

HISTORY OF ROXBURY

THE EARLY DAYS, BEFORE INCORPORATION:

The original Masonian land grants, issued to Captain John Mason by James I of England in 1621 and 1629, include much of what is the State of New Hampshire today. Portsmouth, Dover, Hampton and Exeter were the first settlements and, by 1680, voters in the four towns numbered 209. By the 1730's, settlers had advanced to the Monadnock Region, and townships were surveyed out into eight divisions: Rindge (Monadnock Number One); Jaffrey (Monadnock Number Two); Dublin (Number Three); Fitzwilliam (Number Four); Marlborough (Number Five); Nelson (Number Six); Stoddard (Number Seven); and Washington (Number Eight). Although it developed that several of these towns were not entirely included in the original grants, they were successfully purchased by proprietors of the Masonian Grants from the State of New Hampshire after the Revolution. Marlborough and Nelson were among these. Keene, a separate grant, was settled soon after 1732. The Indian raids and the French and Indian Wars of 1741-49 and 1753-60 delayed settlement in the region. There were raids on the settlements in Charlestown, Keene, Walpole, and Hinsdale through 1775. The Fort at Number Four in Charlestown (the Number Four grant in that region from the Massachusetts Bay Colony) continued to come in handy during this period. It was built after some Indian raids of 1744, and was in continuous use until 1761, after which it was a militia gathering point and ammunition storage depot through the Revolution. Other forts located up and down the Connecticut River also served the settlers well up to and beyond the end of the French and Indian Wars (July 10, 1745 saw the last scalping by an Indian in Keene). Fort #1 was at Chesterfield, #2 at Westmoreland, #3 at Walpole, #4 at Charlestown. There was also a fort at Great Meadows in Putney, Vermont, and Fort Dummer in Vernon, Vermont.

By the time of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, the Monadnock Grant towns were being settled quite rapidly. Marlborough was incorporated as "New Marlborough" (after Marlborough Massachusetts, where many of the settlers had come from) on December 13, 1776. Nelson (named Packersfield after its proprietor, Thomas Packer, on a financial promise from him -- and later renamed after Admiral Lord Nelson when Packer later failed to carry out his promise) had been incorporated in 1774, Dublin in 1771, Keene, a part of Massachusetts until 1741, was incorporated in 1753.

Residents in both northern and southern districts of Marlborough were petitioning as early as 1781 to be separated into individual towns as they were far from places of worship and business. The northern section, along with a portion of east Keene and west Packersfield were particularly vociferous. The west Packersfield residents went so far as to build their own meetinghouse in 1803 at what soon was to become the center of the town of Roxbury. In 1812 their petition was granted by the legislature, and the new town of Roxbury was incorporated on December 9th of that year. The new town of Troy was separated from the southern end of Marlborough in 1815, after seeing that it could be done successfully by petitioning the legislature.

EARLY FAMILIES:

There are 82 names that can be definitely established at house sites (on Samuel Wadsworth's map -- see "sources and further reading") settled from 1763 or so up to about 1803. Many of these were veterans of the Revolutionary War who, spending their pay on land, settled in the 1780's and 90's. Some of the early names are still in the area such as Nye, Brown, Nims, Davis, Bemis, Fifield, Cummings, Ellis, Richardson, and others. Some moved away to find work and made names for themselves elsewhere, such as the son of James Wakefield, Cyrus Wakefield, who became an industrialist and for whom the town of Wakefield, Massachusetts, is named. And Joseph Ames, son of Robert Emes -- as it is spelled in the early records -- was a celebrated portrait painter in Boston, Rome, New York and Baltimore in the middle to late 1800's.

BREED BATCHELLER:

Breed Batcheller bought 2,135 acres of Monadnock #6 for 60 English pounds in 1762, and came to live and started clearing his land in about 1764. He surveyed the early roads in Packersfield, and the first road in the area was almost certainly the road from Keene to Packersfield, passing the Nye Farm and Breed Batcheller's house in what was then Packersfield, just to the west of what later became the center of town. Breed Batcheller was one of the founders of Packersfield and Stoddard, a Major in His Majesty's Militia of the Province, and on various committees, including that for laying out roads. His house and barn were most likely the first permanent structures on the west side of Packersfield township. He married Ruth Davis of Rutland, Massachusetts, on March 11, 1766, and the same year built a large and "heavily timbered" barn on his homestead. His daughter Betsy, born in August of 1767, was the first child born in Packersfield. His house was on the north side of Middletown Road, just about opposite where the "Phillips" or "Grimes" road originally joined it at K-4-7. Batcheller (or Batchelder), originally from Wenham, Massachusetts, was born in 1740, joined the British Army at the age of 16 and fought in the French and Indians Wars. He served in two expeditions to Crown Point in 1756 and '59. Later he learned surveying and practiced in Brookfield, Massachusetts.

In 1772, the first Town Meeting of Packersfield was held in his home, but by 1774 he was gradually edged out of town affairs. The reason was the talk of rebellion. Major Batcheller took the position that the "Patriots" were rebelling against lawful authority, and that they could not exist as a separate country even if they succeeded in the rebellion. The local Committee of Safety in Keene, and indeed in that in Packersfield also, viewed Major Batcheller with suspicion. The morning after the alarm at Lexington and Concord of April 19, 1775, 27 men from Packersfield left for Concord. Batcheller was not among them, having hastened to Keene "to see if the report of a battle was correct". When he returned and found the men had left under his Lieutenant, he followed and overtook them and commanded the march to Cambridge, where they remained several weeks. But the men didn't trust him, and a few didn't speak to him, and many (including Batcheller) returned before the Battle of Bunker Hill was fought. It was probably the treatment he received at the hands of his men as much as anything else which turned him against the rebellion, and after that he became outspokenly against the revolution. He was called before the Committee of Safety several times and even jailed for a short time before he was forced into hiding in the summer of 1777, and eventually escaped to Canada. "Batcheller's Cave" where he hid out for much of that summer can still be seen today, as well as "Batcheller's stairs", a cleft leading down the 60 foot cliffs on the north side of the "Pinnacle" hill, where he escaped the posse of townspeople who came to arrest him after they learned of his presence. He made his way to Canada, where he rejoined the British as a Captain and fought at the battles of Bennington and Saratoga. After the war, he settled in Nova Scotia, where he was drowned in an accident in 1785. His farm and lands in Roxbury, occupied all of this time by his wife and three children, had been confiscated by the State during the war (the family was allowed to live in the house) but were returned to them in 1789 by the legislature. His widow, in turn, sold the land now occupied by the old burying ground (used since 1798) to the town in 1813 to be the Roxbury town cemetery, after the town was incorporated.

HISTORY OF ROXBURY:

The original meetinghouse of 1803 was built at the center of the town where the later 1849 church stood, and where a stone marker now stands. The later church had a more modern style with a square tower to replace the old and plain "God's Barn". The town grew around the 1803 meetinghouse and flourished. There was a tavern a little way to the west on the same side of the road, blacksmith shops, pound, three schools -- the nearest one of brick -- and more than one store, carpenter shops, and several mills or "factories" where wooden products were made, grain ground, logs sawed, etc. The principal product of the town for its first half century was wool for the textile trade. The rocky pastures were well suited to the keeping of sheep, and cultivation of the better fields would provide enough to keep the family and livestock. Weaving was done in the home, but Yankee ingenuity was rapidly coming up with ways to mechanize the other operations in making woolen cloth in the area. There were fulling mills reported as early as 1813 (an undated one probably earlier than that) for treating the woven cloth. And other goods made of wood such as pails, lumber, furniture, pegs, and small metal goods made by the blacksmiths provided cash income along with the wool.

In 1848 there was a widespread depression which affected the wool market and caused the first of several waves of migration by the younger residents to the mill towns looking for work. The coming of the railroad to Keene at that time, and the 1849 Gold Rush, opened up the routes to the West. The population of Roxbury began to decline at a faster rate than it had since the 1820's when the weaving mills in the surrounding towns began opening for business and offering the temptation of good wages. Never again could the rocky pastures and the promise of inheriting a part of one's father's farm compete with the wages offered by the new mills appearing in the river valleys, and the open land in the far west. The 1860's brought mills as close as Marlborough. Harrisville had a large and successful (and architecturally significant, as it is now one of the very few well-preserved early mill complexes) plant in which wool was treated and spun and dyed as early as 1799. The Cartwright-type weaving machine wasn't imported or perfected in this country until after that date, but weaving came to the Harris Mill in 1823 -- which, until the panic of 1873, competed successfully with even the big Boston, Manchester, and Lowell woolen mills.

In 1855 the population of Roxbury was reported as 260, with 1,131 sheep, 344 neat stock, 58 horses, and 6,000 acres of land area. Marlborough, by comparison, in the same year had a population of 887, with 603 sheep, 804 neat stock, 152 horses, and 13,000 acres -- more than double the area. The greatest population in Roxbury was in 1820, with 366 in the first U.S. Census to cover the newly incorporated town.

After about 1849, Roxbury's population rapidly began to shrink, and houses were abandoned as the wool industry left the area, and young people left to work in the mills farther south or to go west. Population declined to a total of 53 in 1930, from which time it gradually began to grow again as the automobile made living on the Branch Road a practical proposition for people working in Keene and elsewhere. The open farmland continued to shrink, but now there was a growing summer population which began arriving as early as 1903, acquiring several of the remaining tracts of open land and keeping them open, restoring existing farmhouses and building new ones. This slowly growing summer population kept some of the upland farms intact with their land and even adding to them, thus preventing much cutting up of the land into building lots, and maintaining much of the rural character of the old town.

Population increased by more than 100 percent by 1940 and nearly another 100 percent by 1980, with a ten year gain of 17 to 18 percent during the last thirty years.

It is interesting to note that peak population in the town occurred quite early, in 1820, when the raising of sheep and weaving in the home were the principal light industries. Population declined gradually before 1830 when the next census was taken. The Harris Mill had begun weaving in 1823, and marked the coming of the mills to the immediate region and the beginning of the decline in population in the hill towns such as Roxbury; which decline became more and more rapid as the wool industry left the region for larger centers and the pastures became forests once again in the late 1800's. Not until the widespread use of the automobile in the 1930's did these towns become practical for working families to live in once more.

EARLY ROADS IN ROXBURY: (Listed in the order in which they were surveyed and built -- map references from Samuel Wadsworth's book)

MIDDLETOWN ROAD The course of Middletown Road, or the old Packersfield Road, was begun in 1763 by Keene when it was extended down Beech Hill across the North Branch to the old Brown Farm, then the most easterly place in Keene. In 1769, the road was extended by Breed Batcheller to his farm, and thence to the town center of what is now Nelson.

OLD GRIMES, OR NYE ROAD, and HORSE HILL ROAD (L-5-4) was laid out in 1767 from the house of Breed Batcheller to Marlborough. It included most of the present Horse Hill Road, and continued on Glenbrook Road and Depot Street in Marlborough, and from there across the Minewawa brook and up Frost Hill to the original center of Marlborough where the Meeting House was.

ROXBURY MIDDLE ROAD, now DAVIS ROAD (K-4-9) was laid out in 1769 to the Crossfield Farm (later the Rene Davis Farm) and in 1797 beyond.

ROAD FROM PACKERSFIELD TO MARLBOROUGH (N-4-1) was laid out probably as early as 1770 from what is now Nelson center to Marlborough, shown on the map of 1783, now known in Roxbury and Marlborough as the Dillingham Road as far as Woodward Pond. It used to go up the east side of Woodward Pond before the level of the pond was raised, so much of the old roadbed is under water. It joined the old Packersfield Road northeast of Woodward Pond.

PARKER ROAD From Woodward Pond over Parker Hill (to the southeast) to the Dublin Road (now called Old Harrisville Road) was laid out in 1790 or before. (N-4-5)

DAKIN ROAD was laid out in 1792 (September 24th) from the house of Daniel Perry on Middletown road (K-5-6) to the old Marlborough line, where the town of Marlborough had laid a road to Ephriam Dakin's place (L-5-5) near where the Babbidge Dam is now. The completed road connected Middletown Road with what is now Horse Hill Road, joining the latter right at the present Marlborough/Roxbury town line.

PUBLIC BUILDINGS AND SCHOOLS:

Besides the meeting house, there were three district schools, two taverns and a pound. We have parts of three buildings left: one of the taverns is in Marlborough serving as a residence; one schoolhouse is a storage building; and the church tower still exists, serving as a summer house (gazebo) in a pasture. The town pound walls are still where they were originally on Middletown Road.

The District #2 school was built in 1815 (after the previous Marlborough school further down the road at M-6-13 burned that year) on Dillingham Road near the present Taves Place at N-5-4. It was rebuilt in 1873. After it was closed, it was converted into a storage building and kept up. The District #1 school was of brick, built in 1813, and was just east of the town center on Middletown Road at L-4-16. The District #3 school was at the lower end of the Nye cemetery at K-5-5, originally a Keene school, built in 1774. The remaining foundation shows how small it was. It was rebuilt in 1825, after a fire. It had a probationary teacher in 1825, a young man named Salmon P. Chase, from Cornish, aged 17 at the time. He was evidently not a success as a teacher, but after graduation from Dartmouth in 1826 became a member of the bar in Ohio, later a U.S. Senator, then governor of the state, Secretary of the Treasury under Lincoln, and finally Chief Justice United States Supreme Court. He had to be let go from the Roxbury school after just two weeks, however, because he couldn't control the students. He was dumped into a snowbank at least once by one or two of the larger 14 year old boys. Keeping children of all ages busy and interested together in that small room for long hours was a talent that was just as rare then as it is today.

BURYING GROUNDS:

The two main burying grounds still exist in good shape, and there is much information. The one near the center of the old town was sold by the widow of Breed Batcheller to the town after incorporation in 1813, but was in use as early as 1798. The other is adjacent to the Nye Farm land, originally one of five in Keene at the time, set aside in 1795.

TECHNOLOGY IN THE TOWN:

There were at least three blacksmith shops which can be located on Samuel Wadsworth's map, one tannery-and-blacksmith, a saw and grist mill (which later did mechanized woodworking and finally included a bolting mill), two carpenter and cabinet shops, and a shop that manufactured tools. The majority of the mills were on Roaring Brook. Most of the needs of the town were evidently provided for from 1782 (blacksmith), 1812 (tannery), 1795 (nails), 1805 (saw and grist mill). The mill at Woodward Pond, which started as the saw and grist mill under Josiah Woodward in 1805/06, was carried on under the family until 1856 and was then enlarged to include bolting cloth. The mill was quite advanced as to machinery, and only closed in 1886 when the City of Keene purchased the land and the dam for water supply, and the mill was removed.

QUARRIES:

Roxbury's "other" industry was the quarrying of granite. Two large and several small quarries supplied building, pavement, foundation, mill wheel, and curb stone, etc. The Bodwell quarry, where Babbidge Dam is today, and the Cass quarry about half a mile up Roaring Brook from the present reservoir, were the two largest. Stone for the New York State Capitol building in Albany came from the Bodwell quarry, as well as for the arched bridge near route 101 southeast of Keene. There was a railroad spur line from the Bodwell quarry after 1878. Before that, oxen were used to haul stone to a cutting shed at J-5-15 on Middletown Road, close to the existing railroad. There was a large boarding house at the Bodwell quarry, as well as a large barn and stables. The Cass quarry was worked from as early as 1835. The Bodwell quarry was in operation from as early as 1817. Both quarries were closed and became a part of the Keene water supply land about 1912. The Bodwell quarry was later dammed and became Babbidge reservoir.

SOURCES OF FURTHER READING FOR ROXBURY TOWN HISTORY

Historical Notes, Keene and Roxbury (with keyed map), by Samuel Wadsworth, 1932.

History of Marlborough, New Hampshire, by Charles Bemis, 1881.

New Hampshire As It Is, by Edwin A. Charlton, 1855.

History of the Town of Keene, New Hampshire, by S. G. Griffin, 1904.

Harrisville, New Hampshire, 1870-1970, Centennial Commemorative Book.

Celebration of the 150th Anniversary of Nelson, N. H., Nelson Picnic Assoc., 1927.

The Repertory, a magazine published in Keene, issues from December 1924 through June 1927.
The magazine published the first of the Abner Sanger journals, see below.

The Development of the Town of Roxbury, N. H., and its schools, by Charles B. Knight (in bound manuscript),
Master's Thesis: Boston University, School of Education, 1933.

Factory Under the Elms, A History of Harrisville, N.H., 1774-1969, John B. Armstrong, 1969.
Much information about early textile manufacturing and local families.

Very Poor and of a Lo Make, the Journal of Abner Sanger, edited by Lois K. Stabler, Historical Society of
Cheshire County, 1987.

This is the written journal of a man who lived in Keene and Dublin, and gives a first person look at what life was like during the early days in the region. There are a number of mentions of Packersfield, Breed Batcheller, and Marlborough. His journals date from 1773 through 1794, and include travel to Cambridge Massachusetts with the Militia after the Lexington/Concord Alarm of April 19th, 1775. He was later imprisoned briefly in Keene for being a suspected Tory. The book is from the original journal pages preserved in the Library of Congress. There is also much researched information about local families in the biographical notes.