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Sometimes You Can Go Home Again



Williamstown draws many Williams College alumni back as second-home owners.

By MICHELLE FALKENSTEIN

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When Gene Bauer told his mother he was buying a second home in Williamstown, Mass., in 1998, she couldn't believe it. Mr. Bauer, a Boston lawyer who graduated from Williams College in 1971, had complained heartily about the frigid, snow-filled winters there when he was a student. "My mother said, 'You swore you'd never go through another Williamstown winter again,'" he recalled recently.

Never say never. For Mr. Bauer and many others, the town's beauty and rich life of the mind outweigh a few months of single-digit temperatures and annual snowfall that regularly tops 80 inches. Besides, said Paul Harsch, a local real estate agent, "for some people, the winter is glorious."

Williamstown, a storybook New England town in the North Berkshires with one traffic light and one shopping street, sits beside Mount Greylock, a gently rounded, 3,491-foot peak that is the highest point in Massachusetts. Williamstown was established in 1753 as a plantation called West Hoosac and renamed Williamstown in 1765, when Col. Ephraim Williams bequeathed his estate to the town to establish a free school. (Williams now costs more than \$40,000 a year). Students of Williams College, which was chartered in 1793, call themselves the Ephs, pronounced "eefs," in his honor.

“What drew us back, in addition to our fond associations, is the beautiful physical setting in combination with an inspiring array of cultural and intellectually stimulating activities,” said Mary McTernan (Williams Class of 1976), who bought a three-bedroom colonial-style house on five acres last year for about \$1 million with her husband, Thomas Lee ('73), a lawyer.

Ms. McTernan, a former health care administrator, said that she and Mr. Lee make the five-hour trip from Swarthmore, Pa., at least once a month, spending time with their daughter Liz, who graduates from Williams this spring.

The Scene

Second-home owners say that Williamstown has the charm of country living without the provincialism. “There are things going on year-round,” said Michele Riley, a lawyer in New York City who owns a condo in a development called Stratton Hills. “It’s hard to find that in a small town.”

Susan Brown, a remedial reading teacher from Berwyn, Pa., who with her husband, Stephen, bought a renovated 1860s three-bedroom house within walking distance of the campus in 2004 for about \$520,000, said she never dressed up. “It’s fleece and jeans.” Spring Street, Williamstown’s main drag, is about the length of a short city block. Students and local residents mix genially in cafes, shops and restaurants, including Sushi Thai Garden and Mezze Bistro and Bar, an upscale restaurant on Water Street.

Williams makes an effort to enhance the life of the entire community by presenting free public lectures, readings, concerts, performances and films, often several in one day. Jim Kolesar, Williams’s assistant to the president for public affairs, said it was important for the college to be a good citizen.

Local residents can audit classes free, with the professor’s permission, and can take books out of the college’s library. An annual pass for Williamstown residents or Williams alumni to use the school’s extensive athletic facilities costs \$205 for individuals and \$320 for families. “There’s always more to do than you can possibly do,” Ms. McTernan said.

Williamstown’s small size has its pluses and minuses. “You can’t be anonymous,” said Roger Fachini, an agent with Elder & McDonough Real Estate, “but there’s always someone you can count on.”

Pros

Despite a population of only a little more than 8,000 — and that includes Williams College’s 2,000 students — Williamstown has deep cultural riches. There are two important museums: the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, with more than 30 Renoirs, and the Williams College Museum of Art, which holds a significant collection of 18th- and 19th-century American art.

There is also the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams, five miles east on Route 2 in a former textile mill, and from June to August, the Tony-award-winning Williamstown Theater Festival, which has sent plays to Broadway.

Cons

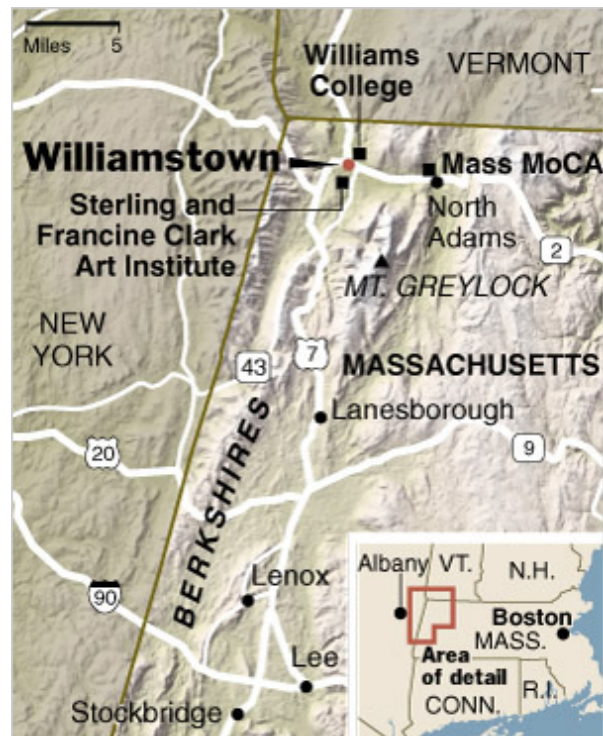
Williamstown, 45 minutes north of the more bustling Southern Berkshires (Lee, Lenox, Stockbridge), is not an easy trip from anywhere. There are no Interstates to the region, and the roads into town — Routes 2, 7 and 43 — are slow and single lane. (To some, this isn't necessarily a bad thing.) The nearest major airport and the most convenient Amtrak station are an hour away in Albany. Williamstown is three hours from Boston, more than three hours from New York and five hours from Philadelphia. "There's no good way to get here," Mr. Fachini said. "You have to make an effort."

There are only a handful of clothing stores in town, and many people shop at the Manchester Designer Outlets in Vermont, an hour's drive, or the Berkshire Mall in Lanesborough, 20 minutes south. "If you're into shopping, this is not the place to be," said Bill Frado, a Williams graduate who recently moved to Williamstown and now uses his house in Natick, Mass., as his second home.

The Real Estate Market

It appears that Williams graduates can't get enough of Williamstown. Real estate agents reported that around 10 percent of home sales were to second-home owners, and they also estimated that close to 40 percent of those were Williams alumni. "When they graduate from Williams, they don't want to leave," Mr. Fachini said. "There's something about it that keeps them coming back."

Stephen Birrell, vice president for alumni relations and development at Williams, said: "As a group, Williams alum are extraordinarily loyal and devoted. The college is happy to have alums in town, but we don't have to do anything to encourage them. They just come."



Most homes in Williamstown were built in the 20th century, but 18th- and 19th-century houses occasionally come on the market. "Many people want an old farmhouse on five acres, but some don't stick with that," said Don Westall, the owner-

broker of Alton & Westall. “They love the thought of old, but they don’t want a wrestling match with an alligator to open a window.”

Home sales are off from where they were two years ago, real estate agents say, and there is more inventory than usual. Yet prices have not declined.

In the spring, a house can sell in 90 days, but in the colder months a property can languish. Three-bedroom, two-bath houses on an acre or less sell in the upper \$300,000s to low \$400,000s, though Mr. Harsch said the better three-bedrooms sell for around \$500,000. A number of high-end homes with views have sold for more than \$1 million.

Williamstown has three villages of condos; prices range from \$100,000 for a small one-bedroom to \$350,000 for a large three-bedroom. Several real estate agents said the town could use more, but it’s hard to get approval for new developments.

“Williamstown is highly protected from development,” Mr. Harsch said. “In Florida and Colorado, the subdivisions spring up like flowers or weeds, depending on your perspective. That’s not going to happen here. There are zoning restrictions, topographical restrictions and limited sewer service. The town is going to change very little, and the people here like it that way.”

Lay of the Land

POPULATION 8,238, according to an estimate by the Census Bureau.

SIZE 46.9 square miles.

LOCATION Williamstown is in the northwesternmost corner of Massachusetts, just south of Vermont and east of New York.

WHO’S BUYING Most second-home owners come from New York, Philadelphia and Boston, and many are professionals — lawyers and doctors — or in finance. Real estate agents estimate that nearly 40 percent are Williams graduates.

GETTING THERE Routes 2, 7 and 43 lead directly into town, but none are major highways, which makes the going slow. Williamstown is 165 miles from New York City and 150 miles from Boston by car. Buses from Manhattan take about five hours.

WHILE YOU’RE LOOKING Guest House at Field Farm (554 Sloan Road, 413-458-3135; www.guesthouseatfieldfarm.org), set on 316 conserved acres with great views of Mount Greylock, is unremarkable on the outside but a midcentury masterpiece on the inside. There are only five rooms, so reserve early. Rooms with full breakfast range from \$175 to \$295 through October. A more modest choice is the 1896 House Country Inn & Motels (Route 7, 413-458-1896; www.1896house.com), where a small room for two runs \$69 and the fanciest suite costs \$259.

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THREE FOR SALE

It's a 'Fleece and Jeans' Atmosphere in a Tiny College Town



WHAT 2-bedroom house
HOW MUCH \$259,000

This 1930 1,120-square-foot house is on a half-acre close to Bridges Pond. It has hardwood floors and a wood-burning fireplace. Taxes: \$2,264. Agent: Roger Fachini, Elder & McDonough Real Estate, (413) 458-5300; www.eldermcdonough.com.

Information on properties was provided by the listing companies.



WHAT 3-bedroom house
HOW MUCH \$555,000

This early American Colonial saltbox of about 1,900 square feet was built in 1773 and has five working fireplaces. It is on 10.4 acres and has an attached garage, two barns and an icehouse. There are wide-plank floors and open-beam ceilings. Taxes: \$4,828. Agent: Carolyn Umlauf, Harsch Associates, 413-458-5000; www.harschrealestate.com.



WHAT 4-bedroom house
HOW MUCH \$675,000

This house has more than 2,700 square feet and is within walking distance of Williams College. Built in 1975, it has two and a half bathrooms, a two-car attached garage, a stone patio and perennial gardens. The property is 1.6 acres and includes a small barn with two stalls. Taxes: \$6,925. Agent: Don Westall, Alton & Westall; 413-458-8366; www.altonwestall.com.