

Northumberland Historic District History

Overview of the Northumberland Historic District

The Northumberland Historic District consists of a total of 234 properties which include buildings and sites.

159 of the buildings (shown in **dark blue**) and one site (the market square, today's King Street Park) (shown in **light blue**) contribute to the district's architectural significance, meaning they are part of what makes the district important.

62 of the buildings (shown in **dark pink**) do not contribute to the district's architectural significance, either because they were built after the district's period of significance – that is, the period during which the district's architectural character was established - or because they have been altered to the point where their historic character is no longer evident.

Nine sites (shown in **light pink**) do not contribute to the district's architectural significance because they are sites of demolished buildings.

History of the District

Northumberland was originally platted in 1772 by John Lowden and William Patterson. Part of their plan for the community was a common area or market square, today's King Street Park, which was laid out around 1772 (Bell 1891:515-516) (Figure 1; mapped in **light yellow**). This is the earliest extant property in the district. About one year later, the fledgling town was purchased by Reuben Haines, a brewer from Philadelphia.

The American Revolution saw the abandonment of the town and surrounding areas due to frequent Native American raids. With peace, settlers came back to the town in the 1780s, and it began to grow. The earliest extant building in the district, at 10 King Street, was built around 1790. Eminent scientist Joseph Priestley came to the town in 1794 and built his house and laboratory near the river, completing it around 1797 (National Park Service 1988:8/1-2).

As the dawn of the nineteenth century approached, the town boasted approximately 100 houses (Bell 1891:518); however, mapping the properties in the district with dates of construction between 1750 and 1799 (Figure 2; mapped in **dark yellow**) suggests that many of these buildings may have been replaced later. Around 1800, a market house was built at the market square (Bell 1891:519); it was moved to its current location at 384-386 Water Street around 1867 (Northumberland County Historical Society 2003:4).

The earliest map of the borough dates to 1817, but shows only the street grid and a large open space, likely the market square (Figure 3; Scott 1817). One year after this map was made,

the bridge connecting Northumberland to Shamokin Island and Sunbury beyond, begun in 1812, was completed (Bell 1891:528-531). Mapping the properties within the district by their dates of construction (Figure 4; mapped in pale green) illustrates the growth of the town during this period, the first quarter of the nineteenth century.

Northumberland was incorporated as a borough on January 16, 1829, and the coming of the North Branch Division of the Pennsylvania Canal in the following decade brought some affluence (Bell 1891:533; National Park Service 1988:8/3). Mapping the properties in the district by their dates of construction (Figure 5; mapped in bright green) indicates that the second quarter of the nineteenth century saw a slight building boom, likely corresponding to the canal and the town's growing affluence.

By the 1850s, the canal was superseded by the railroad. The first railroad to reach the borough was the Sunbury & Erie Railroad, which was chartered in 1837. By 1854, it connected Williamsport to Milton, extending from Milton to Northumberland the following year. About one year later, the railroad was extended to Sunbury, its eastern terminus. Located on the southwest side of the borough, along the West Branch Susquehanna River, the railroad was reorganized as the Philadelphia & Erie Railroad Company in 1861. In 1862, it was leased to the Pennsylvania Railroad and by 1864, its route from Erie to Sunbury was complete and open to traffic. In 1907, the Pennsylvania Railroad bought the line outright (Black 1998:4). This line is currently owned by Norfolk Southern (PennDOT 2019).

The second railroad to serve the borough was the Lackawanna & Bloomsburg Railroad, which connected Northumberland to Scranton and which was located on the southeastern side of the borough, along the North Branch Susquehanna River. It also connected to the Sunbury & Erie Railroad in the borough (*The Sunbury American* 1860a:3). Originally, its tracks were located in the middle of North Way, today's Priestley Avenue. Incorporated in 1852, the railroad became part of the Delaware, Lackawanna & Western Railroad in 1873 (Graham 1938:54; Hopkins 1874; Bell 1891:328). After 1948, the train no longer ran down current Priestley Avenue, instead running on the tracks the Pennsylvania Railroad had built on the old canal bed (Northumberland County Historical Society 2003:3). In 1984, the line became the North Shore Railroad (*The Daily Item* 1984:8).

With these railroad connections, Northumberland began to grow even faster (County of Northumberland n.d.; Bell 1891:528-531; National Park Service 1988:8/1-2). Mapping the properties in the district by their dates of construction (Figure 6; mapped in dark green) shows the continued growth in the borough during the third quarter of the nineteenth century. Maps from

1858 and 1874 also show the borough's growth, along with railroads that served the borough (Figures 7 and 8; Hopkins 1858; Hopkins 1874).

The last quarter of the nineteenth century saw continued growth within the district, as can be seen when mapping the properties by their dates of construction (Figure 9; mapped in [olive green](#)). This growth can also be seen by examining the United States Geological Survey (USGS) topographical map from 1893 (Figure 10; USGS 1893). It is likely that this continued growth was associated with the sheer number of railroad connections in the area. For example, an 1858 newspaper account noted that, "at Sunbury, it [the Northern Central Railway] will connect with the great Sunbury & Erie Road, extending West, the Philadelphia & Sunbury, extending east, and also by the Sunbury & Erie and Lackawanna & Bloomsburg..." (*The Sunbury American* 1858:2). By 1860, a newspaper account noted that, "the Lackawanna & Bloomsburg Railroad is now in direct connection with the Northern Central at this place [Sunbury] by using the two bridges of the Sunbury & Erie between this [Sunbury] and Northumberland" (*The Sunbury American* 1860b:2). Facilitating Northumberland's connections to the railroads in Sunbury, was the Sunbury and Northumberland Street Railway, which began passenger service in 1890 (Bell 1891:533).

Just after the dawn of the twentieth century, around 1909, the Pennsylvania Railroad and the Northern Central Railway realized that their classification yards at Sunbury, where trains were compiled based on freight destination, were inadequate (*The Lewisburg Chronicle* 1909:1). The decision was made to build new classification yards in Northumberland, and a contract for the new yards was awarded that same year (*The Miltonian* 1909:3). The yards, completed by 1912, were located on the west side of the borough, along the West Branch Susquehanna River (Figures 11 and 12; Forsyth 1911:1; USGS 1943; *The Altoona Times* 1912:10). It appears that the yards' proximity to the western side of the borough encouraged development there (see Figures 10 and 12; USGS 1893 and 1943).

Evidence suggests that the presence of the yards also facilitated further growth in the historic district, as well. Of the 85 properties in the district built between 1900 and 1924, most, 32 (or 37.6%), were built along King Street, approximately four blocks from the classification yards (Figure 13; mapped in [light blue](#)). A plan of the borough's sewer system from 1915 also shows the development within the borough during the first quarter of the twentieth century (Figure 14; Northumberland Borough 1915).

By 1930, the historic district had, for the most part, been built out, as can be seen by mapping the properties built between 1925 and 1930 (Figure 15; mapped in [dark blue](#)) and in a United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) aerial photograph from 1939 (Figure 16; USDA 1939). By that time, the significant architectural character of the district had been established.

Almost no development took place within the borough between ca. 1930 and ca. 1940, during the Great Depression. After ca. 1940, development within the district consisted of mostly infill (Figure 17; mapped in pink) and did not match the earlier character of the district. The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries saw demolition of a very small number of historic buildings within the district.

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