

# 5. CULTURAL & HISTORIC RESOURCES

## 1. Summary & Key Facts

Sheffield, in the heart of the Housatonic River Valley of the southern Berkshires, was incorporated in 1733. It is the oldest town in Berkshire County, with Ashley Falls being the original village settlement in the township.

The interval between the Taconic range on the west and the Berkshire barrier on the east was originally occupied by a group of Indians belonging to the Mahican tribe. In 1724, for three barrels of cider, thirty quarts of rum and 460 pounds, the Indians conveyed a tract of their land to a group of Hampshire County residents, who divided this tract into two townships, each seven miles square.

The present town of Sheffield was a large part of the lower Housatonic township. The first white settler was Matthew Noble of Westfield, who arrived along in the fall in 1725 to begin the first settlement in the Berkshires. In January 1733 the second town meeting voted to hire a preacher and to build a meetinghouse. On June 22 of that year the town was incorporated.

—Lillian E. Preiss,  
quoted in the 1987 Sheffield Open Space and Recreation Plan

Thus began Sheffield's rich rural history, which included drafting of the Sheffield Declaration at Colonel John Ashley's house and Shay's Rebellion, a farmer's revolt against heavy taxes fought near the Egremont line four years after the Revolutionary War.

The history of Sheffield in many ways epitomizes the small New England town experience that has remained so powerful in the nation's imagination. The town saw decades of rich agricultural production and participated in early water-powered industrialization, with paper, saw, marble, grist mills, built throughout the town, particularly on Mill Pond and at the falls in Ashley Falls. Marble and limestone were quarried, trees harvested for charcoal and processed into lime in kilns like those on Lime Kiln Road. Two covered bridges were built to span the Housatonic and provide access to town for farms in the eastern portion of Sheffield. Sheffield became a commercial center for these early industries.

In the years leading up to the Civil War, Sheffield was a station on the Underground Railway. After the war, new railroads made the countryside accessible to city dwellers and Sheffield, with other towns in western Massachusetts and northwestern Connecticut, became a fashionable summer resort area. Large inns/hotels in town catered to travelers and spas built near springs on the east side of town offered health cures, including the so-called Soda Spring Farm on Home Road. A lecture hall (Dewey Hall) was built in the town center to provide improving amusement for the populace.

Sheffield’s population clustered around the town center, the village of Ashley Falls, and other clusters around the Bow Wow and Clayton Road areas.

In the mid 1800s Sheffield was one of the first communities to embrace the spreading “Good Village” movement, which included planting a double row of elms along the main street, trees that succumbed to disease in the 1930s. Sheffield’s Great Elm, the tree that had stood for hundreds of years at the corner of Main and Silver Streets, whose picture is on the town seal, perished too.

Throughout Sheffield’s 270-year history, the community has maintained much of its rich historical character and agricultural heritage.

Building on the Chautauqua heritage of Dewey Hall, Sheffield has increasingly become a locus for cultural activities, including a nationally recognized choral festival, a respected summerstock theater company, art league and a landscape (both natural and agricultural) and antiques industry that draw people from around the world and the Mark Dewey Research Center which has a growing clientele.

Key facts in Sheffield history	
Matthew Noble House built	1726
Incorporated	1733
Col. Ashley House built	1735
Parish Church built	1760
Sheffield Declaration	1773
Dan Raymond House	1774
Stone Store built	1834
Dewey Hall built	1887
Berkshire School founded	1907

## 2. Historic Resources

The concentration of historic buildings, mills, cemeteries, and public spaces is particularly noticeable in the two villages of Sheffield Center and Ashley Falls and in the area north of Sheffield Center called Sheffield Plain. Both villages are designated on the State Historic Register. Sheffield Center and the Sheffield Plain are also listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Map 3 illustrates these historic districts as well as other important historic and cultural sites throughout Sheffield.

**Sheffield Center Historic District** — This historic district was entered on the National Register in 1989. It roughly follows Route 7 (Main Street) from north of Miller Avenue to south of Root Lane. It also includes a portion of Maple Avenue. There are approximately [ ] acres and 109 buildings in the district. This district is the traditional center of Sheffield and is the location of many of the first homes, religious institutions and public buildings in the community. The Old Parish Church (1760), Dewey Hall (1887), The Stone Store (1834) and the Dan Raymond House (1774) and adjacent historic complex are among

those open to the public. While the character of the village has changed over the years, it still serves as the central community gathering place, and many of its historic and cultural attributes are still present.

**Sheffield Plain Historic District** — This historic district was added to the National Register in 1988. It roughly covers one-half mile along Route 7 from north of Cook Road to one-half mile south. The district encompasses approximately 270 acres and 23 buildings. The district includes the Matthew Noble House, the oldest house in Sheffield. Historically, this area was principally agricultural, but it also included various businesses, including a stagecoach stop and inn, a clock and watch-maker’s shop, stone store, cider mill and a tannery.

**Ashley Falls Historic District** — This district was included on the State Register in 1989. It is centered on the village green and extends out to include approximately 678 acres of land, with 60 homes, two churches, the last one-room school house in the township (now closed) and the oldest grist mill. The district includes the Colonel John Ashley House (1735) on Cooper Hill Road, the oldest home in Ashley Falls, listed on the National Register individually in 1975. The Colonel John Ashley House is owned by The Trustees of Reservations and is open to the public. The Ashley Falls Historical District has adopted preservation guidelines. It is the only one of the Historic Districts to do so.

The Sheffield Historical Commission inventoried 200 existing buildings, primarily private homes, built between 1735 and 1875, and is planning to update that inventory through 1900 for a total of 326 buildings. The architectural styles most represented are Greek Revival, Georgian and Federal. The main building (1904) of the Option Institute is an excellent example of the Arts and Crafts shingle style. The Old Turnpike Inn off Clayton Rd. in Ashley Falls is also individually listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

#### **Age distribution of Sheffield’s historical buildings**

<b>Time frame built</b>	<b>Number of Units</b>
1730-1749	11
1750-1799	39
1800- 1849	102
1850-1900	174

*Source: Sheffield Historical Commission and Sheffield Historical Society*

**Sheffield Historical Society.** The Sheffield Historical Society was organized in 1972 by a group of residents who sought to preserve the story of the oldest town in Berkshire County. It is a volunteer driven, nonprofit corporation, actively involved in local historical research that also offers a variety of educational programs for every age group. The Society’s goal is to stimulate interest in local history and to interpret the town’s past. It collects and preserves records and materials relevant to the town, which includes the hamlets of Sheffield and Ashley Falls, exhibits them and makes them available for exhibits, research and educational programs. It maintains several historic structures. The 1774 Dan Raymond House is both a period museum and houses the Society’s main office. Other buildings on the campus are the 1820 Parker Hall Law Office; a 19th century Carriage

House that contains an exhibit of agricultural and related tools; an 1876 brick Learning Center which was an early Sheffield greenhouse; an unusual early 19th century double chamber Greek Revival Smokehouse; the early 19th century Hatter's Shop which now contains the collection of the Mark Dewey Research Center; and a circa 1834 commercial building, known locally as the Old Stone Store, which has undergone restoration to serve as a museum, community information center and artifact storage area. The campus is located in the heart of the Sheffield Center Historic District at 159-161 Main Street.

**Colonel John Ashley House.** Located on Cooper Hill Road in Ashley Falls, the house was acquired in 1972 by The Trustees of Reservations and is adjacent to their Bartholomew's Cobble property. The house itself has a rich history. In 1735, at the age of twenty-five, Colonel John Ashley built this house for his Dutch bride, Hannah Hogeboom. The Ashley House was the center of social, economic, and political life in south Berkshire County in the eighteenth century. The famous Sheffield Declaration, a petition against British tyranny and a manifesto for individual rights, was drafted in the upstairs study of the house and published in 1773. The cause for abolishing slavery in America was strengthened in the celebrated 1781 Massachusetts state court battle that freed the Ashleys' slave, Elizabeth Freeman (nicknamed "Mumbet") under the new state constitution. The house was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1975, and exemplifies early 18th century architecture. House furnishings and items date from the 18th and early 19th centuries. Guided tours are offered during the summer season.

Several publications about Mumbet are available for purchase at the house and from The Trustees of Reservations offices and more information is available on her from PBS's *Africans in America* at [www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part2/2p39.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part2/2p39.html) or from [Mumbet.com](http://Mumbet.com) as well as publications: *Mumbet: Folklore and Fact* by Arthur Zilversmit- article in Berkshire History, Spring 1971, Vol. I, No. 1; *The Ashleys - A Pioneer Berkshire Family* by Arthur C. Chase- booklet published for the Colonel Ashley House; *Sheffield, Frontier Town* by Lillian E. Preiss in conjunction with the Sheffield Historical Society; and *Elizabeth Mumbet Freeman: Unsung Heroine and the Bill of Rights*.

### **Cemeteries**

Sheffield's historic cemeteries, both public and private, are distributed throughout town and have had much written about them. The Sheffield Historical Society has thorough documentation on each.

### **Benefits of Sheffield's Historic Nature**

The everyday experience of history in Sheffield, prompted by our older buildings, village centers and rural settings, is one of the most important reasons many people live in the community. It is also one of Sheffield's greatest economic assets. Tourism has been one of Sheffield's most consistent economic contributors since the arrival of the railroad in the 1840's. However, as the community grows and changes, the tangible evidence of our history is threatened. The impact of high-speed highway traffic, utility and infrastructure changes (such as electrical wires, road materials and road widths), incompatible architecture, fragmented land uses, and other issues need to be carefully evaluated and addressed through effective land use planning.

### **3. Cultural Resources**

Sheffield is fortunate in having numerous cultural resources, including those listed below and those more difficult to quantify, in the antiques industry and the landscape and rural heritage that provide support and a foundation for the cultural institutions, encouraging visitors to stay and explore the area.

#### **CULTURAL ORGANIZATIONS AND RESOURCES**

**Barrington Stage Company.** Founded in 1995, BSC is a nonprofit professional theater company located in the center of Sheffield. BSC produces work from repertory, develops new plays and musicals, and looks for ways to bring new audiences into the theater. It offers programs for aspiring drama students and puts on a Youth Theater production, in addition to its Main Stage and Stage II productions. During its summer season, BSC is in residence at the Consolati Performing Arts Center on the Southern Berkshire Regional School District campus, with two stages, classrooms, rehearsal space, concession and gift shops. Off-season productions are at BSC's Studio Space in the center of Sheffield. The year-round staff of seven swells to as many as 100 in the summer and in 2003, its Main Stage productions were seen by more than 17,000 people. BSC is a major regional theater and heavily markets its work bringing busloads of theater-goers to Sheffield and the region during the season contributing significantly to the local economy.

**Berkshire Choral Festival.** Founded in 1982 by John Hoyt Stoke, a New York City and Sheffield resident, the BCF is a nonprofit educational organization, which each summer brings together 1,600 choristers from the United States and around the world for a singing week in which they rehearse and perform the great choral masterpieces in choruses that number 225. The singers rehearse five hours every day to prepare for concerts with the Springfield Symphony, leading soloists and the most distinguished choral conductors. The choristers also attend classes in a variety of musical subjects taught by a professional staff. Five of those weeks take place on the campus of Berkshire School, the other weeks occur in Canterbury, England and Salzburg, Austria. In their off-time choristers explore the local attractions, adding to Sheffield's and the area's economy. BCF also heavily markets its work and with over 6,000 alumni in 2003 and an average of 4,000 people attending concerts each year, contributes significantly to the local economy.

**Sheffield Art League.** SAL is a regional art league with a number of annual shows held at Dewey Hall in Sheffield, with outreach and education programs for local and regional artists and students.

**Berkshire School.** Founded in 1907, this private preparatory school is also home to the Berkshire Choral Festival in the summer time and the skating rink and other facilities are a resource for the community.

#### **Cultural Venues**

There are a number of cultural venues in Sheffield, many serving multiple roles. Some of those venues include: Dewey Hall, a historic 1887 stone building in the Center of Sheffield which is owned and operated by the Sheffield Friendly Union, and hosts the Sheffield Art League summer art shows, the Sheffield Senior Center, numerous community events and is

available for rental by organizations and the public; the Consolati Performing Arts Center, the auditorium at the Southern Berkshire Regional School District Campus on Berkshire School Road, used by the Barrington Stage Company for its performances during the summer season and by the Town for its Annual Town Meetings; the Sheffield Grange on Route 7, just north of the center of Sheffield, owned and operated by the Sheffield Grange which holds its meeting there, in addition to renting the building out for monthly contra dances, for the Berkshire Children’s Chorus, regular church meetings and community events; the Old Parish Church, whose rooms are used for the monthly Sheffield Historical Society meetings and community events; Tango Argentino has in recent years used space at Christ Church Episcopal for its lessons and dances.

### **Other Cultural Activities**

Many town and regional organizations hold events throughout the year. The Sheffield Association and other groups sponsor an annual “Sheffield in Celebration” the weekend or two following Labor Day, featuring traditional fairs on the Green in Sheffield and Ashley Falls. The Ashley Falls Village Improvement Society began sponsoring the Ashley Falls Fair in the mid-1990s and the Sheffield Association, the Celebration in 2000. Old Parish Church holds an annual quilt show and Christ Church has an annual fair.

□ *Please see Map # 3:  
‘Town of Sheffield  
Cultural & Historical Resources’  
behind the MAPS tab.*

# CULTURAL & HISTORIC RESOURCES ACTION PLAN

The purpose of this plan is to present a vision for Sheffield's historic and cultural resources that reflects the wishes of the community as accurately as possible, and to outline various strategies for achieving that vision.

## **Overall Goal**

**Enhance and preserve the historic resources and landscape essential to Sheffield's character and economy. Develop Sheffield as a cultural center, raising visitors' and the community awareness of these resources.**

Sheffield's history and its cultural attractions and institutions are an integral part of the fabric of the community and Sheffield's and the region's economy. As the oldest town in the county, with many historical firsts, Sheffield has a wealth of resources well worth protecting, and its proximity to major metropolitan areas of New York and Boston provide a built-in audience for historic and cultural attractions. Resources range from historic buildings, landscapes and a leading regional genealogy research facility to regional theaters, world-renowned choral festival and an antiques industry that draws people from all over the world.

## **Recommendation 1. Preserve and promote Sheffield's cultural & historic heritage, landscape and attractions.**

- a. **Inventory and catalog Sheffield's Heritage Landscapes and establish priorities for preservation of historical homes, landscapes and sites.**
- b. **Establish a historic/architectural sign program to identify historic resources and create a historic/architectural 'trail' that enhances connections between historic/architectural places and settings throughout the township.**
- c. **Establish a historic/architectural 'walking tour' in the town centers.**
- d. **Enhance the covered bridge experience by connecting it to the town, beautifying the picnic area and improving river access.**

- e. **Consider design guidelines and performance standards for new buildings and related improvements in historic and culturally significant areas such as Sheffield Center and Sheffield Plain historic districts.**
- f. **Consider a demolition delay by-law to provide time for the preservation or relocation of historic resources.**
- g. **Secure wherever possible public access to scenic areas and historic sites.**
- h. **Work with local schools to increase awareness of scenic areas and historic resources.**
- i. **Consider creating a brochure of historic and cultural attractions for use locally and for visitors.**
- j. **Work with Sheffield's cultural groups to promote Sheffield as a cultural destination.**
- k. **Consider creating a web page to promote Sheffield's historic and cultural attractions.**
- l. **Consider establishing a Historic District for the Sheffield Village Center and Sheffield Plain areas.**

**Recommendation 2. Pursue funding for the enhancement and acquisition of significant cultural and historic resources.**

Effectively protecting, managing and marketing historic and cultural resources will require funding for the purchase of properties or easements or creation of promotional materials. The fiscal constraints and limited resources of town government do not currently provide a viable opportunity for preserving other than the most significant resources nor for creating a comprehensive marketing strategy. The town, historical, conservation and cultural organizations must work cooperatively and be resourceful to leverage additional funding sources.

- a. **Continue to seek historical preservation grants.**

- b. Work with private conservation and historic preservation groups to acquire historic properties and conservation and historic preservation restrictions.**
- c. Explore partnerships with the Berkshire Visitor's Bureau, Southern Berkshire Chamber of Commerce and Berkshire Chamber of Commerce to fund promotional planning and materials.**
- d. Explore economic development funding through the Southern Berkshire Community Development Corporation.**
- e. Explore partnerships with the Massachusetts Cultural Council and Historic Massachusetts for private or government grant funding.**
- f. Consider adopting the Community Preservation Act and/or a transfer tax program to generate funds to protect historic and open space resources.**
- g. Explore resources available through the Upper Housatonic National Heritage Area.**