The Way It is Suits Princeton

LandMark 1994

Since early settlers first sighted Wachusett Mountain in 1632, people have been drawn to Princeton. From Indian footpaths to modem highways, the mountain attracts outsiders. Hikers and walkers enjoy 18 trails that crisscross the mountain. Each winter, an average of 300,000 skiers schuss down 18 trails at the Wachusett Mountain ski area. A proposal to expand the ski area is currently under review.

Thousands of visitors ushered in Princeton's summer season in the hey day of her hotel era - from the 1860s to the 1930s. Tourists flocked to a dozen or so local hotels and many boardinghouses. During the summer, Princeton's population swelled to 15,000. Visitors came to "take the air" in the mountainside community.

Today, most Princeton families leave town for their summer vacations, traveling to distant areas for fun and excitement. They return to enjoy life in their town's quiet, relaxed, rural atmosphere.

In a 1990 survey, Princeton residents made it clear they want their town to stay as it is. They don't long for a return to the good old days" of summer tourism. Through the survey, most residents opposed any industrial/commercial growth. Many said they moved to Princeton because of its open space, privacy, small town atmosphere, scenic views, outdoor recreation and lack of congestion.

Others wrote about the high quality of the air and water, about the good hunting and fishing, the wildlife and clean environment. Still others praised their town's community spirit, civic pride, character of the people, old-time town feeling, and pointed to the number of educated/creative people who live in town. Adults find Princeton a safe place to raise children and note the lack of crime.

Wind, not nuclear power

A majority of Princetonians support environmental issues, are active recyclers, and want their electricity to come from non-nuclear sources, as evidenced by local opposition to involvement with the Seabrook nuclear plant. In 1984, voters took an unorthodox approach to an alternate energy source by appropriating $500,000 to have eight windmills constructed on the back of Wachusett Mountain. This year, the town will make its last payment on that bond.

Today in Princeton, a pizza shop, a video store, coffee shop, two small convenience stores and a post office are the only commercial enterprises. In June, residents learned the only bank in town, WCIS, will close its office on Worcester Road this September. Then townspeople will have to travel out of town for their banking needs. The town has no gas station and a proposal to put one in on Worcester Road a few years ago met opposition.

Strict state and local regulations for septic systems and the recent adoption of the controversial Cohen bill effectively limit large scale development in Princeton. With more than 3,000 acres of open space, owned either by state agencies or the Audubon Society, much green space will remain protected forever. Today, visitors come to Wachusett Meadow Wildlife Sanctuary on Goodnow Road to enjoy quiet woodland walks and to see the abundant wildlife.

Looking back at the variety of activities that lured thousands of visitors to town, it's hard to believe how the small town of Princeton geared up each summer during the hotel era. On summer tradition endures - tennis. Wealthy fabric manufacturer, William Langley of New York introduced the first tennis set, with concave English racquets. A net strung with multi-colored tassels was set up on the lawn in front of the former Wachusett House hotel on the common. The game caught on and has been played ever since. The end of each summer is still climaxed with the Labor Day Tennis Tournament, which has become a homecoming time for many former Princeton residents.

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Picture comment:
Standing in front of the library today and looking over the pastoral setting of imagine the noise and bustle of all the activities centered around the large hotels in the center 1900, the Wachusett House hotel is at the end of the common on the right with the Prospect near where the Dunbar House now stands.

Photo courtesy of Princeton Historical Society