

## ***The Kingsland, A Brief History***

The Kingsland is a long and narrow, sloping open space 3/10 to 4/10 of a mile long, located within Southbury's Historic District No 1, at the northern end of the District. This space has national historical significance as a point along the route taken by General Rochambeau and his army on the way to assist General George Washington in the Revolutionary battle of Yorktown against General Cornwallis and the British army. Beyond that, it has local significance as the site of the first church in Southbury, the site of what was at one time a "commons" for grazing of local livestock, and a landscape feature that has not changed significantly for over three centuries. In addition, it is surrounded by and complements historic structures that are key components of Historic District No. 1. The Kingsland contributes a substantial visual and historical element to the overall mix of landmark structures, outbuildings, fences, historic trees and other landscape features that make up Historic District No. 1 and that attract visitors and residents to Southbury as a distinguished destination.

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The first reference to the plot of land that has become known as "The Kingsland" was found in historic records just after The Revolutionary War when a local patriot, Dr. Andrew Graham, was granted the use of the property as a reward for his service to his new country by a proprietors' committee. Dr. Graham lived in the home which still exists just south of the White Oak schoolhouse. Legend suggests that neighbors who had been Tories objected to this grant, so to avoid paying further taxes, Graham deeded the land back to King George III.

Prior to that, the first church that had settled in Woodbury was divided into two parishes, and the first church building in Southbury was built at the southern end of what we now call Kingsland around 1735. The first pastor of that church was Rev. John Graham (father of Dr. Andrew Graham), and he lived in a parsonage on the site of the Mitchell Mansion House. The meeting house was only used for approximately forty years, and then a new meeting house was built further south on Main Street. The White Oak meeting house must have fallen into disrepair and been demolished.

Eventually this sloping piece of land was used as a common area where roaming domestic animals were gathered and kept until their owners came to claim them. Cattle, sheep, horses, and pigs were often "earmarked"...similar to the branding of cattle in the West. A central and visual area for stray animals was common in agrarian New England.

As the need for a meadow for stray animals diminished, the area was probably kept mowed by nearby farmers or by the proprietor of the stately Mansion House which was open to the public for business. The simplicity of this uncluttered open space, outlined by maple trees planted during the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, complemented the many historic houses surrounding it. The following is an excerpt from Rockey's History of New Haven County:

The principal highway has ever been Southbury Main street. It closely followed the old Pomperaug trail and was laid out by the whites in 1675. When the Woodbury turnpike was located in 1795 this course was selected, when it became a still more popular thoroughfare. In many places it is from eight to fifteen rods wide and has several driveways, along which grow magnificent oaks, elms and maples, among which are studded many comfortable homes. Near the Woodbury line are several fine places. One is known as the Mitchell Mansion House and was built on the site of Reverend Mr. Graham's residence by M. S. Mitchell, about 1835, for a superior place of public entertainment. At that time and for many years it had no equal in size and beauty of finish in this part of the state. It was sold to Sidney B. Whitlock, a retired sea captain, who converted it into a country residence, in which way it was used in 1890 by Henry A. Matthews. Near by, on the hillside, is a substantial brick residence, which became noted as the place where the popular and genial author, Samuel G. Goodrich (Peter Parley), passed the last days of his life, and he now rests in the cemetery near by. The "Peter Parley House" was a pleasant country resort in 1890, kept by Egbert Warner.

Unfortunately, during the 1970's, the maples located along the Main Street North side of the Kingsland began to die. It was presumed that these trees were weakened by the use of salt in the winter. The State, which had acquired The Kingsland through the courts when Connecticut began building its system of state roads, replanted the maples during the 1970's, farther away from the road to avoid salt contamination.

During the 1980's, the State stopped mowing and maintaining The Kingsland. The neighbors petitioned the Town to clear away the overgrown brush and begin mowing the area again. The Selectmen refused to allow the Town Highway Department to do this until the Kingsland became town property. The State released the Kingsland to the Town in 1987, which indicates that ownership of the Kingsland was considered important by the Board of Selectmen at the time. It was important to the neighbors to have the area returned to an open "meadow" as it had been before the State allowed the area to grow up to brush.

In summary, when Southbury created its first historic district in Southbury in 1967, the ordinance stated that the Commission's purpose was to "...preserve the antique rural atmosphere of the town through the preservation of buildings and PLACES of historic interest and by maintaining LANDMARKS...." The Kingsland is completely surrounded by Historic District No. 1 and is in effect a "doughnut hole" carved out of the Historic District. Had the Kingsland been town property at the time of the establishment of Historic District No. 1, it would have been required by Connecticut General Statutes section 7-147a et seq. to be incorporated into the Historic District at that time. Had that happened, the integrity of the District would have been fully maintained and The Kingsland would have been included as a prominent feature of the District. In fact, the anomalous exclusion of The Kingsland is a unique situation in the state of Connecticut; we have been told that there is no other Historic District in which a central historical and landscape feature was excluded at the time of designation. For these reasons, the present Commission members are asking the town to set the historic record straight and to officially include this most significant landmark in the heart of Historic District No. 1.

Additional Historical notes:

The predominance of significant buildings and features surrounding the Kingsland leads one to believe it must have been a “Town Green” or “Commons” in the very early days of Southbury.

1. The Stiles Cemetery, containing many significant and ancient gravesites
2. The Benjamin Stiles house, thought to have been designed by a French engineer who had traveled with Rochambeau’s army
3. Peter Parley (Samuel Goodrich) house
4. A 1700’s saltbox, known as Hunnihan house
5. The Graham house ([just South of the White Oak school house](#))
6. White Oak School
7. The Mansion House -- also said to have been owned by the renowned furniture maker Duncan Phyfe
8. Original roadway which is referred to as the “Indian Trail” or “Pomperaug Trail” to identify the path of the settlers who traveled from Stratford to establish a new settlement in Woodbury. They spent their first night under the White Oak, having come into Woodbury from the Shepaug River and over Good Hill, to the North and West. This was the obvious route to take.

After breaking away from the first Woodbury church, a Meeting House was built between on this property around 1735, and worship took place there for 40 years or so (per History of Ancient Woodbury by William Cothren, ). Rev. John Graham was the first minister of that church, and he stayed until the end of 1764. Congregation grew out of this building and built a new church (current UCC Southbury) around 1770. His son Andrew Graham (1728 - 1785) was a doctor, and he lived just south of the White Oak schoolhouse.