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 arrived in 1673, where, in 1673, European colonists settled the land that is now Southbury. The first European settlement, known as Pomperaug, was located on the east bank of the 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, these and other early industries prospered, often driven by water-powered 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 20,000 up until the early 1860s, when construction of I-84 brought with it new development and a rise in population to today’s 20,000.

The landmarks we see today reflect Southbury’s early phases of growth, up through the 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 it has today.

We hope you will look, learn and linger as you explore Historic Southbury.
HISTORIC SOUTHBURY

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 1981, 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 in the 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 yarn. 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 mature, 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 on 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 sluiceway canal along the riverbank near the former Hawkes’ 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

381 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, slate and brownstone – reflecting changing gravestones and monument styles over more than 350 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 pastor of Dartmouth College. It is a classic 18th century house of wood-frame construction with a gable-roof, balanced five-bay facade, 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 Italianate architecture 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 typical elements: a low pitched roof, wide overhanging eaves supported by decorative brackets, a round arch 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 1829, was originally the Meeting House of the South Britain Ecclesiastical Society. The cost for the construction was $2000. It is an exception because of the Federal style, with beautifully balanced proportions, a central entrance tympanum enhanced by exquisite detailing and an elegant three-story staircase. 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 area in 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 built in 1871 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.

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The importance of South Britain within the larger town is reflected in the construction of Southbury's first town hall in South Britain in 1872. 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 public 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)
562 South Britain Road
One of the oldest houses in the district, this was said to have been built by Downs in 1765. It was originally a sawmill with potential for both saw and beam construction with a central chimney. The house was later enlarged to two full stories and in the 1860s updated with Greek features including a bold platered frontispiece.

20 The Methodist Episcopal Church
698 South Britain Road
Constructed in 1825 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 1850 to 1860. It was also a "place of higher learning" with a library and an Institute for Education 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 taste.

17 Curtis House
184-186 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, gable roof, simple central entry, and large central chimney that supported several fireplaces.

18 Old Town Hall
624 South Britain Road
Built approximately 1810, this Federal structure is notable for its elegant proportions, twelve-over-twelve windows, three story height, and the simplicity of design are Greek Revival. In 1804 a local private industry raised funds for the South Britain Library and an Institute for Education and Debating. It operated as a museum by the Southbury Historical Society as a local history and genealogy asset for Southbury. Some of the land that was once the Platt Farm is an exceptional visual and environmental asset for Southbury. The importance of South Britain within the larger town is reflected in the construction of Southbury's first town hall in South Britain in 1872. 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 public 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.

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