market production in a number of ways. Those hoping to share in the benefits of industrial production cut lumber for market or made products like barrel staves to earn money for items not produced on the farm. Farm wives took in “Boston work” like spinning, sewing, and shoemaking, and their husbands produced specialty agricultural products for nearby industrial towns and for the burgeoning urban population to the south.<sup>1</sup> To survive in this new rural economy, Maine farmers had to change the way that they structured their farms and organized their communities. Town centers consolidated the scattered economic and cultural activities of the countryside, and farmers in turn focused their commercial trade in these growing town centers and adapted their farm architecture to the cultural influences radiating from them.

These adaptations, particularly northern New England’s unique village layout and its connected farm-buildings, are the subject of two important historical works. Joseph Wood’s *The New England Village* examines the development of the New England towns that have become so iconographic in the region’s landscape. Wood shows that the central-village landscape so typical of these towns today was not a product of New England’s colonial past, but rather an early nineteenth-century development. He argues convincingly that colonial settlers came to the New World culturally predisposed to dispersed land-holdings. Rural townships were made up of scattered farms in the pre-Revolutionary years, and the center usually consisted of little more than a meetinghouse and churchyard. New village centers developed, Wood argues, “in the early nineteenth century as proto-urban places, not puritan agricultural settlements.”<sup>2</sup> These early village centers functioned as organizing bodies to control land division during early settlement. They hosted neither commercial buildings nor meeting houses. But as trade and commerce grew more important, a common meeting place became necessary, and this gave rise to the center-village, where government, church, and trade were brought together in the center of the town.

In a related way, Thomas Hubka argues in his *Big House, Little House, Back House, Barn* that the vernacular architecture of the northern New England farm—the familiar complex of connected buildings, workshops, and barns—came not from any colonial agricultural precedent, but instead from the farmers’ adaptations to these new commercial trends. The buildings themselves changed as cultural connections to the nation at large brought Federal and Greek Revival architectural movements to the countryside. The changes in architecture and in the spatial

arrangement of the buildings were bolstered by a spirit of improvement that swept across northern New England in the early nineteenth century. Farmers worked to recreate and rearrange their farms and buildings, in response to changes in the nearby towns and to outside markets.

**B**UCKFIELD, MAINE, was settled at the beginning of this expansive period in Maine's history, and its architectural and agricultural history illustrate the two developments discussed above. Though the town had only a brief colonial history, it was founded on patterns dating from earliest colonial times. The establishment of roads to Portland from the nearby towns of Hebron and Turner just prior to the American Revolution made the area appealing to new settlers. In a rapidly expanding agrarian economy, Buckfield quickly developed a central village arrangement that tied these farm families to the wider economy of the region and to the nation. In competition with midwestern farmers, Buckfield residents modernized their farms, their buildings, and their systems of production. The search for more efficient use of farm space resulted in the connected buildings so well described by Hubka. Buckfield's geographic and agricultural history thus explains both the center-village development and the connected-building arrangement, both of which emerged as the town was integrated into the larger agricultural economy. Buckfield's transition explains and illustrates the changing farm landscapes of mid-nineteenth-century Maine.

Located in Oxford County, Buckfield was established in 1777 by Abijah Buck. A veteran of the Seven Year's War, he saw the land first while on a survey expedition. The advantages of good soil, plentiful land, and growing market for staples like timber and food enticed him to move to the area and settle. A survey map from 1785 shows the principal roads, major landmarks, and original divisions of the town's 22,323 acres into forty-seven settlement lots (Map 1).<sup>3</sup> This early land division established the foundation for a town that by 1790 had grown to seventy-seven families. The map suggests the early town's loosely structured demographic arrangement by which saw and grist mills were situated at falls on the rivers and farms were scattered on best soils across the countryside. By the time Buckfield was fully established, nearby towns were already beginning to feel the effects of industrial and commercial development and were beginning to concentrate these activities into Wood's center-village arrangements. Many had developed central meeting houses with businesses, churches, and schools clustered nearby. The 1785 map shows the

beginning of this process in Buckfield. Despite its later founding, the town quickly followed in the wake of its neighbors.

Buckfield's center emerged along the Nezinscot and West Branch rivers. Both were important waterpower sources for a cluster of grist mills and saw mills—essential manufacturing units in the local agricultural economy. The fork in the rivers served as a focal point for the town's industrial, administrative, religious, and commercial activity. Town meetings were held at the constable's house in the center of town on County Road, the town's main street, until a permanent meeting house was built.<sup>4</sup> In 1819, the Baptist Meeting House was completed at the town's expense and was used for public meetings, but because of its remote location in the northern part of town, the townspeople established another meeting-place in a more central location on County Road.<sup>5</sup> The new location helped shift the town's central point away from the forks and further to the west. As Wood explains, "meeting-house sites located by legislative fiat or before settlement took place were removed to a [more] preferable site if they proved to be 'uncenterical.'" Once the location of the meetinghouse was firmly established, additional roads were created, linking the center to the outlying farms.<sup>6</sup>

Buckfield had, in fact, already begun to establish a central mercantile district in the 1790s around several local traders and professionals.<sup>7</sup> This nascent commercial district was further consolidated around the new meeting house at the Nezinscot River. In 1839 a school house was also located in the center of town, and as commerce and industry grew, roads radiated outward from the business district like the spokes of a wheel, connecting to some 341 local farms.<sup>8</sup> An 1858 business directory indicates that the majority of shops and businesses were by this time located on these spokes, including a lawyer's office, a jeweler's shop, a hotel, and the Buckfield and Rumford Railroad Station. Cultural structures also gravitated to the center, and as the town center prospered, economically and culturally, many prominent families built homes along the northern spoke on High Street. After 1840 this emerged as a middle-class residential area for professional and merchant families. An 1880 map of Buckfield center (Map 2) shows that many businesses indicated in the 1858 directory were still present, suggesting a period of stability in the town's geography. Strategically located, these businesses were easily accessible to outlying members of the community. The town reached its economic peak in the late 1880s, but it continued to attract new cultural institutions. By this time, a new school house and church had been built on the main street to replace buildings lost in a fire in 1872. In 1885 a Baptist



church was located next to the school, and in 1890 the Odd Fellows Theater was built. Situated on the town's main street, the theater provided live entertainment, music, and plays. Next to the theater, townspeople raised a brick library in 1901 on land donated by a local citizen.

To the casual observer, center Buckfield might appear to be simply a continuation of a centralized agricultural community dating from pre-commercial and pre-industrial times. But as in many communities, Buckfield's geography represents a sharp break with eighteenth-century town-founding ideas and a very conscious set of changes made to integrate the town into a new national economy. While many Maine and New England towns experienced this transition over several generations, Buckfield changed in the space of a single generation. The forces of commercial and industrial development were indeed powerful in central Maine.

THE SAME transition can be noted in the changing farm architecture in this New England town. In Buckfield and throughout northern New England, farmscapes, like townscapes, changed to meet new cultural and economic realities. Before 1830 rural New England houses were simple structures built around a center chimney. These were either "half-houses"—one or two rooms across, and only one room deep—or full Capes, which were two rooms deep. Both styles could be modified by adding a second story. Many in early Buckfield were half-houses, consisting of one room and a loft above. The lower room served as a kitchen, dining room, and bedroom for the adults, leaving the loft for the children's bedroom or corn crib. The roofs of these simple buildings were covered with strips of hemlock or cedar bark; the windows contained oilpaper panes; and the chimneys were rough stone set in a clay mortar.<sup>9</sup> Later, farmers dismantled these primitive structures and used the lumber for newer, larger houses, or they moved them to a new location to be used as an outbuilding. This process became a recurring theme in rural Maine.<sup>10</sup>

As the town developed and the farms became more prosperous, rural families shifted from the simple half-house arrangement of the early years to modest versions of Federal architecture, defined by low-pitched roof lines and symmetrical facades. Zadoc Long's house, built in 1825, exemplifies the Federal style popular in the mid-nineteenth century. The house was a single story, center-hall building two rooms deep. Long was the town clerk, and his house, located in the center of town, indicated his



own prosperity and that of the town (Photo 1).<sup>11</sup> Other farmers and townspeople adapted similar styles, reflecting a growing sensitivity to trends in residential architecture across the Northeast.

As the 1785 map shows, these farms were disbursed across the landscape. And on the individual farms, the buildings were equally disbursed. Barns and other outbuildings were not centrally located but placed on the land in accordance with the traditions and needs of the region's dominant subsistence agriculture. As farmers began to feel the influence of the commercial and industrial forces sweeping across New England, this spatial arrangement changed. Centralization to meet the demands of commerce and industry became the dominant theme on the individual farm, just as it was in the town. Here, too, the drive for economic efficiency and the new cultural ties to outside influences inspired new motifs and new spatial arrangements. While mid-western farm architecture was designed around the production of a single crop, New England farmers adapted their buildings to multiple farm products—dairy, poultry, orchard, wood, and vegetables. Farm buildings were designed to house a variety of tasks—sheep sheering, canning, wood-working, dairy processing, textiles, to name a few. These farm structures



Photo 1: The Zadock Long House, showing the early nineteenth-century Greek Revival architecture. *Photo courtesy of the author.*

“[were] well suited to the multipurpose agricultural production employed by most of the rural [New England] population.”<sup>12</sup>

Contemporaneous with the arrival of the Federal style, farmers began rearranging their outbuildings by connecting them in a linear arrangement commonly known as the “big house, little house, back-house, and barn.” This development, unique to northern New England, emerged as a result of the town’s commercial growth and its integration into the trans-regional agricultural economy. The development of agriculture in the western states affected land use in Maine. As the richer soils of the Midwest were put under the plow, they marginalized the poorer lands of New England. The opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 and the development of rail transport a decade later tied the new West to eastern markets and further weakened the northern frontier’s ability to compete in corn and grain production. This was exacerbated by the development of new farm machinery, like John Deere’s plow and Cyrus McCormick’s harvester, which were better suited to the rolling lands of the Midwest than the broken and irregular fields of New England. Unable to compete against western farmers, with their rich soils and large land-holdings, Maine farmers responded by marketing a wide range of farm and off-farm products and specializing in goods needed by urban dwellers that could not be transported over long distances. Improvement in rural roads and other transportation systems—the Cumberland and Oxford Canal was opened in 1830 for example—made it possible for Buckfield farmers to enter the fresh produce market, and the expansion of the Buckfield and Rumford Railway, first to Auburn and then to Portland by the late 1880s, gave them an edge in this market.<sup>13</sup>

Pressured by the new competitive forces, many farmers modernized and reorganized their farm operations. Milk, cheese, and other dairy products grew in demand because they could not be shipped over long distance, given the limited refrigeration capacity of the day. Dairy farming thus became an important part of the Buckfield agricultural economy after 1850, and it remained so as late as the 1950s. In addition, farm men and women did piecework in their spare time, thus contributing to the local manufacturing economy. These strategies offered farm families access to cash and freed them to some degree from the rigors of subsistence production. Connected farm buildings were part of this economic realignment.<sup>14</sup>

As Hubka found, this arrangement was a logical and practical choice, given the particular mix of jobs and chores that were the lot of the northern New England farmer. While conventional reasoning has it that

a line of connected farm buildings offers protection from the brutal New England winters, in fact, there was a great liability in this architecture. Fires were common in hay-filled barns illuminated by lantern and candle, and farmers risked devastating losses if these fires spread to the main house. This danger might have outweighed the convenience of winter passage to the barn, if other factors were not at play. In fact, the connected farm buildings afforded a convenient way of organizing of agricultural and home industry work-spaces for an economy characterized by constant movement from job to job. Farm men and women derived multiple benefits from the efficiently arranged work-places, the protection from harsh winds in the dooryard, and the streamlined flow of production between home industry and agriculture.

**A**S CENTER-VILLAGES grew in the mid-1800s, these new centers exerted a powerful pull on the outlying farms. Accordingly, the positioning of farm buildings shifted to a road-dominated orientation. In the farm arrangements brought to Buckfield by its first settlers, the front of the house and the dooryard faced south whenever possible to gain maximum exposure to the sun. This arrangement, dating from Medieval times, helped to prevent flooding in the dooryard in the spring, and it sheltered this workspace from winter winds. As town centers developed and roads grew in importance, farmers realigned the front of their houses and their yards to face the road. The change to a road-dominated architectural style was, as Hubka says, an “indication of the depth of this new town and commercial orientation for the rural population of New England.”<sup>15</sup> In this new orientation, farmers still located the dooryard and barnyard on the south side of the buildings, to shelter them from the north winds and expose them to the sun during spring months.<sup>16</sup> The dooryard was a working space on a farm, whereas the front yard was a formal space, used for leisure or entertaining. This division echoed the building’s internal arrangement, in which the formal parlor was located in a front-facing room of the big house, while the working rooms were located in the back of the big house or in the ell.<sup>17</sup> With the front of the house facing the street, formal yards would be visible from the road, inviting a social exchange with passing neighbors. The formal dooryard became separated from the working yard, just as the formal parlor was separated from the working kitchen areas inside the farmhouse.

Reverend Nathaniel Chase’s farm in East Buckfield is an example of a connected farm that evolved during the nineteenth century (Photo 2).

The main house is a typical Federal, two-story, center-chimney structure. Records for this property are not extant, but it is unlikely that these buildings were constructed all at one time. The varied architectural styles suggest that the big house was the first built. The kitchen, or ell, was likely added later, and the barn was probably moved from another area. Many other connected farm buildings are visible in the center of Buckfield, since this is the oldest and most prosperous part of town, with many buildings dating back to the mid-1800s. Early photographs record the connected farm styles. The Cyrus Irish Homestead (Photo 3) illustrates a typical arrangement. The big house faces the road, and a row of trees creates a border between the yard and the road. The dooryard is situated between the ell and the barn, an arrangement that provides easy access to both.

One of the longest-running dairy farms in Buckfield is the Young farm, located on the Buckfield-Turner town line, and its history illustrates some of the variations on this general theme. The main house is an early 1800s Cape Cod style, with two kitchens, one in the big house and the other in the little house. The little house, with upstairs bedrooms, was attached to the “big kitchen” at a later date. The back house, used as a stable and woodshed, was attached to the little house and is currently used for storage. The Youngs chose not to attach the barn to the house because the sloping landscape floods in the spring. The barn, located across the road, is part of an earlier arrangement of buildings. It was never moved because of its proximity to the pasture behind it. Thus mid-nineteenth-century farms adapted not only to the economic forces at large, but also to the exigencies of their own topography and soils.<sup>18</sup>

In New England’s severe climate and rocky soil, agriculture was profitable only as long as there was no serious competition. When this situation changed, the agricultural economy teetered on the edge of collapse, and Buckfield, like other New England towns, was forced to adapt. In a new competitive world, Buckfield’s strategies included the center-village structure and connected farm buildings. Like many other New England towns, Buckfield, participated in the new economy by changing its built landscape.

By the mid-twentieth century, farm youth were moving in growing numbers to larger towns or to the West in search of more profitable employment. The numbers of farms in Buckfield decreased. Almost all of the 180 farms in the town in the 1930s disappeared over the next sixty years, leaving only two modest dairy farms by 1990.<sup>19</sup> This decline in agriculture brought a commercial decline that again altered the townscape. But despite these changes, Buckfield maintains its center-village

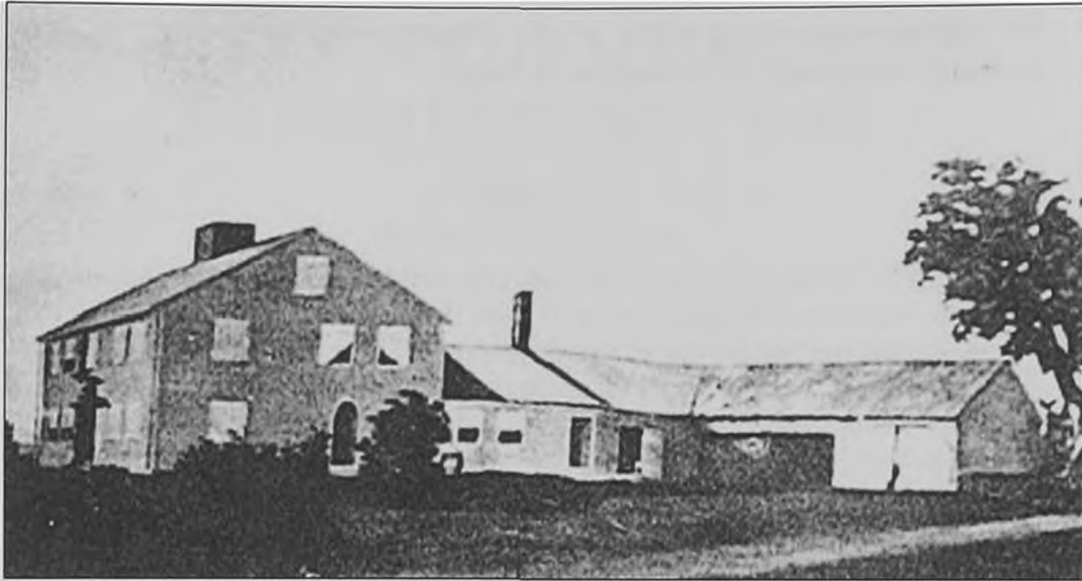


Photo 2: Above, the Reverend Nathaniel Chase's farm in East Buckfield, with its connected buildings, protected barnyard, and more formal dooryard at the front of the building. Photo 3: The lower photo shows the Cyrus Irish Farm. *Photos courtesy of the author.*

layout and many of its connected farms, as the most tangible legacy of the townspeople's adaptation to the changes that came with the economic development of the nation at large.

#### NOTES

1. Richard W. Judd, Edwin A. Churchill, and Joel W. Eastman, eds., *Maine: The Pine Tree State from Prehistory to the Present* (Orono: University of Maine Press, 1995). The author would like to thank Professor Barry Rodrigue of the University of Southern Maine at Lewiston-Auburn College for his guidance in this project; the Buckfield Town office for their assistance in locating necessary historical records; and Mary Young for providing background information on the Young farm. Provost Joseph Wood of the University of Southern Maine took time to review this work and provide fresh inspiration.
2. Joseph Wood, *The New England Village* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 2.
3. John Jordan, *1785 Survey Map* (Buckfield: 1993 Bicentennial Committee, Buckfield Historical Society, n.d.).
4. Buckfield, Town Meeting and Incorporation Records, 1777-1830.
5. Buckfield, Town Meeting Records, January 1819.
6. Wood, *New England Village*, p. 93.
7. Alfred Cole and Charles Whitman, *The History of Buckfield, 1777-1900* (Bridgton, Maine: Coburn Press, 1977), p. 94.
8. Cole and Whitman, *History of Buckfield*, p. 58.
9. Cole and Whitman, *History of Buckfield*, p. 55.
10. Thomas C. Hubka, *Big House, Little House, Back House, Barn: The Connected Farm Buildings of New England* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1984), p. 27.
11. Hubka, *Big House, Little House, Back House, Barn*, pp. 134-36.
12. Hubka, *Big House, Little House, Back House, Barn*, p. 9.
13. Hugh M. Raup, "The View from John Sanderson's Farm: A Perspective for the Use of the Land," *Forest History* (April, 1966): 6.
14. This trend toward farming as the town's primary occupation lasted for over one hundred years. A 1930 census recorded 182 farms in Buckfield totaling 18,000 acres, or roughly seventy-five percent of the town's total area. Buckfield Historical Society, p. 143.
15. Hubka, *Big House, Little House, Back House, Barn*, pp. 115-16.
16. Hubka, *Big House, Little House, Back House, Barn*, pp. 114-16.
17. Hubka, *Big House, Little House, Back House, Barn*, p. 9.
18. Mary Young, personal communication with the author, Buckfield, Maine, August 21, 2003.
19. Cole and Whitman, *History of Buckfield*, p. 237.