

Bedford's Historic District – a remarkable collection of beautifully preserved old houses and churches

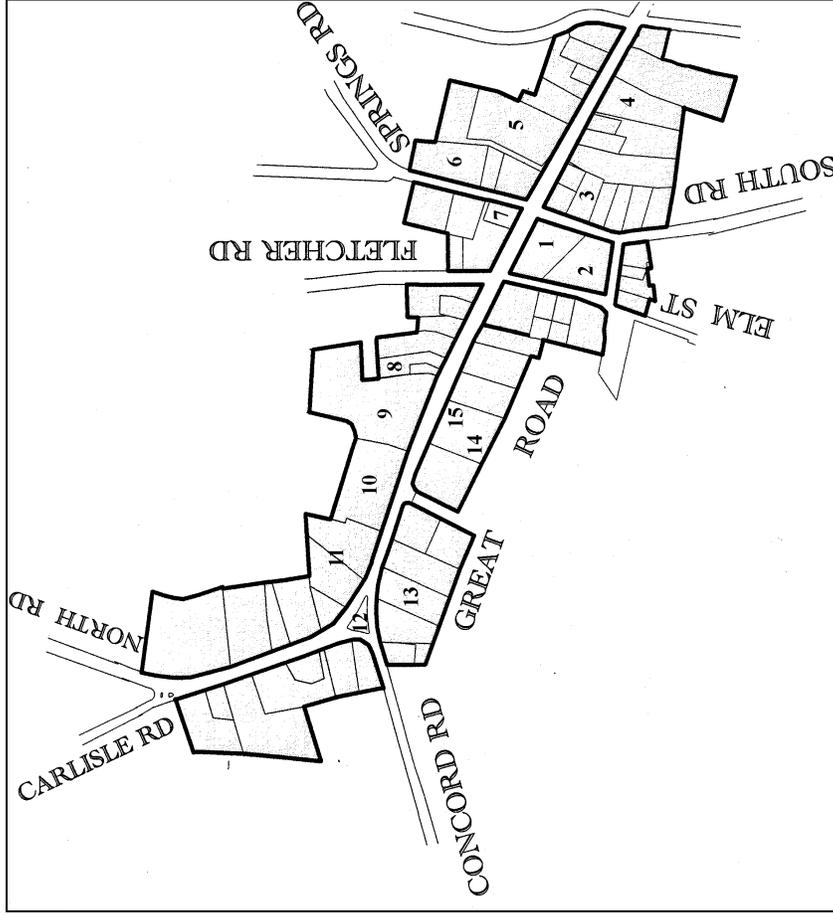
Please note: Except for the Job Lane House, all houses listed in this Guide are privately owned and are not open to the public.

1. Town Common, The Great Road
Early residents of the newly-created town donated the land for the Common. At various times the Town Common (originally much larger than today) was the site of the first meeting house, which stood in the northwest corner; a schoolhouse; carriage houses; a free-standing bell tower; the town pound; a militia training ground; and a liberty pole. In colonial times it was criss-crossed by unpaved, muddy tracks and dotted with puddles. It did not acquire the trim, neatly-fenced appearance that we now associate with Old New England until the mid-1800s.

2. Second Meeting House, 75 The Great Road, 1818, Federal

Typical of colonial New England towns, Bedford was founded as both a town and a parish, with little separation between the two institutions. The founders of the town were required by the Great and General Court, as a condition of the town's incorporation, to build a house for worship, settle a minister, and establish a school, all within three years. The original meeting house built on the Town Common was badly damaged in a windstorm in 1815 and replaced with the current structure. Both buildings were financed by the sale of pews; churchgoers without pews sat on benches. There was no heating system until the mid-1800s. The unusual steeple structure is thought to be based on

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designs by architect Asher Benjamin, who published books for the instruction of country builders.

3. Old Town Hall, 16 South Road, 1856, Italianate.
Listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

This is the town's only Italianate municipal building. At various times Old Town Hall served as a town office, school, jail, library, Town Meeting hall, and social hall. Renovations are expected to be complete in 2004.

4. Jonathan Bacon Homestead, 133 The Great Road, 1836, Greek Revival

This ostentatious structure, with its two-story Ionic columns, could stand as a symbol of the industrial success of Bedford and of its builder, Jonathan Bacon. Bacon was an entrepreneur in the handmade-shoe trade, the most important industry in Bedford in 1830-1870. He also invented and manufactured large quantities of Bacon's Blind Fasteners. His prosperity enabled him to move his family here from a modest house at 65 South Road.

5. Domine Manse (Nicholas Bowes Homestead), 110 The Great Road, 1730, Colonial

The oldest building in the center of town after the Fitch Tavern, it was built for the town's first minister, Rev. Nicholas Bowes (hence the name Domine Manse, meaning the minister's home). Not long out of Harvard and still in his middle twenties, upon his appointment he immediately became the town's most important citizen. Though a professional man, he also farmed his land as did all the other townsmen of the time. Later, this was also the home of the town's first schoolmaster. Under the ownership of John Reed, Committees of Correspondence and Safety met here during the Revolution. In the early 20th century the house was a restaurant.

6. Old Burying Ground, Springs Road, ca. 1729

The town's first cemetery, with grave sites dating from 1731. An estimated 1,400 people were buried in this tiny lot, though only about 400 are in marked graves. The northeast corner, called the African Reservation, was set aside for African-Americans. The slate gravestones in this cemetery feature winged skulls, wreathed urns, and other characteristic funerary symbols. The

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few limestone monuments were considered innovative in their time.

7. Hartwell Homestead, 90 The Great Road, 1843, Greek Revival

Ionic columns, quarter-round windows under the gable, and a full-length porch with long windows add architectural interest to this attractive structure. It was inhabited by members of the extensive Hartwell family, whose name is commemorated by both Hartwell Avenue in Lexington and Hartwell Road in Bedford.

8. Simonds House, 36-38 The Great Road, ca. 1830

A 3-1/2 story duplex, the only house of this type in Bedford. In the heyday of Bedford's shoe industry, shops for the manufacture of handmade shoes were located behind this and neighboring houses.

9. Penniman-Stearns Homestead, 26 The Great Road (across from the Congregational church), ca. 1788, Georgian

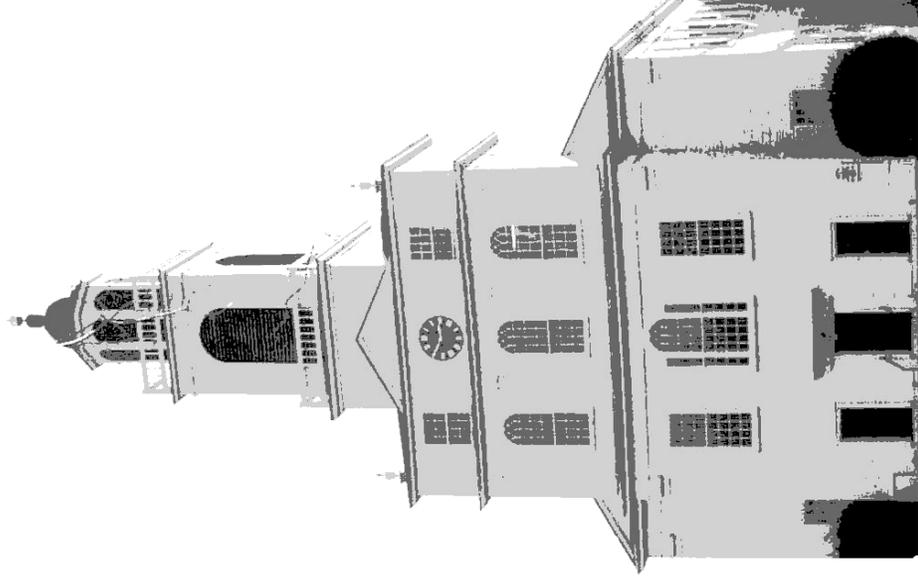
Designed and built by Reuben Duren for Joseph Penniman, the town's third minister; later the home of Samuel Stearns, the fourth minister. The architectural features of this elegant house include a symmetrical façade; a hipped roof (slanted on all four sides); paired chimneys; dentil cornices (toothed trim below the roofline), and corner quoins (wood carved to resemble stone blocks).

10. Kidder-Fitch Homestead (Fitch Tavern), 12 The Great Road, ca. 1710, Colonial

The oldest building in the town center. On April 19, 1775, the town's Militia and Minuteman companies (these were two separate military units) breakfasted here before marching to the Battle of Concord. The house once held a school for young ladies. There is a ballroom upstairs.

11. Elijah Stearns, Esq. Homestead, 4 The Great Road, 1810, Federal

One of the two "brick-ender" houses in town. The ornate doorway was imported from England. In the side yard formerly stood a building that held the town's first post office and general store as well as the town library; it has since been moved to 22-24 Loomis Street. Squire Stearns, the first owner, served as the town's first postmaster.



Second Meeting House

12. Wilson Park (traffic island at the junction of Concord Road and North Road), 1884

On this site, Bedford's military men gathered on the morning of April 19, 1775, before marching to the "Concord Fight." An annual Pole Capping ceremony held each spring still honors Revolutionary resistance to tyranny. Note the red hat at the top of the pole.

13. David Rice Homestead, 1 The Great Road (large sycamore tree in front yard), ca. 1810

David Rice, the village blacksmith, lived here. He made the charcoal for his own forge at a site near the Carlisle bridge.

14. First Church of Christ, Congregational, 25 The Great Road, 1833

In 1832, religious dissent among the town's Congregationalists, spiritual descendants of the Puritans, led to the formation of a more liberal, breakaway Unitarian society. The Unitarians, being in the majority, retained possession of the church on the Common. The rump Congregational society then built this church for their own use.

Note the unusual ornamental millwork above the front entrance.

15. Lewis P. Gleason Homestead, 27 The Great Road (adjacent to the Congregational Church), ca. 1830

Now the parsonage for the Congregational Church, this house was originally a duplex constructed by Joshua Page, a prolific builder. Although the duplex house may seem to be a modern innovation, Page is thought to have introduced the two-family house to Bedford in the early 1800s. A number of other 19th-century double houses still stand in the central part of town.

Now that you've explored the Historic District, take a tour beyond the center. There's so much more to see!