

Hinsdale, N.H., stamps place in history

Tucked in Granite State's southwest corner, village preserves charm along the Ashuelot

By Ken Knutson

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Wyatt is fast asleep as we cross the Ashuelot River into downtown Hinsdale, N.H.

Turning onto Main Street, I immediately notice spots I recall from my Google Maps reconnaissance months ago. There's the Main Street Market Place and Smitty's Restaurant & Pizza. And, of course, the First Congregational Church of Hinsdale in the middle of it all, its steeple stretching into the blue sky.

A park lines the south side, between the road and the Ashuelot. The river cascades down a dam behind the red brick Hinsdale Community Center, next to which is the post office in an old two-story brown wooden building with front porches on both levels. It looked more Old West than New Hampshire.

Rivaling the church steeple is the soaring clock tower atop the august Hinsdale Town Hall, yet another architectural style in this little community.

"Wyatt, we're here," I said as I turn into the parking lot serving the riverside park.

He comes to and within seconds is down on the bank pitching stones into the water, his new favorite pastime.

I'm taken aback to see a couple of girls swimming in the river. It's sunny but not summer warm.

"How's the water?" I shout.

"It's great!" they respond.

I'll take their word for it.

The two-hour drive from Hinsdale, Mass. had been the kind of twisty, back road-roaming course that one would expect through New England — and the kind I love.

Heading northeast, we had hurtled back through America's stages of development with each "Entering" town sign we passed: Ashfield incorporated in 1765 ... Greenfield incorporated 1753 ... Northfield incorporated 1723.

My 7-year-old was less than captivated by such antiquity, and I didn't want to prematurely drain his patience. With some anguish on my part, we blow past

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This is the fourth in a six-part series on visits to towns named Hinsdale in Massachusetts and New Hampshire

the homestead of famed 19th-century poet and editor William Cullen Bryant and a charming one-room schoolhouse that suddenly appeared on a rural road.

I did assuage my sight-seeing urge a bit by popping into Shelburne Falls, Mass., a lovely tourist trap known for turning its old trolley span across the Deerfield River into the garden-like "The Bridge of Flowers."

Now we were in the latter stage of our two-pronged tour of Hinsdales. And I was hungry.

I dragged Wyatt away from his river reclamation project, and we walked across the street to Raynette's Diner & Coffee Shop. A "For Sale" sign hung in the window of the eatery, which occupies the end of the strip it shares with a dollar store and a defunct-looking pizza shop.

We stroll in, the only customers at this late morning hour, and decide to share a healthy stack of hotcakes.

We learn the business's appellation is a marriage of the names of owners Ray and Nanette Porter.

"This used to be a hardware store, both sides," said Ray as he leads us through a doorway into the restaurant's more formal area as indicated by the tablecloths. "The landlord divided the rooms, so I figured we make a banquet room out of this side, have pizza and private parties."

A 50-year resident of the area, he said the building's remodeled facade belies its vintage.

"It has a lot of history to it. It used to have two floors. The upstairs burned down years ago," Ray commented.

I asked about the buried earthworks I noticed in the park by the Ashuelot.

He corrects my pronunciation.

"Ash-WEH-lot," he intoned. "That was all paper mill. It took the whole area from here all the way up to the post office. There were



The Ashuelot River runs through downtown Hinsdale, N.H., and once served as the backbone of the local economy by powering the area's paper mills. Postal clerks Cindy Mason and Brenda Martin proudly staff the Hinsdale Post office, which is celebrating its oldest-in-the-nation 200th birthday today, Aug. 4. (Ken Knutson photos)

five paper mills up through here, within three, four miles. They're all gone."

Like Hinsdale, Mass., this town used to serve a lot more than its current population.

"There used to be train line, went straight to Keene (N.H.). The tracks have been torn up. They use (the old corridor) for snowmobiles and stuff like that. It goes all the way up to Winchester, and all the way down toward Northfield," he said.

Before we take our leave, Ray asks if we've stopped by the post office yet. It's the oldest one in the country, he remarked.

So we had our next stop. I was certainly intrigued by the distinctive style of the building. Sure enough, hanging from the porch rail is a banner proclaiming it "The Oldest Continuously Operating Post Office in the U.S." The year "1816" was inscribed on the gable above, indicating our visit is taking place during its 200th anniversary year.

We enter, walk past the 19th-century post office boxes and introduce ourselves to clerks Cindy Mason and Brenda Martin.

"We're going to have a special pictorial exhibit and some retail items with the post office on it," Martin said of the celebration, planned for Aug. 4.

That's right, the date of this issue.

"We're going to have a list of speakers, and I'm sure there'll be some talk about the history and the building itself," she continued. "They're talking about possibly a little parade and the town band playing."

Mason said local residents take pride in their claim to postal fame, even those who aren't local anymore.

"We have some people who just keep their boxes. They don't even live here," she related. "They say, 'I don't want to give my box up.'"

We offered our congratulations and decided to head to nearby Brattleboro, Vt., to

find our hotel and get Wyatt some pool time. We'll be back.

Hello, Hinsdale, N.H.

Population: 3,954

Founded: 1753

Form of government: Open town meeting, called into session annually by five-member elected board of selectmen and officiated by elected town moderator, at which residents vote on budget and other articles presented; board holds regular monthly business meetings

Notable landmarks: Ashuelot River (tributary of the Connecticut River), Pisgah State Park, historic Col. Ebenezer Hinsdale Homestead

Claim to fame: 200-year-old post office is the oldest continuously operating one in the U.S.