

Living in

Litchfield, Conn.: Old-Fashioned and Pastoral

Prices are up in this rural town, where “the Covid stampede has gobbled up a lot of inventory.”



By C. J. Hughes



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Litchfield, in northwestern Connecticut, can seem like a land pleasantly frozen in time. It's checkered with historic sites like Bunnell Farm, in the rustic Milton section, owned by the same family for five generations.

Being old-fashioned is a point of pride in pastoral Litchfield, where farms sell raw milk, residents traverse their properties on horses, and houses are older than America itself.

While that embrace of the past has helped secure some pristine landscapes — take away the power lines and pavement on North Street, and you might think you were back in the 19th century — it has occasionally caused the community to feel out of step with the rest of the world.

A lack of industry in the 1800s forced residents to pack their bags for mill towns along the Naugatuck River, leading to an extended population decline. Another drop-off has happened in recent years, as cities have grown at the expense of the countryside.

But Litchfield, where some zoning dictates that as little as 15 percent of a property can be covered by buildings, seems well positioned in the pandemic, as buyers are suddenly less concerned with nightlife and more interested in room to breathe. This spring, after several sluggish years, activity and prices jumped by a third, according to the local multiple listing service.



By The New York Times

“Listening to the news every night got a little unnerving,” said Andrew Smith, 53, who is in contract to buy a four-bedroom, three-and-a-half-bath house on seven acres for \$805,000. A bidding war erupted over the barn-shaped house, which has a lily farm, chicken coops and pear trees; a heartfelt letter to the seller put his bid over the top.



Strict zoning rules mean some rural spreads like Bunnell Farm can have only a few buildings.

The pandemic really hit home for Mr. Smith and his family because their current address, a three-bedroom, two-bathroom house in St. James, N.Y., on Long Island, is a few miles from Stony Brook University Hospital, which treated a wave of Covid-19 patients.

Before the pandemic, Mr. Smith, a partner in a wine and spirits company, had no real plans to move. But he doesn't want to be so close to New York City anymore, he said: "Being a little more removed was a factor."

Besides, his job has changed dramatically. No longer is he required to be on the road 200 days a year, which means he doesn't have to live near a major airport.

Litchfield wasn't a totally random choice, as Mr. Smith grew up in next-door Washington. But he isn't surprised other people are streaming in. "What's happening is a trend for a reason," he said. "A lot of people are probably looking at their situation they way we were."



Two colors that turn up a lot in rural Litchfield are white, for houses, and red, for barns. Both appear at Bunnell Farm, which sells turkeys, pumpkins and corn.

New York-area residents aren't the only ones seeking greener pastures. Robert and Wendy Baruc were living in Los Angeles before they bought a Cape Cod-style house with four bedrooms, three bathrooms, a sunroom and a brick patio for \$570,000. Constructed in the 1960s for the food editor of a women's magazine (which explains the built-in can openers in the kitchen), the house has 10 acres that are popular with bears.



A pond at White Memorial, a 4,000-acre park that offers hiking, kayaking and a nature museum on the site of a former summer estate.

Mr. Baruc, 69, who grew up in New Rochelle, N.Y., and lived for years in Bedford, had long contemplated returning to the East Coast. But he was focused on Westchester County before someone at a party in California suggested Litchfield.

To him, the town was an abstraction. "It seemed far away, like a place where you go to camp," said Mr. Baruc, a retired distributor of independent films who is now becoming a mindfulness instructor.



Ox Hollow Farm Stand offers a roadside stand in the Bantam section of Litchfield that sells eggs, peaches and pork, among other fresh food.

In retrospect, buying the house in February, just before the pandemic hit, may have been a well-timed move, as Los Angeles had its own bad viral outbreak. “It feels very safe here,” Mr. Baruc said. “We are very happy.”

What You’ll Find

Stretched across a plateau edged with hills, Litchfield is 56 square miles, the seventh largest of the 169 cities and towns in Connecticut. (The largest, with 62 square miles, is nearby New Milford.)

Often lumped in with the surrounding county of the same name, Litchfield has a population of 8,100 — 91 percent of whom identify as white, according to census records — and more full-time residents than in nearby towns.



Trinity Episcopal Church, completed in 1826, is in the Milton neighborhood, where you’ll find a well-kept collection of 18th- and 19th-century buildings listed on the National Register.

Just 15 percent of Litchfield’s housing stock is used for weekend retreats, while in nearby Roxbury the share is closer to 60 percent, said Susan Pollock, an agent with William Pitt Sotheby’s International Realty, who grew up in the town.

There are enclaves, some distinct, others less so. The center of town — a row of restaurants and shops near houses on sidewalks — is Litchfield borough, contiguous with a 475-structure National Register historic district. Towering homes seem to have avoided becoming funeral homes, law offices or museums as they might have elsewhere, and are still in private hands, more than 200 years after being constructed.

In the town’s boroughs, residents pay slightly higher property taxes; gentrifying Bantam, the second borough, is announced by rooster statues in yards. Northfield, a modest neighborhood, was once a knife-making hub; rustic Milton, with 11 buildings from the 1700s, is a Colonial postcard.

Condos, like Hunter’s Chase at Litchfield, on the Torrington border, are often tucked out of sight. Indian Knolls offers detached houses for residents 55 and older.

What You’ll Pay

Of the 58 single-family homes for sale in mid-August, the average list price was \$836,000, according to the SmartMLS, the local multiple listing service. The least expensive, a two-bedroom ranch-style house in foreclosure, was \$116,200; the most expensive was a four-bedroom, two-and-a-half-bath, colonial-style house with 66 acres, including an active nine-hole golf course, Stonybrook, listed for \$2.75 million.



Arethusa Farm Dairy sells milk, cheese and ice cream out of a former fire house in the Bantam neighborhood.

Between April 1 and June 30, 29 single-family houses sold for an average of \$376,000, said Wendy Westcott, an agent with Klemm Real Estate. In the same period this spring, which coincided with the worst of the pandemic, 38 single-family homes sold, a 31 percent jump, for an average price of \$507,000, a similar spike.

“The Covid stampede has gobbled up a lot of inventory,” said Ms. Westcott, who described a house in need of work that had 27 showings in three days in April and received six offers. “I have never seen this level.”

The Vibe

Because huge tracts of land are set aside for public use, there is no shortage of things to do outdoors.



Mount Tom State Park, established in 1915, features a popular lake with a beach, as well as hiking trails. Much of Litchfield is conserved land.



Visitors enjoy a warm August day at Mount Tom State Park, which spans the towns of Litchfield, Morris and Washington.

The most significant green space may be White Memorial, a 4,000-acre nonprofit park that hugs the spot where Bantam River meets Bantam Lake, the largest undammed body of water in the state. Enter along pine-shaded roads and find 40 miles of trails, 10 ponds for kayaking and lakeside cottages that can be bought, though their land must be leased, said Lukas Hyder, White's executive director, who lives there himself. Admission to the park is free.

"Use has skyrocketed this year," said Mr. Hyder, who had to close a popular boardwalk and remove picnic tables to insure social distancing. "And we are seeing a lot more New York license plates."



150 SOUTH STREET | A seven-bedroom, three-and-a-half-bathroom house built in 1850, with a wood-shingled mansard roof and a refurbished barn, on 0.8 acres in an historic district, listed for \$1.175 million. 860-480-1449

Marketplace Tavern, a converted jail whose oldest section dates to 1812, offers a balcony with views of a narrow green where free concerts were held in previous summers. Nearby DiFrancos Restaurant & Pizzeria has a wide brick terrace in a town that seems to love its pies: A half-dozen pizzerias are strung along Route 202, including Bohemian Pizza, which dishes them out under a ceiling tattooed with album covers.

Arethusa, a large local farm, has three retail outposts. A former general store became Arethusa al tavolo, a restaurant, while a former firehouse sells ice cream, milk and cheese.

The Schools

Public school students, about 900 in all, move around a bit. Center School offers prekindergarten through third grade, while the Intermediate School covers fourth through sixth grade. Litchfield Middle School serves students in seventh and eighth grades, and Litchfield High School, ninth through 12th.



15 BIGOS ROAD | A four-bedroom, three-and-a-half-bathroom house on more than eight acres, listed for \$995,500. 860-201-7159

On state Smarter Balanced assessment tests during the 2018-19 school year (the most recent available), 70 percent of third graders met standards in English, versus 54 percent statewide; 70 percent met standards in math, versus 55 percent statewide.

On SAT exams in 2019, the average score in evidence-based reading and writing was 557, compared with 515 statewide; the average score in math was 530, compared with 501 statewide.

The Commute

About 98 miles by car from Midtown Manhattan, and lacking commuter train service, Litchfield likely won't appeal to regular commuters. But telecommuters able to space out their New York trips may be fine.

The closest commuter train station, on a branch of the Metro-North New Haven Line, is in Waterbury, 17 miles away. But service is infrequent, and the trip to Grand Central Terminal takes more than three hours. Shorter trips are available from farther away, in Wassauc, N.Y., but service was suspended there after damage from Tropical Storm Isaias.

The History

Small Litchfield has played a big role in American history. Two vice presidents, Aaron Burr and John C. Calhoun, were educated at Litchfield Law School, which also produced three Supreme Court justices, 90 U.S. Representatives and 26 U.S. Senators, from 1774 to 1833. It



442 MILTON ROAD | A Dutch Colonial-style house with three bedrooms and two and a half bathrooms, built in 1966 on 1.85 acres, listed for \$495,000. 860-307-7378

was declared a National Historic Landmark in 1965 and houses a museum today.

The 1753 Colonial at 89 South Street was the residence of Oliver Wolcott Sr., a signer of the Declaration of Independence. A lead statue of King George III, torn down at Bowling Green in Manhattan, was melted into musket balls in the backyard, historians say. Today, the house is a private home.

And Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose antislavery novel, “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” helped spark the Civil War, was born in a house on North Street. Dismantled in the late 1990s, it awaits a buyer today.

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