

Travel

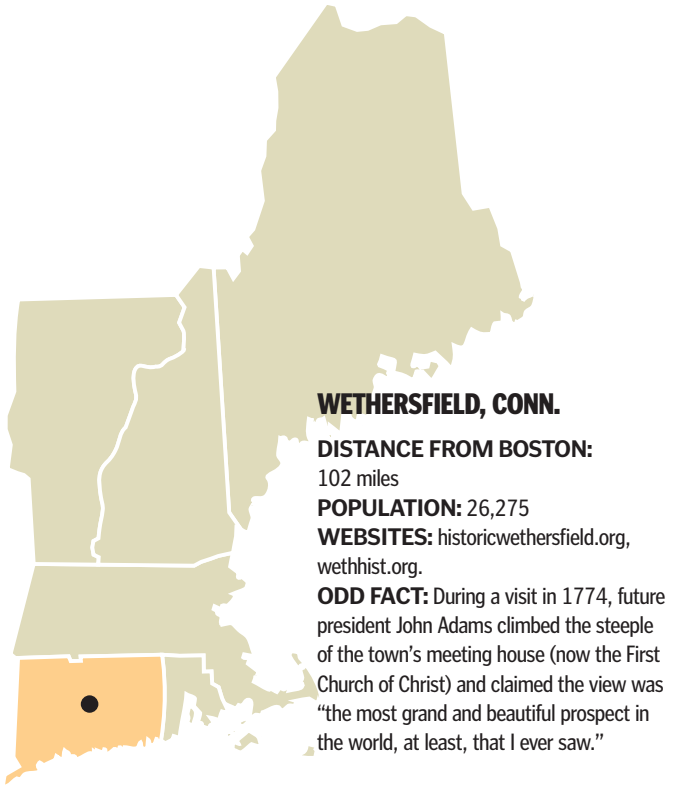
CLOSE-UP ON WETHERSFIELD, CONN.

HISTORIC CHARM

STATE'S FIRST TOWN RETAINS ITS QUIET COLONIAL CHARACTER

BY KARI BODNARCHUK | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

In 1634, a group of Massachusetts colonists settled just south of present-day Hartford, establishing Connecticut's first town. Today, Wethersfield has the largest historic district in the state with more than 1,100 buildings, several dozen of which are open to the public. The Silas Deane Highway bisects town. Get off this main road and you'll find quiet neighborhoods and more than 640 acres of parks to explore. Most visitors stick to the charming village of Old Wethersfield on the east side of town, but don't overlook the parks, nature center, and historic buildings west of "Silas Deane," as the locals call it. This bustling main artery is undergoing a major revitalization, and numerous historic buildings in Old Wethersfield have recently been restored, including the old train depot (now a chocolate café), a tavern, and a private home-turned-bed and breakfast. "I love that people keep these historic buildings intact and restore them with historical accuracy," Governor M. Jodi Rell said when I ran into her at the new J Michaels Tavern. "It lends character to an area."



WETHERSFIELD, CONN.
DISTANCE FROM BOSTON: 102 miles
POPULATION: 26,275
WEBSITES: historicwethersfield.org, wethhist.org.
ODD FACT: During a visit in 1774, future president John Adams climbed the steeple of the town's meeting house (now the First Church of Christ) and claimed the view was "the most grand and beautiful prospect in the world, at least, that I ever saw."

PLAY

When the Connecticut River flooded in 1700, it carved out the **Wethersfield Cove**, which today draws anglers and boaters. Launch your canoe, kayak, motorboat, or sailboat from Wethersfield Cove Park at the end of Main Street and explore the 80-acre cove and the Connecticut River. Head south, and you'll find lots of secluded inlets, perfect for fishing, swimming, and making like Tarzan and Jane on the rope swings.

The 4-mile **Heritage Way Bike Trail** (Wethersfield Parks and Recreation Dept., 860-721-2890, wethersfieldct.com/recreation) connects the town's parks and green spaces, and offers a mix of on- and off-road riding.

Birdwatchers can spot bald eagles at **Wethersfield Meadows** (off the unpaved Great Meadow Road alongside the Connecticut River on the east side of town), where these majestic birds have recently started nesting.

West of Silas Deane, **Mill Woods Park** (154 Prospect St., 860-721-2890) has wooded nature trails, a pond with a small beach and swimming area, tennis courts, and the **Robert Allen Keeney Skate Park**, a concrete playground for skateboarders (local kids raised \$150,000 through grants, donations, and fund-raisers to build the skate park).

Mikey's Place on Garden Street has a dynamite playground for young kids, while local teens hang out at the little-known **basketball court** behind the Keeney Memorial Cultural Center.

Visitors can stroll along the 80-acre Wethersfield Cove, a favorite spot for fishing, swimming, and boating.



PHOTOS BY WENDY MAEDA/GLOBE STAFF

SPEND

Since 1820, **Comstock Ferre & Co.** (263 Main St., 860-571-6590, comstock-ferre.com, closed Mondays in winter) has been supplying seeds for gardeners and farmers worldwide. It can get you started on more than 700 varieties of perennials, annuals, vegetables, herbs, and heirloom greens, not to mention its own sauce-and-slice plum tomato.

The historic Comstock building also houses a knitting shop and a gift shop, **Heart of the Country** (860-257-0366, closed Sundays). The latter sells one-of-a-kind jackets made from recycled wool sweaters, vintage china and jewelry, Vera Bradley bags, whimsical crafts by New England artisans, and items that suggest you're no longer entirely in Red Sox Nation: New York Yankees patio lights mingle with Sox nutcrackers and calendars.

Antiques on Main (167 Main St., 860-721-0663, closed Monday and Tuesday) looks small from the outside, but has four sizable rooms that are chockablock with everything from high-quality antiques to kitschy collectibles.

Next door, in a restored 1790 farmhouse, **Neill Walsh Jewelry** (125 Main St., 860-721-9256, neillwalsh.com, closed Sunday and Monday) creates custom jewelry and sells everything from \$35 silver earrings to high-end platinum and gold pieces with precious stones.

Up on Silas Deane, **Omni Comics and Cards** (732 Silas Deane Highway, 860-571-0138, omni.ribhus.com) sells comic books, sports cards, and memorabilia for kids to serious collectors, while **Wooden Toy** (1275 Silas Deane Highway, 860-529-1945, thewoodentoy.com) has more than 8,000 specialty toy items, including games, books, puzzles, dolls, hand puppets, arts and crafts items, and science kits.



Comstock Ferre & Co. sells a variety of flower and vegetable seeds.

PARTY

Wethersfield residents hit the town on Thursday nights. Many head to the cozy pub at **J Michaels Tavern** for its signature Harpoon-brewed IPA, excellent wine selection, and chummy atmosphere (you'll know half the townsfolk before you leave here). Others go to the **Wood-n-Tap Bar & Grill** (12 Town Line Road, Rocky Hill, 860-571-9444, woodntap.com) on the Wethersfield-Rocky Hill line, which is known for its late-night food (it serves "bar bites" until 12:30 a.m.) and is elbow-to-elbow on weekends.

FUEL

Eateries in the village of Old Wethersfield have an intimate, welcoming feel. Here, you can mingle with the locals and pay small-town prices for homemade fare. Many shops have outdoor cafes in warmer months.

Start your day at **Patty Cakes Bakery, Bagels & More** (227 Main St., 860-529-6451; bagel, 79 cents-\$6.99; coffee, \$1.25-\$3), which sells a downright good, eye-opening brew, plus New York-style bagels, Italian pastries, and stuffed breads.

The Spicy Green Bean Deli (285 Main St., 860-563-3100, spicygreenbean.com, closed weekends, most sandwiches \$5.50-\$7.95) draws a steady stream of lunchtime diners who come for the seriously "overstuffed" sandwiches, and homemade soups and chowders —the popular shepherd's pie chowder has a tasty zing.

Paula Rubinow, owner of **The Main Street Creamery and Cafe** (271 Main St., 860-529-0509, mainstreetcreamery.com, cones, \$1.75-\$4.50), serves more than 50 flavors of homemade ice cream and sorbet, including a treat for pooches —vanilla soft serve with a milk bone. Her dad, Sonny, creates hand-sliced corned beef and pastrami sandwiches that draw patrons from afar.

Mainly Tea (221 Main St., 860-529-9517) serves afternoon tea, complete with scones and finger sandwiches, in an elegant parlor from 2 p.m. daily. The **Narcissus Chocolate Cafe** (7 Railroad Place, 860-436-9311, narcissuschocolatecafe.com, free Wi-Fi) opened six weeks ago in the renovated 1872 train depot — look for the bright red building next to the train tracks on Church Street — and serves all things chocolate. Need I say more?

Village Pizza (233 Main St., 860-563-1513, villagepizzau.com) and **Vito's Pizzeria** (673 Silas Deane Highway, 860-563-3333, vitosct.com) vie for the best pizza in town, but for fine dining, head to **J Michaels Tavern** (222 Main St., 860-257-0700), a newly opened restaurant in a beautifully restored 1787 Georgian and Federal-style building. Here, chef Michael DiPiano offers classic American cuisine with a delectable twist — try the grilled salmon with raspberry-basil cream sauce — while his down-to-earth Bostonian parents play host and schmooze with guests.

Restaurants along the Silas Deane Highway offer Thai, Italian, Chinese, Japanese, and American, but **Sake Cafe** (1105 Silas Deane Highway, 860-721-1618), in a nondescript strip mall, stands out. It has a dynamite sushi bar, a restaurant, and a hibachi grill, where chefs entertain you while preparing your meal (watch out for the "flaming volcano").

DO

Stop at the visitors center in the **Keeney Memorial Cultural Center** (200 Main St., 860-529-7161) for information on guided and self-guided walking tours of Old Wethersfield, and on special events like the county fair and kitchen tours, which feature hands-on demonstrations of 17th-century cooking techniques.

The **Wethersfield Museum**, located in the cultural center, has two fascinating exhibits: "Legendary People, Ordinary Lives," which highlights the history of the town and key residents, and "Connecticut Rocks," a kid-friendly, hands-on exhibit that blends factual information on local geology, dinosaurs, human settlement, and land use with fun, interactive elements.

Visit the **Webb-Deane-Stevens Museum** (211 Main St., 860-529-0612, webb-deane-stevens.org; closed Jan.-April) to tour four 18th-century homes, which feature outstanding furniture and decorative arts displays, and offer a peek at how middle- and upper-class families lived in the 1700s and 1800s. Yes, George Washington really did sleep here: He spent five nights at the Joseph Webb House in 1781. While here, he met with French general Comte de Rochambeau to plan the battle of Yorktown, a military campaign that brought the Revolutionary War to an end. See the room where Washington stayed.

At the family-oriented **Eleanor Buck Wolf Nature Center** in Mill Woods Park (156 Prospect St., 860-529-3075; closed Sunday and Monday), you can meet eastern box turtles, an African gray parrot, pythons, South American chinchillas, Australian cockatiels, ferrets, and a bunny named Miss Thumper, among other local and exotic animals. The small center includes a re-created log cabin.



A bearded dragon is among the many local and exotic animals found at the Eleanor Buck Wolf Nature Center.