



# Seasons *of* Stockbridge

| By Emily McMackin |

*This centuries-old Berkshires gem is a haven for hospitality and history*

Tucked inside the Berkshire Hills in the southwest corner of Massachusetts is a town you have probably seen before, though you may have never visited. In winter, the lights and life inside its Main Street shops glow against its snowy streetscape nestled in the hills, painting a picture of the quintessential white Christmas, first captured for the world

to see by its best-known resident, the renowned 20th-century illustrator Norman Rockwell. He resided in Stockbridge for the last 25 years of his life and immortalized many of its faces in his illustrations. Rockwell called the town “the best of America.”

In warmer weather, this city of less than 2,000 welcomes thousands of tourists who come to explore Rockwell

art, its Gilded Age mansions and sweeping mountain views. For more than two centuries, the Red Lion Inn has been at the center of the activity. Though it has had many names and owners, the Red Lion Inn has operated continuously since 1773. Five presidents have stayed there, along with leading authors, industrialists, politicians, movie stars and musicians. From antique teapots lining its transoms to plush rockers and the fire roaring in the hearth, the lobby is full of early American conversation pieces and captures the conviviality that has kept the inn vibrant for more than 200 years.

“It’s a gathering place—a place where people who cared about each other showed up,” said Anne Flaherty MacArthur, a Connecticut native who has spent Christmas holidays in Stockbridge and at the Red Lion Inn with her family for the last three

decades. “So many families have come here before ours. You feel like you belong. Everyone feels that, whether it is their first or 30th time to visit.”

### From a Mission Town to a Stagecoach Stop

Missionaries were the first to visit Stockbridge. In 1734, the Reverend John Sergeant, a Puritan minister from Newark, N.J., arrived in the area to set up a mission for the Mahican American Indian tribe. Bands of the tribe lived miles apart until Sergeant, exhausted from traveling between them, suggested they unite in a central location. In 1736, the Massachusetts General Assembly granted the tribe a township in Stockbridge (then called “Indian Town”), with the hope of securing their allegiance in growing frontier clashes with the French.

Sergeant built one of the first homes in the village and established a school to educate Mahican children. Incorporated on June 22, 1739, the village was named Stockbridge after a town of the same name in the Hampshire region of England. Though the British families who settled there lived separately from the tribe, the town government was integrated, with both groups sharing power and working closely together. The tribe adopted farming techniques from their neighbor to harvest bumper crops, and some colonists even provided funds to back these agricultural experiments.

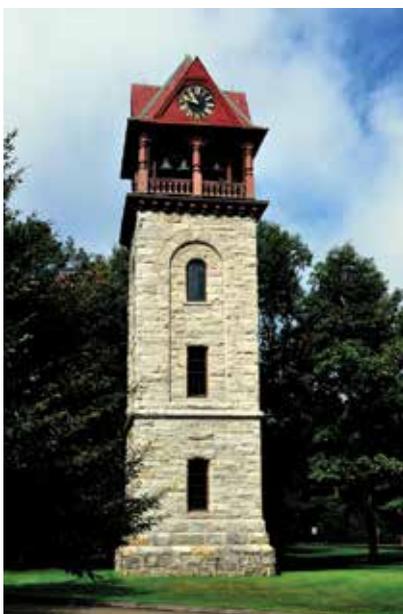
Sergeant was a fierce defender of the rights of the Mahicans until his death in 1749. Succeeding him in the post was famed revivalist preacher and theologian Jonathan Edwards, already known throughout New England for his fiery sermons and leadership in the first Great Awakening movement. Arriving in Stockbridge in 1751, Edwards preached to the tribe through an interpreter and carried on Sergeant’s legacy of defending the Mahicans against speculators who sought to take their land.

Stockbridge grew steadily in the years before the Revolution. An

early road from Boston to Albany cut through the center of town, and local merchant Silas Bingham and his wife, Anna, decided to take advantage of the traffic, opening a general store in 1773 along what is now Main Street. The venture soon grew to include a tavern and an inn that became a popular stop for stagecoaches. Weary travelers and townspeople alike would gather there to unwind, socialize and discuss issues of the day, which soon began to include talk of rebellion against oppressive British rule.

### Catching the Revolutionary Spirit

Taverns of the era often chose distinctive signs to identify themselves, and the Binghams established theirs under the crest of a red lion waving a green tail. According to local lore, the red lion symbolized the British Crown, but the green tail indicated sympathy for the growing cause of independence. In July 1774, an angry crowd of Patriots from surrounding towns gathered at the tavern to pass resolutions protesting the harsh Intolerable Acts enacted by the British to punish Massachusetts



**Clockwise from left:** The chimes of the Children’s Chime Tower are rung at 5:30 every evening between “apple blossom time and the first frost on the pumpkin.” • The Bidwell House Museum features heritage gardens demonstrating Colonial-era plants and techniques. • Originally located on Stockbridge’s Prospect Hill, Mission House was disassembled, moved and restored between 1926 and 1930 at its present location on Main Street.



## Spirited Adventures

colonists for participating in the Boston Tea Party and other protests. The group also pledged to boycott British goods. With the start of the Revolutionary War, Stockbridge became a crossroads for expeditions of soldiers headed to their next battle and supply wagons following them. General Ethan Allen's Green Mountain Boys stopped by the inn to purchase goods such as tobacco and jackknives on their way to capture Fort Ticonderoga in May 1775.

Even after the war, the Red Lion continued to serve as a gathering place for those living in the remote Berkshires community.

When Silas Bingham died in 1781, Anna, called the "Widow Bingham" by locals, kept the enterprise going and was credited with being the first businesswoman in the county.

In 1786, the inn became a meeting spot for disgruntled farmers who joined a group of armed rebels led by Revolutionary War veteran Daniel Shays to retaliate against high taxes and stringent economic practices of the new republic. The men launched protests to block courts from foreclosing on family farms and imprisoning debtors for tax delinquency.

In a final uprising, rebels raided homes in Stockbridge and holed up at the inn before they were defeated in a bloody shootout the next day while fleeing the area.

In 1807, Anna Bingham sold the inn to store owner Silas Pepoon, who continued to draw patrons. Stockbridge was mostly populated by farmers in those days, with a few small factories in nearby towns and a semi-private academy that educated local children. By that time, the Mahicans, once an integral part of the community, had seen much of their land whittled away. Despite the aid they provided to the Patriots during the Revolution, they



**Clockwise from top:** The Mount, Edith Wharton's estate in Lenox • Naumkeag, the summer estate of New York City lawyer Joseph Hodges Choate, completed in 1886 • Chesterwood, the summer estate of Lincoln Memorial sculptor Daniel Chester French

were forced to relocate west—first to New York and later to Wisconsin.

Stockbridge was also home to revolutionary figures such as former slave Elizabeth Freeman, who convinced local lawyer Theodore Sedgwick to help her sue for her freedom based on statements in the new state constitution proclaiming freedom and equality for all. She won the case, which later served as a precedent to another case before the state Supreme Court that ended slavery in Massachusetts. Freeman spent her later years working as a free woman in the Sedgwick household, which also employed Agrippa Hull, a free black Revolutionary War veteran who used his earnings to become the largest black landowner in town.

### A Resort Town Is Born

With the construction of the Housatonic Railroad in 1842 and its extension to nearby Pittsfield in 1850, well-to-do families looking to escape the hustle and bustle and heat of Manhattan, Boston and other Northeast cities began flocking to the mild climate and bucolic beauty of the Berkshires. Visitors preferred the lush, sparsely populated region to overcrowded summer escapes such as Newport, R.I. Some even purchased land to build cottages in Stockbridge and neighboring Lenox.

The area also inspired many famous writers and artists. Prolific early American novelist Catharine Sedgwick,

daughter of Theodore Sedgwick, grew up in Stockbridge. Best known for her 1827 novel *Hope Leslie*, she drew much of her material from characters and scenes in the Berkshires. Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote some of their greatest masterpieces while residing there. Hawthorne penned *The House of Seven Gables* and other works while living in a cottage on the outskirts of Stockbridge between 1850–1851.

At a picnic hosted by friends, Hawthorne met Melville, who was living in Pittsfield and writing *Moby-Dick*, and the two became friends. Melville had moved from New York to a farmhouse he called Arrowhead to escape the distractions of city life, finding inspiration in the Berkshires while composing his great seafaring tale. In 1851 Hawthorne observed the impact of the landscape on the author: “On the hither side of Pittsfield sits Herman Melville, shaping out the gigantic conception of his white whale, while the gigantic shape of [Mount] Greylock looms upon him from his study window.”

Even as the Civil War raged south of Stockbridge, the town attracted a steady stream of guests. The Bingham’s former inn—now operating as the Stockbridge House—expanded to accommodate the demand. In 1862, Charles Plumb and his wife, Mert, an avid antiques collector, took ownership of the inn and set out to improve its amenities to suit its increasingly high society clientele. Mert furnished the hotel with antique furniture, china, crockery and pewter purchased from homes and farms nearby. Her standing offer of “50 cents for a pitcher and a dollar for an antique mirror” helped her build an extensive collection of early American teapots, china and furnishings that still grace the inn

today. In the early 1890s the Plumbs’ nephew, Allen Treadway, took over.

A fire that started in the pastry kitchen in 1896 destroyed much of the hotel, though the storied collection of Colonial antiques miraculously survived. Treadway, who later became a prominent Massachusetts congressman, immediately started restoring the hotel, opening it back up in time for vacation season the following May and calling it The Red Lion Inn in homage to its Colonial-era emblem.

The turn of the century brought another building boom to the Berkshires, with wealthy families from surrounding cities constructing lavish estates such as Naumkeag and Ventfort Hall on secluded ridges across the area. Acclaimed author Edith Wharton designed The Mount—a 113-acre estate built in 1902—based on principles she espoused in her newly published book, *The Decoration of Houses*. From her terrace overlooking sculptured Italianate gardens, Wharton entertained literary friends such as Henry James. She

composed many of her classics in her bedroom suite upstairs, including *House of Mirth* and *Ethan Frome*.

Renowned sculptor Daniel Chester French, known for his Minute Man statue in Concord, Mass., purchased property in Stockbridge for his summer estate, Chesterwood. He developed some of his most famous works in his studio there, including a preliminary design for his 1920 seated statue of Abraham Lincoln at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.

### Age of Rockwell

In 1953, famous *Saturday Evening Post* illustrator Norman Rockwell moved to Stockbridge with his family. He enjoyed the close-knit community, riding his bike around town and becoming acquainted with nearly everyone who lived there. Rockwell initially set up a studio above

a meat market on Main Street, adding a large picture window to give him steady light for painting. He produced some of his most famous covers in Stockbridge, including “The Discovery,” “Before the Shot” and “The



**Right:** The Norman Rockwell Museum offers tours of the illustrator’s studio May through October. • **Inset:** Rockwell’s “Freedom From Want” is the third of his “Four Freedoms” series of oil paintings.

## Spirited Adventures

Runaway,” using many of the town’s residents as his models.

In 1957, Rockwell moved his studio to a converted carriage barn in the backyard of his South Street home. He had just begun painting one of his most iconic works, “Stockbridge Main Street at Christmas (Home for Christmas),” which he finally completed a decade later for the December 1967 issue of *McCall’s*.

Rockwell featured Red Lion Inn in the painting, though the inn had closed and was set to be demolished and replaced with a gas station. The next year, it was rescued from the wrecking ball by Stockbridge residents Jack and Jane Fitzpatrick. The Fitzpatricks originally planned to use the inn for their growing mail-order business, Country Curtains, but they fell in love with its

history and decided to restore it to its early American grandeur. The couple later purchased other endangered buildings around the inn and converted them into guesthouses.

Today, much of Stockbridge looks exactly the same as it did in Rockwell’s 1967 painting. The town is home to the nation’s oldest village improvement society, the Laurel Hill Association, which has fought to keep traffic lights, fast-food restaurants and malls out of town, and landmarks and parks preserved. Whether visitors come to explore the Norman Rockwell Museum, hike through the Berkshires, tour local mansions or shop in the boutiques along Main Street, Stockbridge has a mystique that keeps bringing them back. “It’s a special place,” MacArthur says. 🍷



Main Street in summer

### Things to See and Do



Herman Melville's Arrowhead

The 15-acre **Berkshire Botanical Garden** features more than 3,000 species and varieties of plants, as well as year-round classes, workshops and special events.

**Chesterwood** was the summer estate of Lincoln Memorial sculptor Daniel Chester French. Tours of his Gilded Age home, studio and gardens are available the end of May through mid-October, or stay overnight in his secret studio, Meadowlark.

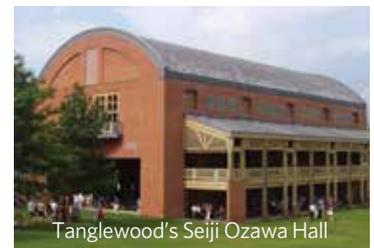
The oldest house in Stockbridge, **Mission House** was built around 1739 by Reverend John Sergeant, who served as a missionary to the Mahican American Indians. Tours offer a glimpse of Colonial and American Indian history in the area.

Visit **The Mount**, the Lenox estate of Edith Wharton—including her personal library, the room where she wrote her classic novels, and three acres of formal gardens. The Wharton Salon stages dramatic adaptations of her work each summer. Tours

of the house and gardens are available daily mid-May through the end of October.

Tour **Arrowhead**, the rustic farmhouse in Pittsfield where Herman Melville wrote his classic novel, *Moby-Dick*. The property is also home to the Berkshire Historical Society.

Established in the 1930s, **Tanglewood** is the summer home of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Annual events include a live recording of Garrison Keillor’s “Prairie Home Companion,” Movie Night with John Williams, and Tanglewood on Parade. Its season runs June through September.



Tanglewood's Seiji Ozawa Hall

The 36-acre **Norman Rockwell Museum** houses the largest, most significant collection of original art by the illustrator. The museum also exhibits work by past and contemporary illustrators and animators. Visitors can tour Rockwell’s studio May through October.

The **Bidwell House Museum** is a Georgian saltbox originally built in 1750 as a parsonage. The 192-acre property in Monterey has been authentically restored and filled with Colonial-era antiques to interpret the early settlement of the Berkshires.