

Southbury, Connecticut

350 Years of History

Welcome to Southbury, a town rich in history and historic architecture, with five Historic Districts and many individual structures listed on the National Register of Historic Places. These landmarks document more than 350 years of historical development.

Originally the home of the Pootatuck Indians, the first European settlers were religious dissenters who came to Southbury from Stratford and established what was then known as the Pomperaug Plantation. Southbury was incorporated in 1787.



Stone marker near the banks of the Pomperaug River where, in 1673, European settlers established Woodbury, a portion of which was to become Southbury in 1787.

During its first hundred years Southbury evolved as a quiet agricultural center situated along the fertile Pomperaug River, which provided a favorable environment for crops and furnished power for local mills. During the late 18th century and up through the Civil War the town gained in prosperity, with water-powered industries and prosperous mercantile enterprises. Manufacturing was located primarily in South Britain, on the Pomperaug River, and in Southford, on Eight Mile Brook, both of which produced goods for major urban markets. The New York and New England Railroad ran a line through Southbury, with three local stations.

Following the Civil War the industrial capacity of Southbury was surpassed by other towns in the region and it remained primarily agricultural for the next 100 years. The population was stable at approximately 2000 up until the early 1960's, when construction of I-84 brought with it new development and a rise in population to today's 20,000.



Southbury played a role in the American Revolution, when, in 1781, General Count de Rochambeau and his troops marched through the town to join General George Washington at Yorktown, Virginia.

The landmarks we see today reflect Southbury's early phases of growth, from the pre-Revolutionary period through the mid-19th century.

Despite many recent changes in the town, a significant number of historic structures remain, some of which are prime examples of their style and period. Clustered in the Main Street Historic District, along Main Street North, and in the South Britain Historic District, along and adjacent to South Britain Road, they tell the story of the people and events that shaped the town and gave it the special character that attract so many today. We hope you will look, learn and linger as you explore Historic Southbury.

HISTORIC SOUTHBURY

This guide to Southbury's South Britain Historic District and a companion guide to the Main Street Historic District are designed to introduce residents and visitors to Southbury's architectural and historical assets. Because of the town's rich historical legacy, only a sampling of individual sites can be listed. For more information about the history of Southbury we encourage you to visit the Old Town Hall Museum in South Britain or the Town of Southbury website: www.southbury-ct.org



Platt Farm, 538 Flood Bridge Road

This guide is a project of the Town of Southbury Certified Local Government (CLG) with support from the Connecticut Commission on Culture and Tourism.

Members of the CLG include:
 Southbury Historical Society • www.historicsouthbury.org
 Historic Buildings Commission
 Historic Tree Restoration Committee
 Historic Districts Nos 1 and 2
 Southbury Land Trust • www.southburylandtrust.org

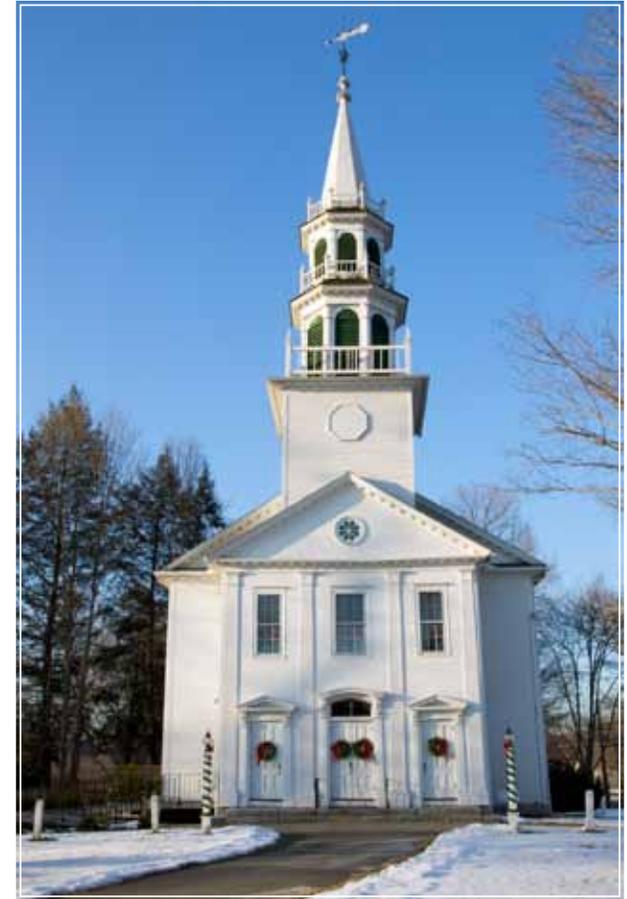


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HISTORIC SOUTHBURY



South Britain Historic District

A Guide to the South Britain Historic District
 Southbury, Connecticut, a *Preserve America* Community

South Britain Historic District

South Britain is a self-contained section of the Town of Southbury situated along the picturesque Pomperaug River. The Historic District, which was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1991, extends from the bridge across the Pomperaug River north along South Britain Road (Route 172) and contiguous streets to the Burying Ground. The District encompasses 700 acres and 43 buildings, including some of the earliest buildings in the Town of Southbury, 18th and 19th century residences in the major architectural styles of their day, two historic churches, civic and commercial structures, and traces of South Britain's industrial prominence in the 19th century.

Settled early in the 18th century as a part of Southbury, South Britain was recognized as a separate parish, or ecclesiastical society, in 1766. The settlement soon became a center for water-powered industries made possible by the damming of the Pomperaug River. Prior to the Revolution, South Britain had a grist mill, sawmill and fulling mill, and by 1798 a three-story mill to make carpet yarns. In the mid-19th century South Britain prospered as a flourishing village with many industries and trades, including a tannery, carriage shop, three hat manufacturers and the Curtis woolen mill with 50 employees. The South Britain Water Power Company was formed in 1853 to create additional power, with a plan to divert water from the river to supply a huge reservoir. These plans did not materialize, and as steam power overtook water power, South Britain was eclipsed by other industrial centers.



Evidence of South Britain's former importance as an industrial center may be seen in the remnants of the dam and bridge abutments over the Pomperaug River, located west of South Britain Road, and in the extant sections of a diversion canal along the riverbank near the former Hawkins Factory.

South Britain rivaled Southbury proper as the town center up through the middle of the 20th century. Not long after the Revolution there were two schools and numerous small trades. A post office was established in 1827, the first Town Hall was constructed in 1873, and the town's first library was built in 1904. With its distinctive mix of historic structures and landscape elements the South Britain Historic District offers residents and visitors a visual record of village life over the course of more than three centuries. We hope you will use the following landmarks as starting points for exploring the rich legacy of South Britain.

1 South Britain Burying Ground 831 South Britain Road

The Burying Ground contains the graves of many families associated with the development of South Britain, some dating from the 18th century. Among the earliest is a set of distinctive grave stones in a plot associated with the Downs family that feature death's heads. There are also prominent monuments typical of the Victorian era. The graves vary in their design and their materials – marble, metal, granite, schist, and brownstone -- reflecting changing gravestone and monument styles over more than 300 years.



2 Wheeler House (aka Cassidy Saltbox) 715 South Britain Road

One of several pre-revolutionary buildings in the Historic District, this was the home of South Britain's first physician, Dr. Wheeler, around 1750. From 1807-1822 it was owned by Rev. Bennett Tyler, who later became president of Dartmouth College. It is a classic 18th century homestead of wood-frame construction with a gable-roof, balanced five-bay façade, simple paneled entrance door with a rectangular transom, and a central chimney. The house was known historically as a "saltbox" due to the distinctive sloping extension of the roof line.



3 Mitchell House 709 South Britain Road

Built in the 1880's, this decorative residence is one of Southbury's best examples of the Italianate style, which became popular after 1850 as a romantic alternative to the predominant Greek Revival style. In sharp contrast to its more restrained neighbors, the Mitchell House displays many Italianate elements: a low-pitched roof, wide overhanging eaves supported by decorative brackets, a round-arched double window with prominent molded hoods, an asymmetrical T-shaped plan, a wide porch supported by chamfered columns, and a bay window.



4 South Britain Congregational Church 683 South Britain Road (cover)

The Congregational Church, built in 1825, was originally the Meeting House of the South Britain Ecclesiastical Society. The cost for construction was \$2006. It is an exceptional example of the Federal style, with beautifully balanced proportions, a front pavilion, fine detailing and an elegant three-story steeple. In 1869 the interior was remodeled, and two of the pediments over the three paneled front doors were changed from semi-circular to triangular. The Church provides a visual focal point and a commons for the Historic District and the community.



5 Downs House 32 East Flat Hill Road

A small "saltbox" home, built into the side of a bank, sits just west of the Congregational Church. It was bought in 1791 by the minister of the church, but may have been constructed before that date. In the 1870's a "School for Young Ladies" was held in the house. The lower level was once a tavern.

6 Bradley, Hoyt & Co
24 Hawkins Road



The former Hawkins Factory, situated on the east bank of the Pomperaug River, is the major extant industrial structure in South Britain. The main, four-story section of the Factory was built in 1866; two two-story sections were added later. The building started life as a textile mill. In 1901 it was taken over by the Hawkins Company, a manufacturer of animal traps. Aside from traps, there were numerous other items produced in the building, including woolens, tacks, buttons, and plastic assemblies. Factory operations stopped in the 1960's.

7 Judson Manville House
24 Hawkins Road



One of two brick Greek Revival residences in the Historic District, this home was built in 1835 for hat manufacturer Judson Manville. Both this and No. 9 below are constructed of native bricks and have limestone sills and lintels. The wrap-around porch dates from the early 20th century Colonial Revival period. The building was used for decades as the company office for the Hawkins Factory.

8 Mitchell-Williams Store
667 South Britain Road



This large commercial building in the "picturesque vernacular" style has served the community as a general store continuously since construction in 1904. It replaced an earlier store on the same site. With apartments over the large retail area, this eclectic structure stands out in a community where most structures are more restrained in their design. The store has an unusual pair of gables joined by a circular segmental roof section and pressed tin pillars on the front facade.

9 Benjamin Downs House
657 South Britain Road

Built of native brick in the Greek Revival style, c.1825, this house was constructed for local carriage-maker Benjamin Downs. The simple, rectilinear lines, and the fluted Ionic columns supporting the shed-roofed portico are typical of the period. It is associated with the formation of the first library in South Britain, in 1791, which may have occurred in an earlier building on the site. A similar house is at 24 Hawkins Road (No 7 above).



10 Congregational Church Parsonage ("The Parsonage")
639 South Britain Road

Built approximately 1785 by Moses Downs, this structure served for many years as home for the Congregational Minister. It is characteristic of the Colonial era, with a balanced, five-bay front façade, central chimney, twelve-over-twelve windows, and gable roof. The house was updated in the 1830's or 40's with a Greek Revival door surround.



11 Smith-Pierce House
583 South Britain Road

Local merchant Samuel Smith constructed this residence sometime between 1800 and 1825. It is a transitional building, including elements of both the Federal and Greek Revival styles. Federal elements include the entry at the gable end, a pedimented facade embellished with modillions, and a doorway with sidelights and a leaded transom. Some moldings, the six-over-six windows and the simplicity of design are Greek Revival.



12 Mitchell Double House
545-547 South Britain Road

This unusual structure, a double residence, was constructed about 1752. A later owner, Deacon Mitchell, left the house to his two sons. Over time the house has often had two owners rather than one. The two sections of the house have similar plans. Each is generous in size, with multiple fireplaces. Despite the early date the house has Federal era features including a balanced five bay façade, end chimneys, central entry with sidelights, and a simple Palladian-type window above the entrance way. Even the side entrance has a semicircular transom and pediment. At one time there was also a grist mill on the property, built in c. 1796.

13 Canfield House
524 South Britain Road

Built approximately 1810, this Federal structure is notable for its elegant proportions, twelve-over-twelve windows, three story height, twin chimneys located in from the end walls, and a doorway with leaded side lights and transom. The pedimented entrance porch is a Greek Revival addition.

14 The Old South Britain Library
576 South Britain Road



In 1904 a local private industry raised funds for the South Britain Library Association building, which functioned as the town library until 1969. It is a small, one story Shingle Style structure. Completely sheathed in shingles, it has the long sloping eaves, hipped roof, square shape, integral porch and Colonial Revival detailing characteristic of the style. The Library is now maintained by the Historic Buildings Commission and operated by the Southbury Historical Society as a local history and genealogy research center. It is one of the few preserved historic libraries in the state, and as such expresses the importance of the library as a civic function in New England communities.

15 Cunningham-Davis House
17 Library Road

The two-story frame Cape at 17 Library Road is considered one of the oldest structures in the Historic District, said to have been constructed between 1736 and 1776. Historically the house served as a two family dwelling. With a central chimney, early twelve-over-twelve windows, and a simple plank doorway, it reflects the simplicity of most mid-18th century farmhouses in the region. The building is on two levels, with a later single story extension on the upper level.



16 Platt Farm (rear cover)
538 Flood Bridge Road

The Platt Farm is one of the last remaining operating farms in Southbury. The complex includes an Italianate residence, built in the 1860's, with a typical asymmetrical plan, low hipped roof and bay window. With a cluster of barns, outbuildings and sheds, some dating from the mid 19th century, and situated overlooking open fields and rolling hills, the Platt Farm is an exceptional visual and environmental asset for Southbury. Some of the land that was once the Platt Farm is now maintained by the Southbury Land Trust.

17 Curtis House
584-586 South Britain Road



Some local historians consider the Curtis House to be the oldest residence in South Britain, possibly built as early as 1740. It has typical features of the mid-18th century, including a hand-hewn timber frame, gambrel roof, simple central entry, and large central chimney that supported several fireplaces.

18 Old Town Hall
624 South Britain Road



The importance of South Britain within the larger town is reflected in the construction of Southbury's first town hall in South Britain in 1873. The simple two-story building in the "Picturesque Vernacular" style served as the center of town government until 1964. It accommodated all town functions and also served at one point as a private school. It is now one of three historic buildings maintained by the Historic Buildings Commission and is operated as a museum by the Southbury Historical Society.

19 Perry House (aka Moses Downs House)
662 South Britain Road

One of the oldest houses in the District, this was said to have been built by Downs c. 1755. It was originally a saltbox of post and beam construction with a central chimney. The house was later enlarged to two full stories and in the 1850's updated with Greek features including a bold pilastered frontispiece.

20 The Methodist Episcopal Church
698 South Britain Road

Constructed in 1832 by the Methodist Society, and enlarged in 1851, this church has classic Greek Revival features: a flush sided facade, a central double leaf four panel door, Doric pilasters that divide the front into bays, high narrow windows and a square belfry. The simplicity of design contrasts with the more elaborate Congregational Church directly opposite. Although the building is in disrepair it remains an excellent example of mid-19th century ecclesiastical architecture and a reminder of the challenges faced by small communities committed to preserving their architectural legacy.

21 The South Britain Academy
698 South Britain Road

The "Academy" served as a school from about 1820 to 1860. It was also a "place of higher learning," with a library and an Institute for Elocution and Debating. It has a simple gable-end plan, six-over-six windows, and a triangular pedimented roof typical of the Greek Revival era. The porch and entrance door were changed to reflect later Italianate tastes.

