



Winchendon, Massachusetts: A Community Asset Story

*Connecting the Town's Future with a Legacy of Land,
Labor, and Commitment to Community*

July 2021

*Created by the Institute for Economic and
Racial Equity for HEAL Winchendon*

Brandeis

THE HELLER SCHOOL
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Contents

Introduction	1
The Land of the Pennacook and Nipmuc Tribes	2
The Pennacooks	2
The Nipmucs	3
Winchendon’s Past	7
“Ipswich Canada”	7
Winchendon’s Present	10
From “Toy Town” to “Bedroom Town”	10
Winchendon’s Growing Community	12
Ensuring an Equitable Future with HEAL Winchendon	14

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Introduction

Winchendon is a rural town in north-central Massachusetts, home to approximately 10,000 residents and 3,500 households. The town is located 30 minutes from Keene, NH, to the northwest and Fitchburg, MA, to the southeast. The land of Winchendon has been home to many groups of people over the years, from the Pennacook and Nipmuc tribes to the English settlers who arrived in the 1600s. As Winchendon transformed from an agrarian society to an industrial hub, European immigrants moved to the area for factory jobs that were made available during the Industrial Revolution. When factories in the area closed, many community members moved away in search of work.

Today, Winchendon is home to multigenerational, established families as well as newcomers who arrive with different ideas, traditions, and contributions. The natural friction created by these changes is magnified by underlying conditions affecting all families: a lack of quality jobs, limited transportation options, food insecurity, and a rising cost of living. This look into Winchendon's past reveals three major assets, or strengths, woven throughout the town's history: a deep connection to the land, an entrepreneurial ethic, and a strong commitment to community. These are the assets that both longstanding community members and newcomers value about Winchendon. They are also the assets that families can draw from as they come together to address the structural challenges facing the community. Winchendon's legacy of land, labor, and commitment to community lays the groundwork for collective action and visioning for a bright future.

Commitment to Community

In 1907, the town wrote to Andrew Carnegie asking for \$25,000 to build a new library. However, Carnegie rejected the request, sticking to his original offer of \$12,500. Two years later, a prominent local businessman, Charles L. Beals, stepped forward and offered the money needed to establish a new library site in Winchendon.¹

The Beals Memorial Library that stands in Winchendon today provides a gathering space for Winchendon residents and multiple resources for community members. In 2018, the Beals Memorial Library was renovated to ensure that all residents of Winchendon could access the library regardless of ability. This renovation and other community assets like the YMCA and continued support for HEAL are possible thanks to support from the Robinson-Broadhurst Foundation, whose founders, Avery and Anna Robinson, were born and raised in Winchendon.²

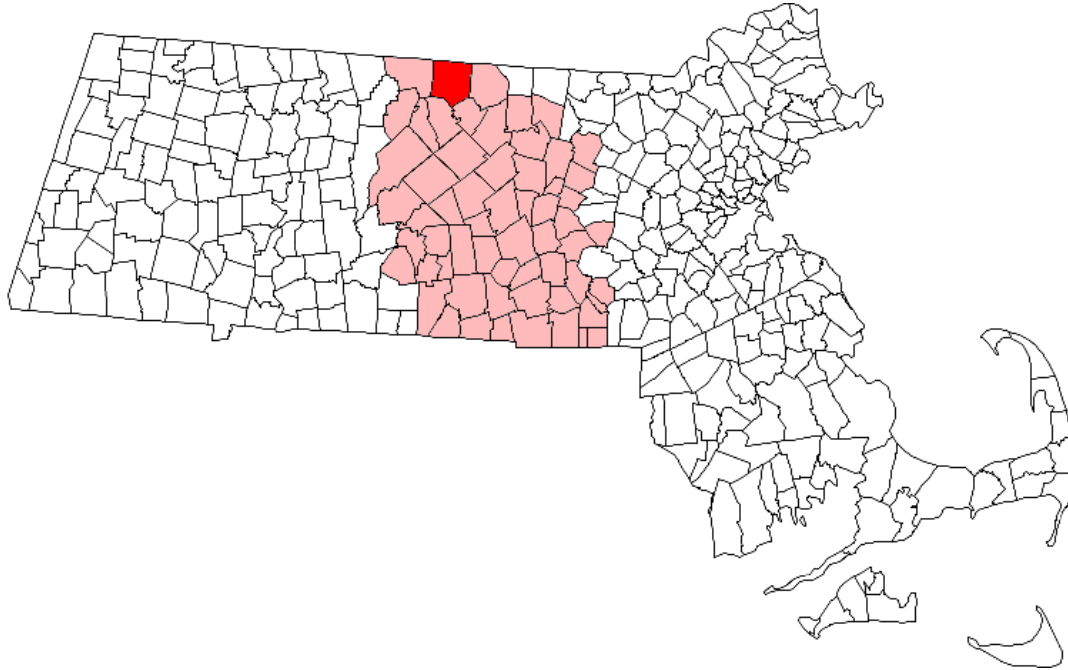
This community asset story was developed by researchers at Brandeis University's [Institute for Economic and Racial Equity](#)³ as part of a three-year evaluation partnership with [HEAL Winchendon](#)⁴. HEAL Winchendon is a coalition of local organizations driving upstream change and imagining a better future for the town. The purpose of this community portrait is to inspire reflection and dialogue by establishing a connection between Winchendon's past, present, and future, including different types of human, social, financial, and community assets.

¹https://be3c9d78-52f6-4d76-98a3-6ffd14fee2f6.filesusr.com/ugd/3d3991_31a7442c5aae487c92672c31a0c425ba.pdf

²<https://robinsonbroadhurst.org/files/2016/10/robinson-broadhurst-history.pdf>

³<https://heller.brandeis.edu/iere/>

⁴<https://healwinchendon.org>



[Winchendon, MA Highlight](#) by Justin H. Petrosek, CC BY-SA 3.0

Above: *The town of Winchendon (in bright red) in relation to the state of Massachusetts and the Central Massachusetts region (in light red).*

The Land of the Pennacook and Nipmuc Tribes

This community portrait begins by acknowledging that the land Winchendon is built on was originally part of the territories of the Pennacook and Nipmuc tribes. They were the original inhabitants and stewards of the region. Their history is part of Winchendon's history. The Pennacook and Nipmuc tribes' legacy creates a historical thread to Winchendon residents' current connection to the land, and suggests that Winchendon residents have always leaned on the land and its natural resources to support physical, mental, spiritual, and financial well-being.

The Pennacooks⁵

The [Pennacook people](#) were fisherfolk, farmers, and hunter-gatherers. They erected villages on the Merrimack River, along whose banks the women grew maize, corn, and squash. At its height, the Pennacook tribe numbered approximately 12,000 people spread across thirty villages. In the late 1560s, European diseases brought over by arriving settlers, such as typhus, smallpox, measles, influenza, and diphtheria, decimated the Pennacook tribe. By the time the tribe began having regular interactions with the English (i.e., after the settlement of Plymouth, MA, in 1620), the Pennacooks had already lost 75% of their population, leaving roughly 2,500 people.

⁵. <https://www.legendsofamerica.com/pennacook-tribe/>

The first meetings between the Pennacooks and the English were largely peaceful. However, after the Pequot War in 1637, which resulted in the massacre and defeat of the Pequot tribe, English settlers became more hostile and aggressive. In the years following, English- and Mohawk-led attacks, epidemics, the tribe's participation in King Phillip's War to combat increasing settler encroachment on Pennacook lands, allyship with the French, and inter-tribal wars resulted in the tribe's population falling by over half. By the early 18th century, the remaining Pennacooks had mostly joined the Abenaki tribe and relocated to Canada.

The Nipmucs⁶

The [Nipmucs](#) lived in the same region as the Pennacooks and used the land in a similar fashion, hunting, gathering, and farming. Contact between the English settlers and the Nipmuc tribe began almost immediately after the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth in 1620, due to the proximity of Nipmuc land to the Boston harbor. Most of the 5,000 to 6,000 Nipmucs at that time lived along the multiple rivers in the area. Relations were initially friendly, with a Nipmuc man, Acquittimaug, even walking all the way to Boston with corn for the starving settlers.

The English initially acquired lands that belonged to the Nipmucs through formal purchases and treaties, including the Lancaster Purchase (1643), the Tantiisque Deed (1644), and the Eliot and Brookfield Purchases (1655). While these treaties depleted the Nipmucs' land, [aggressive informal settlement stole even more](#): Settlers took the best lands along the rivers for themselves, leaving the Nipmuc tribe facing great food insecurity.⁷

In the 1640s, Reverend John Eliot, a Puritan preacher, began introducing the Nipmucs to Christianity. He established "praying plantations," towns in which Native people were inculcated in English and Christian ways. Nipmucs who voluntarily joined these praying villages did so for multiple reasons, including protection from Mohawk attacks, basic economic survival, and education. Nipmuc Christians became known as "praying Indians" and set up other praying towns further west.

Relations between the English and the Nipmucs became increasingly hostile as English settlers continually took Nipmuc land by force. When war broke out in 1675 between the English and Philip, the Wampanoag leader, the praying Indians fought on the side of the English but were later treated as enemies and prisoners of war by their former allies. When King Philip's War ended, they were released to four towns. The Nipmucs who had fought against the English were sold into slavery or killed; those who escaped went into hiding, moved to Canada, or joined other tribes. Today, there are several Nipmuc bands in Massachusetts but no organized tribe.

⁶<https://www.nipmucnation.org/our-history>

⁷https://westbrookfield.org/?page_id=76

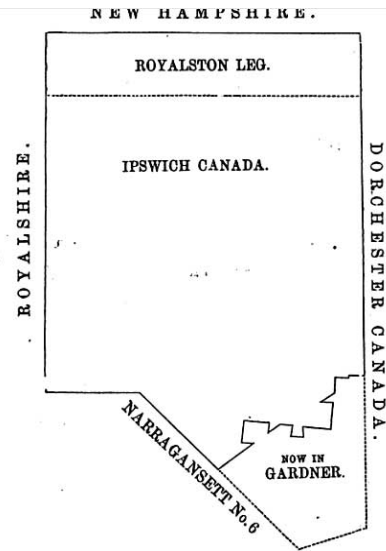


For Reflection and Dialogue

- How far back are you able to trace your ancestral lineage to the town of Winchendon?
- Does connecting to this history shift the way you think about honoring your own connection to the land?
- What are some ways that you and/or HEAL Winchendon can inspire people to care for the land and foster a greater sense of place and ecological well-being?
- A violent colonial history resulted in Winchendon's present population. How can current residents ensure that this history is not forgotten?
- As Winchendon becomes increasingly diverse, how can you write a new history that is welcoming and inclusive of newcomers?

Photo by HEAL Winchendon.

Winchendon's Past

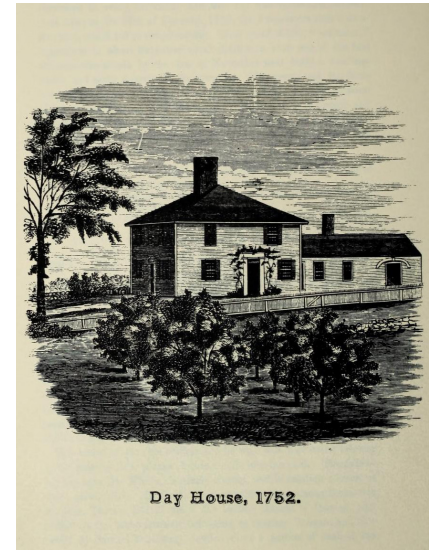


Left: Ipswich Canada, 1785

Adapted from Abijah Marvin's History of the town of Winchendon (Worcester County, Mass.) from the grant of Ipswich Canada, in 1735, to the present time, first published in 1868. Retrieved from toytownweb.com

Right: The Richard Day house, built in 1752, hosted Winchendon's first town meeting⁸

Abijah Marvin (1868). Retrieved from archive.org



"Ipswich Canada"⁹

In 1735, the United States House of Representatives granted a swath of land to soldiers who had taken part in the 1690 expeditions to capture Canada. The land, called "[Ipswich Canada](#)," is where Winchendon currently sits. The first settlers arrived in Ipswich Canada in 1752.

The residents of Ipswich Canada constantly feared attacks by Native American tribes. These fears influenced local architecture, with residents building a number of blockhouses. Despite these fears, no tribe engaged in hostilities with the settlers.

In 1764, Ipswich Canada residents petitioned the General Court of Massachusetts to be incorporated as "Epesberry." However, the Court responded with the name "Winchendon," and the residents accepted the change. During this time, about two hundred people lived in town. By 1800, the town had about 20 two-story houses built by local craftsmen. As more settlers moved into the area and technology shifted, Winchendon and its industries and reputation also experienced significant change.

Winchendon: Industrial-Strength Manufacturing Hub

[Agriculture](#) was the main industry in Winchendon until the 1830s.¹⁰ As manufacturing became more important, however, people moved to be near the Millers River, where there were opportunities to earn more money by extracting energy from water. This, coupled with the fact that better and more fertile lands opened in the West, hastened the decline of agriculture as a major industry in Winchendon.

Slowly, Winchendon became a manufacturing hub. The [railroad lines](#) that ran through Winchendon provided important access to markets and expanded local businesses' reach.¹¹ Town residents used the [Millers River to power the transformation of logs](#) into wooden shingles and cotton into textiles.¹² By the middle of the 19th century, woodworking was the dominant industry in Winchendon, and Winchendon

⁸ <https://www.townofwinchendon.com/our-history/pages/village-development>

⁹ <https://www.townofwinchendon.com/our-history>

¹⁰ <https://www.sec.state.ma.us/mhc/mhpdf/regionalreports/CentralMA.pdf>

¹¹ <https://www.mass.gov/doc/winchendon/download>

¹² <https://www.townofwinchendon.com/our-history>

was the [state leader in the production of wooden tubs and pails](#).¹³ Building on Winchendon's robust wood manufacturing industry, Morton E. Converse and his uncle, Alfred C. Converse, [founded the Converse Toy and Woodenware Company in 1883](#).¹⁴

The company made a variety of toys, including Noah's Arks, doll furniture, hobby horses, building blocks, and farm houses (see picture below). So many toys were produced in Winchendon that it became known as "[Toy Town](#)."¹⁵ Spurring [Winchendon's strength in manufacturing](#) were local men such as Baxter D. Whitney and Elisha Murdock, who invented a number of machines that helped launch the woodworking and metalworking industries in Winchendon.¹⁶



Above: Toy barn with animals made by Morton E. Converse & Company.

Photo by Jim Sneed. Retrieved from oldwoodtoys.com

Winchendon once produced such a large volume of shingles that it was known as "Shingletown."

In addition to the manufacturing of wood products and metalwork, [Winchendon was also known for its textile business during the Industrial Revolution](#).¹⁷ Prior to the Industrial Revolution, it was often considered a woman's job to spin yarn and weave cloth at home. The Industrial Revolution mechanized these processes and moved these roles away from the home. While spinning and weaving work still belonged to women, there was a [shift in women's relationships to home and work](#) as women began to acquire more formal paid employment.¹⁸

Many women found new employment in large factories, while others worked with manufacturers to create parts of a finished product in their homes. Women who did home work in this latter fashion [caned and painted chairs and produced clothing for distribution in the South](#), among other tasks.¹⁹ Of course, while women found new roles outside of the home, the work they continued to do to care for their families did not change. Winchendon women's roles as unpaid caregivers in addition to their paid jobs was crucial to building and sustaining Winchendon's economy; their contributions are important to highlight in relation to the commonly held narrative of male industry and labor.

Eventually, the years of high demand for wooden products depleted local timber, electric power replaced small water power for manufacturing, and metal and plastic items replaced wooden ones. The Converse Toy and Woodenware Company—renamed "Morton E. Converse & Company" in 1887—[closed its doors in the mid-1930s](#).²⁰ After World War II, Winchendon experienced a brief economic boom from denim production, leveraging its existing infrastructure. However, as production gradually shifted away from Winchendon and many similar towns, Winchendon's manufacturing industries began to decline in the middle of the 20th century, eventually closing altogether. The loss of industry left permanent imprints on many Winchendon families.

¹³ <https://www.sec.state.ma.us/mhc/mhpdf/regionalreports/CentralMA.pdf>

¹⁴ <http://www.oldwoodtoys.com/converse.htm>

¹⁵ <http://freedomsway.org/about-fwnha/our-communities/winchendon-ma/>

¹⁶ <https://www.townofwinchendon.com/our-history/pages/winchendon-becomes-manufacturing-community>

¹⁷ <https://www.townofwinchendon.com/our-history>

¹⁸ <https://www.sec.state.ma.us/mhc/mhpdf/regionalreports/CentralMA.pdf>

¹⁹ <https://www.sec.state.ma.us/mhc/mhpdf/regionalreports/CentralMA.pdf>

²⁰ <https://www.mass.gov/doc/wayfinding-town-of-winchendon/download>



For Reflection and Dialogue

- Can you identify the ways gender plays a role in your work and life? How has your gender identity shaped your life?
- Did the deindustrialization of Winchendon affect your family? How? Where does your family find most of its work?
- How were/are non-binary folks understood in this town?
- What is the highest level of education your parent has achieved? What is the highest level of education that you hope to achieve?

Photo by HEAL Winchendon.

Winchendon's Present

From "Toy Town" to "Bedroom Town"

The story of the town of Winchendon is a story like many other New England towns. Formerly a booming industrial site, residents describe Winchendon today as a "bedroom town," one that differs greatly from its manufacturing heyday. To make ends meet, many residents work multiple jobs or commute to surrounding towns and cities for better-paying jobs. This in turn affects people's abilities to become involved in town matters, join school boards, and participate in the community. At the same time, some families maintain strong connections to the land and the town, embracing a rural lifestyle and raising their children in the community.

Half of Winchendon residents are considered "rent-burdened," meaning that more than 30% of their income goes toward rent.

Economic stagnation and a lack of quality jobs mean that many families live on low or limited incomes. The Winchendon Housing Authority has a 1.5-year waitlist, even as rent continues to rise in town. In 2019, [Winchendon's median household income was \\$34,027](#),²¹ nearly 50% less than the [median household income of the United States](#).²² The [poverty rate in Winchendon hovers around 10.6%](#),²³ higher than the [state poverty rate of 9.4%](#).²⁴ Winchendon has a [higher mortality rate](#)²⁵ compared to the overall state rate and [one of the highest chronic disease rates in Massachusetts](#).²⁶

Education in Winchendon is an important factor to consider in the town's well-being. At their best, schools draw new families and retain residents, provide social and networking spaces, foster hope and aspirations, and encourage positive identity formation. However, the public school [graduation rate in Winchendon](#) has fallen over the past several years, with 11% of students dropping out of high school and just 76.8% of students completing grade 12.²⁷ Among graduates, nearly half plan to start working immediately instead of pursuing higher education. Four of the five local [public schools](#) are going through [school turnaround](#) due to low performance and ratings.²⁸ [The Winchendon School](#) (TWS), a private high school, has emerged as an option for some families, including international students.²⁹ But this has also created some tension in Winchendon, with parents and students of Murdock High School and TWS both having certain perceptions of the other school.

While a handful of working farms root Winchendon in its once-thriving agricultural heritage, food security and healthy food access are critical issues for residents. With the [closure of Central Supermarket IGA in 2017](#), Winchendon became a food desert.³⁰ The lack of transportation options continues to present a significant challenge for residents without cars. Without accessible transportation, people are limited

²¹ <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=Winchendon%20town,%20Massachusetts&tid=ACSST5Y2019.S0601>

²² <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/profile?g=0100000US>

²³ <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=Winchendon%20town,%20Massachusetts&tid=ACSST5Y2019.S0601>

²⁴ <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/MA>

²⁵ <https://www.heywood.org/files/dmHTMLFile/2018-heywood-healthcare-community-health-needs-assessment-full-report1.pdf>

²⁶ <http://growingplaces.org/programoverview/heal-winchendon/heal-winchendons-story/>

²⁷ <https://www.heywood.org/files/dmHTMLFile/2018-heywood-healthcare-community-health-needs-assessment-full-report1.pdf>

²⁸ <https://www.winchendonk12.org/o/wps/browse/85436>

²⁹ <https://winchendon.org/>

³⁰ <https://www.thegardnernews.com/article/20170118/NEWS/301189475>



Above: Growing Places Mobile Market
Photo by HEAL Winchendon.

to shopping for groceries at the town’s Family Dollar and convenience stores. Unfortunately, convenience stores have limited healthy food selections, and the healthy foods they carry tend to be expensive. Recognizing this need, [local businesses, such as Not Just Produced, and organizations like Growing Places and Winchendon CAC have stepped up](#), purchasing fruits, vegetables, meats, honey, and syrup from local farms and offering them as healthy options to townsfolk.³¹ This is a wonderful example of the Winchendon community meeting Winchendon needs and supporting the local economy.

Of 1,000 residents surveyed by Growing Places in Winchendon, Gardner, Fitchburg, Leominster, and Clinton,

- *33% are food insecure*
 - *50% do not have cars*
 - *15% shop at convenience and dollar stores*
-

³¹. <https://www.thegardnernews.com/news/20200413/not-just-produced-in-winchendon-accepts-snap-and-hip-benefits-for-locally-grown-food>



Above: HEAL Winchendon Youth Changemakers Service Project

Photo by HEAL Winchendon.

Winchendon's Growing Community

Winchendon is growing, both in terms of population and racial and ethnic diversity. Local demographics have been shifting for a number of years, with families moving to Winchendon from neighboring towns and a small but growing Latinx³² population diversifying the town's community. In contrast to the rest of the state, [Winchendon's population is increasing](#).³³ Multiple families have moved into the area in recent years, purchasing homes and setting down roots. Winchendon's beautiful natural surroundings—including Lake Dennison, Winchendon State Forest, and Millers River—are attractive features for many.

Winchendon's growing diversity may cause some folks to pause, worried that the limited resources available will get spread even thinner. However, diversity is an asset to build on, and new energy may, in fact, help to resolve some of the structural resource challenges facing the community. Diversity brings new ideas and experiences to our everyday lived experiences, and, through initiatives like the Taste of Winchendon, expands our palates. Growing communities that have strong relational ties are better able to support families with young children and aging adults. Growing communities are better able to work together in times of crises and create a strong foundation for youth to be proud of their towns.

Winchendon has a strong history of community organizing and community reliance. Most residents feel able to ask neighbors for help, although some newcomers of color have also experienced discrimination and social exclusion. New residents are welcomed in the Winchendon Residents' Facebook group. Winchendon folks are well aware of the issues their community faces and have organized responses in different ways. The town's local churches, schools, and [Community Action Committee \(CAC\)](#)³⁴ provide leadership in addressing systemic and interpersonal injustices based on racism, sexism, ableism, and more. For example, the CAC provides services such as medical transportation, emergency supplies provision, and a food pantry to Winchendon residents, while Bethany Bible Chapel hosts [Caring Hearts](#),³⁵ a counseling ministry for church and community members. [The Winchendon School](#)³⁶ hosts intergenerational community dinners, inviting members of the community to connect with students and one another over a shared meal. However, many of these responses have been siloed efforts to date—something that HEAL Winchendon is working to address.

³² We intentionally use the gender-neutral, nonbinary term 'Latinx' instead of 'Latino' or 'Latina' to refer to people of Latin American origin or descent. 'Latinx' is also a more inclusive term than 'Hispanic,' as 'Latinx' can refer to both Portuguese- and Spanish-speakers.

³³ <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/winchendontownworchestercountymassachusetts/PST120219>

³⁴ <https://winchendoncaccom.com/>

³⁵ <https://www.bbchapel.net/ministries/caring-hearts/>

³⁶ <https://winchendon.org/>



For Reflection and Dialogue

- When you are not working or attending school, where do you spend most of your time in Winchendon?
- If you are able to build a space for the community, what would it look like? What actions can you take to make people feel welcomed in this space?
- When was the last time you had a sincere conversation with someone from a different racial/ethnic background than you?
- What are the values that you want your community to practice to make Winchendon a more welcoming town for people of all different backgrounds?

Photo by HEAL Winchendon.

Ensuring an Equitable Future with HEAL Winchendon

Funded by the Massachusetts Health Policy Commission, [HEAL Winchendon](#) is an intergenerational coalition of eight local organizations working for the well-being of Winchendon residents.³⁷ HEAL Winchendon traces its roots to the [Healthy Eating, Active Living \(HEAL\)](#) initiative, a joint effort spearheaded by Growing Places and the Community Health Network of North Central Massachusetts (CHNA 9).³⁸ The HEAL Winchendon Steering Committee comprises youth, adults, and seniors; local residents; and institutional representatives.

HEAL Winchendon came together in an effort to connect and build on shared knowledge and strengths and address the daily struggles and needs of Winchendon residents. As part of the process, an intergenerational coalition of youth and resident leaders works in tandem with other residents and organizations affiliated with HEAL Winchendon to create a more socially inclusive environment, increase resident economic empowerment, build a healthy food ecosystem, and offer greater collective impact.

HEAL Winchendon Partners

- CHNA 9
- Growing Places
- Heywood Hospital
- The Winchendon School
- Three Pyramids
- Town of Winchendon
- Winchendon CAC
- Winchendon Public Schools

HEAL WINCHENDON'S THEORY OF CHANGE

FEBRUARY 2021

Mission

HEAL Winchendon's mission is to address food and economic security and community cohesion at the individual, community, and systems levels in Winchendon, MA. Community-based events, training, and programming centered around HEAL Winchendon's four focus outcomes--Healthy Food Access, Economic Empowerment, Social Inclusion, and Collective Impact--are the mechanisms for building a strong coalition and greater community, human and social, and financial assets in Winchendon.

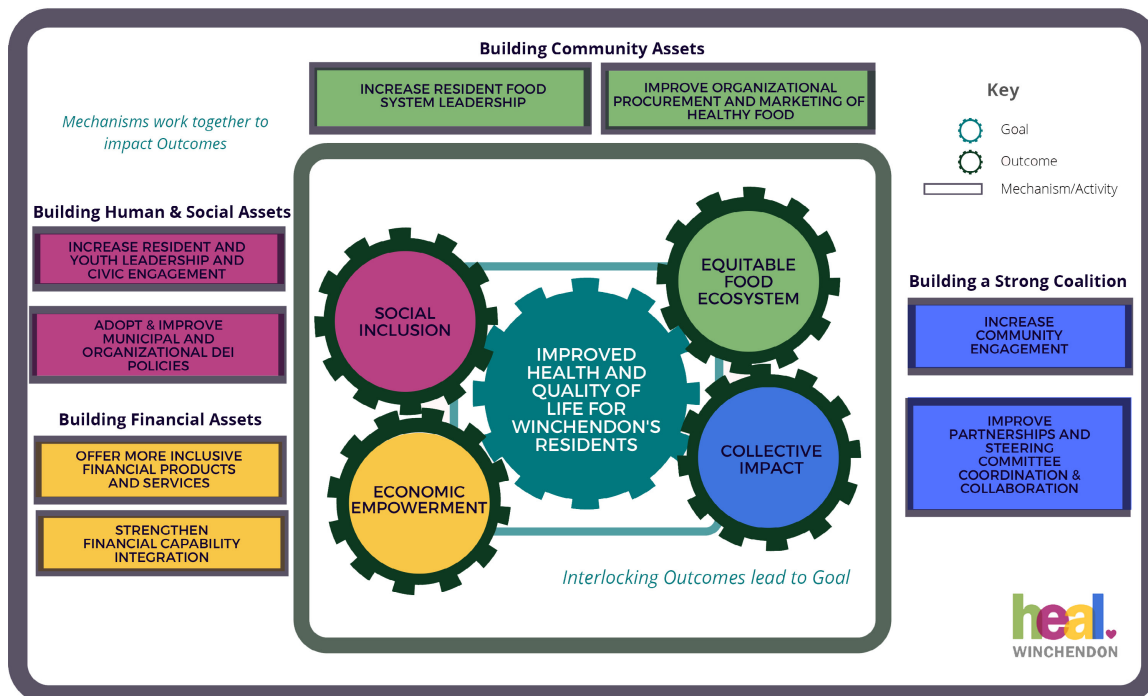


Figure 1: HEAL Winchendon's theory of change

³⁷ <http://healwinchendon.org/>

³⁸ <http://growingplaces.org/programoverview/heal-winchendon/heal-winchendons-story/>

The guiding framework for HEAL Winchendon is the model of [Empowerment Economics](#). Originally developed by and for Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities, Empowerment Economics is a multigenerational, culturally relevant approach to building wealth and power. **Figure 2** below depicts the core elements of Empowerment Economics, which inform HEAL Winchendon’s approach to addressing upstream social determinants of health.

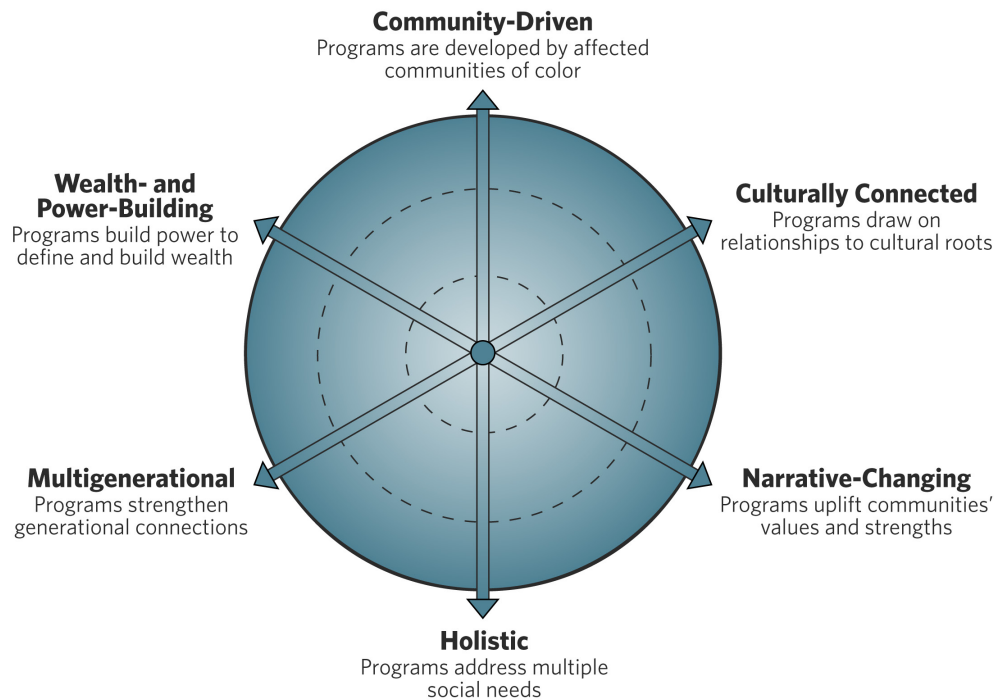


Figure 2: *The Core Elements of Empowerment Economics*³⁹

One of HEAL Winchendon’s focus areas is [economic empowerment](#).⁴⁰ HEAL Winchendon recognizes the need for a healthy local economy, one with good-paying jobs, good transportation, and strong ties to local networks; improvement in residents’ economic well-being; and inclusive policies. Besides offering financial coaching to Winchendon residents, HEAL Winchendon intends to work with the town government and local financial institutions to foster individual entrepreneurial success, break down barriers to economic well-being, build community wealth, and generate a strong and sustainable local economy.

Many of HEAL Winchendon’s goals are woven into the [Winchendon Master Plan](#), which provides another opportunity for community-led development. A goal of the master plan is to encourage agricultural use of existing lands. The 2020 plan notes that 72% of land in Winchendon is still undeveloped open space and forest, of which a relatively small amount is permanently protected.⁴¹ One of HEAL Winchendon’s anticipated outcomes is to ensure that Winchendon has an [equitable food ecosystem](#), one in which all residents have access to healthy foods and people can reconnect with the local food system.⁴² Connecting local farmers with residents and offering incentives to start small farms is a way to create jobs, grow the local economy, and provide residents with healthy food.

³⁹ <https://heller.brandeis.edu/iere/pdfs/racial-wealth-equity/asset-integration/empowerment-economics-core-elements.pdf>

⁴⁰ <https://healwinchendon.org/economicempowerment/>

⁴¹ https://www.townofwinchendon.com/sites/g/files/vyhlf4051/f/uploads/mp_final.pptx.pdf

⁴² <https://healwinchendon.org/healthyfood/>

In a way, the renewed passion and commitment to connecting once more with the land signals a full circle journey for Winchendon and its residents. Many residents of Winchendon come from a white working-class background. Like the Pennacook and the Nipmuc tribes, and the thousands of other Winchendon inhabitants that once lived on and off the land, modern Winchendon residents have the opportunity to be reacquainted with their land. The ingenuity that arises from this interaction could lead to more creative ways for nourishment, sustainability, and a renewed sense of pride at just how far Winchendon has come and just how much Winchendon can accomplish.

One of HEAL Winchendon's core focus areas is [social inclusion](#).⁴³ Some residents have not felt welcomed or included in the community despite living in town for several years. People of color in Winchendon have suffered openly racist acts against them. These acts have happened alongside [a national increase in hate crimes](#) toward people of color, people of the LGBTQ+ population, people of various religious backgrounds, and people with physical and/or intellectual disabilities.⁴⁴ Winchendon residents have also felt the effects of the increased political polarization in recent years, with many noting that civil discourse has worsened over time.

As we look towards the future, HEAL Winchendon provides an opportunity to move forward together in solidarity, beyond party politics. HEAL Winchendon is working on catalyzing greater social inclusion through cross-cultural community celebrations like [Taste of Winchendon](#),⁴⁵ education, and narrative change (e.g., [Seeds of Hope](#)).⁴⁶ Instead of viewing newcomers as a threat to scarce resources, Winchendon can welcome new residents and see their arrivals as an opportunity to work together for the good of all.



Above: Taste of Winchendon Welcome Table
Photo by HEAL Winchendon.

⁴³ <https://healwinchendon.org/socialinclusion/>

⁴⁴ <https://www.newsweek.com/hate-crimes-under-trump-surged-nearly-20-percent-says-fbi-report-1547870>

⁴⁵ <https://healwinchendon.org/home/tasteofwinchendon/>

⁴⁶ <https://healwinchendon.org/seedsofhope/>

HEAL Winchendon engages various stakeholders and organizations to make Winchendon a better place to live for all. The Winchendon School and Winchendon Public Schools are organizational members of the HEAL Winchendon steering committee, along with representatives of the CIRCL Leaders and Youth Changemakers programs—individuals who are parents and students themselves. With resident input, the town is trying to bring in an agricultural technical program to provide increased options for students. Several churches in the area have promoted intergenerational relationships and mentorship opportunities for many years. Working Wonders in Winchendon and the Winchendon CAC have also contributed greatly to building resilience within the community, and HEAL Winchendon builds on this legacy. Through the CIRCL Leaders and Youth Changemakers programs, HEAL Winchendon leverages residents’ strengths, connections, knowledge of, and passion for Winchendon. Winchendon youth, in particular, are leading the way with their creative ideas, skills, and strong voices for change.



Photo by HEAL Winchendon.

HEAL Winchendon intends to bring traditionally underrepresented people, including Black and Latinx residents and single parents, to the decision-making table. Everyone should have the ability to participate in their local government and community and shape their lived experience. This means dismantling obstacles to participation and inclusion in town government, school boards, clubs, and associations—a listed goal in the Winchendon Master Plan. The presence of youth and resident leaders will enable those who have typically felt excluded from making decisions and solving community-wide problems to be a part of the process in Winchendon. There are so many potential champions that can grow through HEAL Winchendon and so many opportunities to grow in empathy for one another and ourselves. Simply being aware of the community’s strengths and the incredible skills residents have is an asset on its own. Diversity in all shapes and forms is a strength and a foundational element in co-creating a more just and sustainable future for all.

As members of HEAL Winchendon, people and organizations passionate about food justice, economic empowerment, and social inclusion are coming together to find solutions that increase Winchendon residents’ well-being. The people in Winchendon have always been the town’s greatest asset, and, unsurprisingly, the people will be the ones to ensure that Winchendon is a welcoming place for all and a town where residents’ health and wealth can grow. Winchendon “working together” is Winchendon stronger together.



For Reflection and Dialogue

- What are some community organizations that you admire? What are the ways that you can become more involved?
- Has there been a moment when you felt like you were an outsider in your community? How did that feel? Where did you feel it in your body?
- Have you ever had the opportunity to grow your own food? When you have an opportunity to grow your own food, what would you be excited to grow? What kind of dishes would you make and want to share with other people?
- What do you hope for the next generation of Winchendon residents to feel most proud of? What would you like your legacy to be?

Photo by HEAL Winchendon.