Early eighteenth-century settlement consisted of isolated farmhouses, most of them simple one-and-a-half-story dwellings with massive, brick, central chimneys and gable or gambrel roofs. With increased prosperity, the characteristic two-and-a-half-story, gable-roofed, center-chimney farmhouse with a five-bay facade and a central entrance became the most common form of dwelling, a house type which persisted into the early nineteenth century. Such farmhouses were but one element of the characteristic farm complex, which was comprised of barns, a wagon shed, wood house, a corncrib and swill house, as well as the usual domestic dependencies like a wellhead or spring house, privy and, often, a family cemetery. Equally a part of any farm were the planting fields, meadows, orchards, wood lots and the stone walls and dirt lanes which divided them. An intact, archetypal farm complex in an agricultural landscape is rarely found in Rhode Island today. A fine Coventry example is the Nicholas Farm (65*) on Nicholas Road near the western border of the town. The most common surviving element of early farm complexes are the farmhouses themselves. In Coventry, the best examples are found in areas which retain place names associated with their early colonial settlers like Whaley's Hollow (27), Vaughn Hollow (38-B), Scott's Hollow (70), Wickes Hill (73), Hill Farm (61), Carr Pond (72) and Hopkins Hill (63). Farms of generally no more than one hundred acres constituted

*The letter-and-number codes in parenthesis refer to the Inventory and to the survey map which are located at the end of the Report.

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the base of the early eighteenth-century economy in Coventry; its location made it an important part of the productive hinterland; and, by the end of the century, Coventry farmers were exchanging grain, lumber and dairy products in Providence for store-bought goods.

Rapid eighteenth-century settlement in Coventry took place along what were the major thoroughfares of the time. The Eight Rod Highway, begun in 1728, ran lengthwise across the southern half of the township, serving as "Ye main highway which headeth from ye Apponaug to Voluntown."[1] Many of the older homesteads can still be found along the country roads which follow the old agricultural trade route--along Nooseneck Hill, Harkney Hill (58), Perry Hill (20) and Sand Hill roads. It is said that the East Greenwich to Hartford stagecoach line travelled north towards Coventry on the Three Rod Highway, joining the Eight Rod Highway at Sand Hill. The ruins of a large colonial tavern complex can still be seen along Sand Hill Road (67), where the stage made an overnight stop.

The Great North Road had been started in 1714. It is more than sixty miles long, with its longest stretch in Coventry. This road, known in the nineteenth century as the Plainfield Pike and now State Route 14, was the northern equivalent to the Eight Rod Highway and was the major overland route-- "vary much in use by travoling from town to town and to mills and market."[2]

[1]Town Meeting Records, Quorter Meeting Book, August 1752.
[2]Petitions to the R.I. Assembly, February 1739-1740, Vol. 4: 1739-1740.

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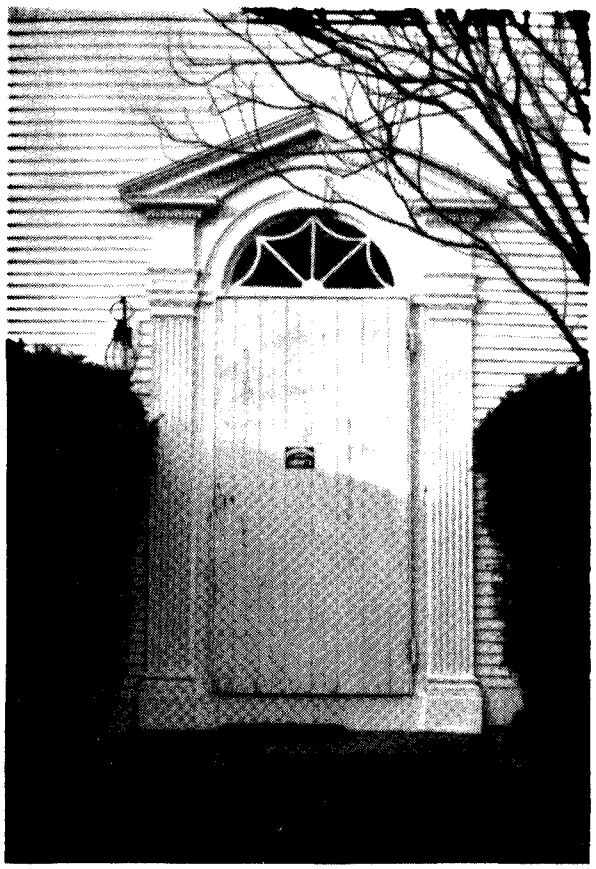
Israel Wilson House (1814); Harkney Hill Road.
(Map # 58)



Israel Wilson House; door detail.

Heavy traffic obliged the Town Council to petition the General Assembly for highway repairs, and the Council also required that "every housekeeper work (on the highway) four days in a year...."[3] as was true throughout Rhode Island. Coventry became less isolated due to this major road. Local farmers started new businesses along the roadside as an adjunct to farming that included gristmills to grind locally grown cereals and sawmills to produce lumber. A good example of a working up-and-down sawmill is still standing at Roaring Brook Farm (15-C) at Hopkins Hollow, on the site of an early eighteenth-century sawmill and gristmill complex, known at that time as Rice's Mills. The roadside farms were also dotted with fulling mills, carding mills, cider mills, cooperages and tanneries. In 1794, the Great North Road was repaired and taken over by a turnpike company. The Providence-Norwich Turnpike (better known as the Plainfield Turnpike) was the second toll road in Rhode Island. A toll gate and booth (38-H) were located at Walker's Toll in Rice City. Here, the various tolls were collected: twelve and a half cents for four-wheeled vehicles drawn by more than two horses; if drawn by two, ten cents; with pleasure carriages drawn by one horse paying a mere eight cents.

Rice City, sutuated on the western stretch of the Plainfield Pike, near the Connecticut border, is the best remaining local example of a late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century village settlement that depended on the turnpike trade for its livelihood. This well preserved village has been recommended for nomination

*Town Meeting Records, Quorter Meeting Book: November 1741.

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to the National Register of Historic Places.

The most visible roadside establishments were taverns which catered to travellers as well as the local populace. Town life, such as it was, centered about the large tap rooms and common rooms where social and political meetings were held. More than forty licensed taverns existed at one time or another in Coventry before the Revolution. Because of the heavy traffic on the Providence-Norwich turnpike, three taverns were established to accommodate the many travellers who chose to stay overnight, as Rice City was halfway between Providence and Norwich. Of these, both the Gibbs (38-P) and the McGregor (38-M) taverns have since burned, although foundations and ruins still remain at the undisturbed sites. However, the Rice City Tavern (38-I), the most notorious for drinking and gambling, still stands. The Town Council held its meetings in taverns until 1835, preferring to frequent Waterman Tavern (28) on "Meeting Days."

On "Training Days," the local militia also met at Waterman's, which still commands an excellent view of the fields that were the camping ground for Rochambeau's armies on their way to Yorktown in 1781 and on their way home to France the following year. The route the French followed, the Great North Road, was the major overland highway route in the eighteenth century--the Route 95 of its day.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, the Greenes, an important Warwick family, had established a trading outpost at a spot between the present-day villages of Quidnick and Anthony. An ironworks at Maroon Swamp near Coventry Centre and a forge

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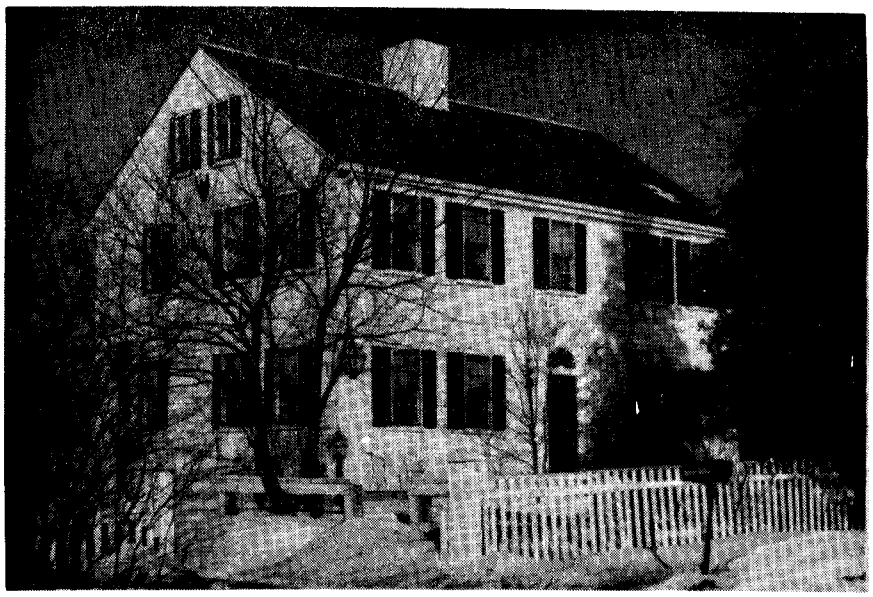
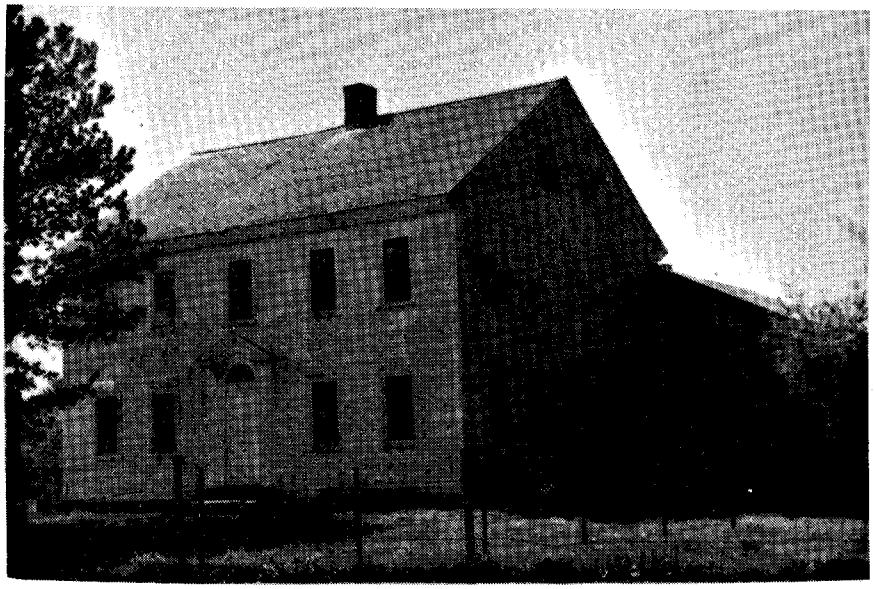


Isaac Bowen House (c. 1795); Waterman Hill Road.
(Map # 36)



Town Asylum (c. 1790); Town Farm Road.
(Map # 33)

at Quidnick were run by Nathanael Greene. Although not a native son, he is Coventry's most famous man. The Greene home (1-E) on Taft Street in Anthony, listed in the National Register of Historic Places and a National Historic Landmark has been the focus of the town's major preservation effort. Restored and open to the public, it is a museum shrine to Nathanael Greene, whose name, to many, is synonymous with Coventry history, just as George Washington is to American history.

By the third quarter of the eighteenth century, Coventry was a series of rural settlement clusters linked together by two major east-west roads and many former Indian trails. The Waterman Tavern functioned as the unofficial political and governmental center. The religious center, however, was to be found as far south as Waterman's is north--at Maple Root. Here, the "new" Meetinghouse (55), built in 1797 and still in use, has remained the most influential of the Conference of Six-Principle Baptist churches.

NINETEENTH-CENTURY DEVELOPMENT: THE TEXTILE INDUSTRY AND THE RAILROAD

The first factory-system industry in the United States, textiles, originated in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, in the 1790s. A great spur to the growth in the textile industry came with Thomas Jefferson's Embargo Act of 1807, which cut off supplies of imported fabrics. Immediately, and for the next two decades, small textile mills, mostly producing cotton yarn, were established all over the state. Mills were built where water power

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was available, and Coventry had an abundance of such sites. Unlike the largely seasonal eighteenth-century sawmills, gristmills and fulling mills, nineteenth-century textile mills required a settled population of workers, and in Coventry half a dozen new villages sprang up: Anthony (1806); Arkwright (1809); Shoethread (1809), now Coventry Centre; Washington; (1810) Taftville (1811), now Quidnick; and Harris (1821). In contrast to the earlier isolated rural settlements, which grew up haphazardly along the turnpikes, these new mill villages displayed a conscious attempt at planning. Uniform, company-owned housing was crucial to the success of a mill village. A steady labor force was attracted by housing which included both single- and two-family homes with enough land for kitchen gardens and by a village complete with company stores, company farms, schools and places of worship.

Of these six mill villages, many still retain some of their nineteenth-century visual character. Harris (23) is the most intact of all the villages; its mill, dense mill housing and the many elaborate Greek Revival and Victorian homes of the mill owners are intact; it has been recommended for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places. Arkwright (2), its neighbor, has by comparison fared worse, a victim of adverse development and change. Its sense of place has been lost somewhat. Due to its siting it owed much of its livelihood to its extensions in Scituate and Cranston, and its social and industrial relationship was with the villages of Fiskeville, Jackson (no longer recognizeable villages) and Harris. Coventry Centre (13), although its two mills survive along with some mill housing, has lost much

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of its other village components, such as its church, school and nonmill housing. Flat River Road (Route 117) also cuts through the village.

Quidnick (37), Anthony (1) and Washington (42) seem to the untrained eye like one large village. This is due largely to the widening of Flat River Road (Route 117). The road has cut each village unit in half, and destroyed the nineteenth-century quality of their main streets; yet it has also strung them together, thus reducing their individual character. These three villages, always the most prosperous and sizeable of those in Coventry, were the only ones to sustain noncompany housing. The variety in village architecture is seen in residential and commercial structures and spans several periods. By the late Victorian period, many of the other mill villages were experiencing a depression--but here the main streets and many side streets still reveal a handful of eighteenth-century dwellings and a high proportion of austere early nineteenth-century mill houses side by side with a variety of Greek Revival and Victorian residential dwellings. Taken together, they constitute wealth of vernacular village architecture unparalleled in the rest of the town.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, Coventry began to institutionalize its social services by acquiring the Briggs Farm near Potterville for use as the Town Asylum and Poor Farm (33). Previously, the indigent and sick were boarded out in private homes or apprenticed as indentured servants. This area, at the eastern edge of Potterville, had been the site of several

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small pox hospitals in the eighteenth century. In the nineteenth century, it was necessary to purchase another farmstead to serve as a Pest House--quarantine center and hospital--serving the town as recently as 1911 but demolished since.

By 1856, all the important mill villages were linked by the Hartford, Providence and Fishkill Railroad, allowing for quick transportation of raw materials and finished goods. Soon the railroad was also bringing in coal to fuel steam engines, which augmented the water power available at the mill sites. At this time the population shifted the taverns and hamlet villages like Potterville, Rice City and Hopkins Hollow that had clustered about the stage coach routes began to decline and the railroad-served mill villages became the focus of new settlement. The railroad villages of Greene and Summit were established; both began as railroad stations and grew to be commercial centers in western Coventry. Many farms were deserted; villages like Rice City and Hopkins Hollow were reduced to sleepy intersections, with the new commercial and social centers shifting to Greene, Summit and Coventry Centre.

Reflecting these changes, the Town House, built in 1835 along the "Great North Road" at Potterville, was abandoned and a new Town House was proposed for Coventry Centre (13-O) in 1879. The site was chosen for its central location and accessibility by railroad. This attempted centralization of town government proved unworkable, however, and soon Washington became the town center, which it remains today.

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