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History of Dexter

Prepared by

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and the Pupils of Her School

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History of Dexter

The tract of land now occupied by the town of Dexter was, until the year 1792, the home and hunting grounds of the Red Man and had never until then been looked upon by the eyes of the white man. At that time Mr. Ballard and Mr. Weston of Hallowell were hired by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to survey a portion of that land belonging to it in the Province of Maine and to establish township lines. During that year they made a plan of 21 townships.

The township now called Dexter was designated on this plan as No. 4 in 5th Range. Two years after this James Bridge of Augusta purchased the township and his name was written across the face of it.

In the summer of 1800 Ebenezer Small, who the year before had come from New Hampshire to Athens, came to the township, guided by spotted trees, felled the trees on a patch of land on the hillside and built a rude cabin near where Crosby & Crosby's office now stands and then went back to Athens and spent the winter there with his family.

That same year John Tucker came to the township and made a clearing where the Marble farm is now located and then returned to his home.

Samuel Elkins was sent here also by Mr. Cragie, who was then the owner of the township, for the purpose of finding a suitable place to build mills that the township might be more desirable for settlement. He selected the outlet of the pond, near where Abbott's mill is now located, cut down the trees, cleared away the underbrush, built a camp of hemlock bark, hewed the timber for the

mill frame and then returned to his home in Cornville where he soon died. A short time after this his brother came, completed the mill and set it in operation. From this time until its incorporation the township was called Elkinstown.

The next spring Ebenezer Small returned to the township on the crust, hauling Mrs. Small and a few necessary household goods on a handsled, and occupied the cabin he had built the summer before. This was the first permanent settlement in the town of Dexter.

In 1802 a daughter was born to Mr. and Mrs. Small, the first white child born in Dexter. Her name was Johannah. In the fall of that year Mr. Small built a more comfortable log cabin on Zion's hill west of the Bassett homestead and set out apple trees which was the first orchard planted in town.

One day when Mr. Small was away working Mrs. Small visited her husband's bear traps on the south shore of the pond and finding a bear in one of them killed him with an ax with which she was armed, dragged the carcass home, dressed it and cooked some of the tenderest portions for Mr. Small's supper.

This same year Mr. Tucker returned to the township with his family.

In 1803 Seba French, William Mitchell and John Safford settled in the Barton district. Mr. French, for several weeks after coming, slept on a sled.

In 1804 the first framed house was built on what is now Grove street, where the P. J. Abbott house is now located.

It was this same year that the few settlers were visited by sickness and death. Two of Mr. Small's children and one of Mr. Tucker's died within two hours. They were buried in Mr. Tucker's field which was afterwards set apart for a burial place. Their rude head stones can now be seen, although the burial took place 104 years ago.

A few years later Andrew Morse built a carding mill on Mr. Elkin's water privilege and Mr. J. C. Hill a fulling

mill. This mill was afterward made into a shoe factory and then into a planing mill and later sold to Eldridge Bros. who are the present owners.

In 1811 the L of the Flynt house was built and is said to be the oldest building in town although some claim that the Bates' house is the oldest.

On June 17, 1816 the town was incorporated under the name of Dexter, the name being selected in honor of Samuel Dexter, a well-known and respected lawyer of Massachusetts.

In 1817 Jonathan Farrar came here from Bloomfield, as Skowhegan was then called, and purchased the first sawmill that was built, also the grist and carding mills, and a large tract of land now occupied by the village north of Liberty street, and east of the stream and pond. He opened a store in what is now the Flynt house. In 1818 the postoffice was established and kept by him in his store.

He continued to do business at this place until 1835, when he in company with Oram McCrillis (C. P. McCrillis' uncle), built the store now occupied by Kimball's variety store and moved his business to that place.

Mr. Farrar built the canal and in 1818 built the grist mill which after many improvements, is now run by S. L. Small.

In 1820 Jeremiah and Amos Abbott came here on foot from Andover, Mass., seeking a mill privilege. They purchased of Mr. Farrar a piece of land containing several acres with mill dam, water privilege, saw and carding mill. This was the beginning of what is now known as the Amos Abbott Woolen Co.

In 1828 Mr. Farrar erected the tannery on Tannery or what is now called Centre street, which was first run by Moses Chase (Mr. G. A. Smart's grandfather), then by Eben Wyman (Mrs. Chas. Sawyer's uncle), then by Charles Shaw and sons.

Several years ago, this property was purchased by

John Morrison who erected a woolen mill on the site of the old tannery.

The same year in which Mr. Farrar built the tannery, Lysander Cutler came here from Massachusetts, when he was 21 years old and worked for the Abbott Co.

In 1834 he and Mr. Farrar erected a woolen mill where the Dunbarton now stands, which was destroyed by fire in 1844 and replaced the same year by a two-story stone structure which gave it the title of stone mill.

The Abbott Brothers had previously built a grist mill where the white mill now stands. This, in about the year 1846, was purchased by Farrar and Cutler and remodeled into a woolen mill afterward known as the white mill. At this time Calvin Copeland built a woolen mill where Fay & Scott's machine shop now stands, which was afterward destroyed by fire.

In 1849 the brick mill was built by Foss and Conant.

SCHOOLS

In 1807 the first schoolhouse was built in the district where Mr. Mitchell, Mr. French and Mr. Safford settled. In 1822 a schoolhouse was built in the village, a little south of Crosby's law office.

About the year 1825 or 26 Rev. Samuel Baker opened a boarding school in a two-story building located on the land between the house of W. H. Carr and that of Elias Mower. Boys and girls were admitted without tuition or pay for board; the boys being required to pay their way by working on the farm connected with the school, and the girls by doing the housework and such sewing as could be obtained for them. This school was run for only three or four years, when the building was burned and it is said that a sick man in the upper story, perished in the flames.

In 1835 a large school building was erected on Pleasant street, where the Town hall now stands. The lower story was used for the primary and grammar schools and

the second floor served both for the High school and town meetings.

The last town meeting held in this building was in March, 1856. About 300 citizens had collected there, and in the midst of the proceedings of the meeting, without warning, the floor began to settle and before any one could escape, it went down,—or about three-quarters of it,—carrying with it a large portion of the people present. When the weight of the heavy flooring struck the floor below that also gave way and the men with all the debris were carried to the cellar.

The noise of the crash was heard by many throughout the village, and it was not long before the news of the catastrophe spread broadcast. Though there were some quite seriously injured, it was a marvel that there were not more, and that none were killed. As I remember, the most seriously hurt were two men named Jethro Goodwin and Eben Wyman, the latter being a brother of Nathan Wyman, who, I think, was moderator of the meeting. At any rate he was on the platform, and by his coolness and advice, those left upon the portion of the floor which did not go down, were kept from being panic-stricken. Mr. Goodwin had the misfortune to come against the stove, which was a big cylinder affair, and very hot at the time.

Boys were not supposed to be in the meeting, except on business, and the only business there for boys, in those days, was the selling of pop corn, molasses candy or apples. Charles Bryant was always on hand as a vender of apples, his father owning a large orchard in the vicinity of where Charles Roberts' house now stands.

Charley went down with the rest, and upon crawling out was heard to say, "Oh, where are my apples?"

The loss of the building for school purposes somewhat upset the school affairs for a time; but other places were provided as best could be for the time. I recollect going to school in the little vestry underneath the Baptist church, but do not remember where others were located.

The following fall was the time of the presidential election when James Buchanan was elected, and the voting was done in the Methodist church. Some of the other churches were brought into use for campaign purposes. I recollect at one demonstration that the speaker stood in a window of the Universalist church, while the audience was partly inside and partly out.

The relics of this old school building were bought by Amos Abbott & Co., and is now used by them for offices, etc. The exterior is very like it used to be, but the belfry has been removed.

The present Town hall was then built and a new High school building on School street, opposite C. F. Bean's, which was destroyed by fire.

The grading of the village schools was introduced by Lysander Cutler who took a deep interest in educational matters.

The first town meeting was held in the schoolhouse first built. This was held August, 1816. At this meeting the amount raised for the support of schools was \$150 and in 1820, \$400 was raised for this purpose and \$100 for defraying town charges.

FACTS OF INTEREST

In 1803 the township was surveyed into lots by Simeon Safford and in 1807 a post road was opened between Dexter and Garland. This was first traveled as a foot path, the travelers being guided by spotted trees.

Very soon after a post road was opened between Bangor, Dexter and Skowhegan, which afterward became a government mail route. For the first ten years after the postoffice was established the mail was carried by post riders, Lawrence Green being the first to perform this hard service. After this a stage line was established between Dexter and Bangor, though the vehicles in use comprised almost any kind of a trap that could be brought into ser-

vice and the same can be said of the line established between Dexter and Skowhegan.

Early in the 30's John Favor purchased a modern Troy coach which he operated on the line between these two places. This met with popular favor and patronage. Robert Sampson and Hiram Safford attended to the transportation of freight.

Early in the 40's a stage line was established between Waterville, Dexter and Monson to Moosehead Lake. All these lines were discontinued at the opening up of the railroad between Newport, Dexter and Dover.

In 1820 Dexter had a population of 500. Many clearings had been made and Main street, with one or two branches, had been fairly well defined.

Soon after this a Mr. Smith established a ferry across the pond where the bridge now is. In 1824 the float bridge was built.

THE OLD FLOAT BRIDGE

The present bridge across the Wassookeag, at Dexter, is sometimes referred to as the "float bridge, but it is as far as possible from that, with its thousands of tons of stone extending from its surface to a point below the low-water mark; and not only that, but many tons deposited within the wooden portion of the structure below, placed there to destroy its tendency to float during its construction.

The appellation, "float bridge," has come down from the time when the real float bridge was there, some over forty years ago.

This old bridge served a great many years—I cannot say how many—but I remember very distinctly how it looked, its peculiar features that rendered it a source of fear to strange horses, and the time when it was mysteriously put "out of commission."

It was constructed of logs, heavy timber and planks, and was secured to the abutments at either shore, with

self-adjusting inclines of about thirty-five feet, leading from the road level of these abutments down to the float, or bridge proper.

The lower ends of these inclines rested on the float, and were so arranged that they allowed the bridge to rise and fall with the varying height of the water in the lake.

At the foot of the inclines, where they rested upon the float, there was at times a space of about twenty-five feet covered with water, caused, no doubt, by the weight of the inclines upon the ends of the float.

Strange horses used often to balk, and require time to examine the situation, and not infrequently a good deal of coaxing, before they would venture down into the water, especially when the high waves were dashing across the space.

The adjustable arrangement, which allowed the bridge to rise and fall, also allowed the ends of the float to sink still lower when heavy teams passed over them, so that in turn the strange driver got something of a fright, as well as the horse; and it was wise for drivers of heavy teams to go over this space as quickly as possible, to avoid going in too deeply.

I recollect one time when there was a circus coming to town from Parkman, the usual interest we boys took in going out to meet the aggregation was augmented by a desire to see how the heavy teams and the elephants would succeed in crossing. The circus trains had usually come by the way of the Dover road, so that this was a test of the old bridge we had never seen.

Well, there was a great delegation out to escort the show into town, and some of the boys had been boys a long time before.

Some one had given the circus a tip regarding the bridge, so that they were very cautious, allowing only one team to go on at a time; but even then some of them went in pretty deeply and got the inside of some of the cages washed out.

The elephants were taken around the head of the lake, and not given an opportunity of passing judgment on the bridge. No doubt the proprietors of the circus knew pretty well what the verdict of the elephants would have been had they taken a look at it.

The old bridge was a favorite fishing place "just as the sun went down." It was something peculiar, and a fact that has never been explained, that the pickerel would bite only about sun-down, and then only at certain points, just where the water deepened from the shore. Every summer evening there would be a delegation of fishermen at each end of the bridge, and many good-sized pickerel were caught, and many much larger got off the hook, after coming to the surface long enough to furnish foundation for a good "fish story."

The time came when the bridge got to be expensive from constant repairs, and the question of a new one was agitated.

There was no question as to the need of a new bridge, but there was quite a diversity of opinion as to what kind of a structure would be best; and the discussion at the annual town meeting brought forth many suggestions. Some advocated the idea of building across at the narrows north of the island, where it was thought the lake would be shallow enough to admit of building piers.

At an annual town meeting, Thomas Rogers, a millwright and withal a genius, presented a plan showing a model which he had constructed and setting forth its advantages. This model, as I remember it, was about three or four feet in length, representing the full length of the proposed bridge.

The townspeople had great faith in Mr. Rogers' scheme, and at once adopted his idea as to construction.

The following fall, some of the people in the north part of the town felt some uneasiness for fear the construction of the new bridge might be unduly delayed; but whether from this or some other reason, the writer cannot say,—

but one morning it was found that the old bridge had been disconnected at the north shore, and it was impossible for teams to pass over. A footwalk was made from the abutment, and the bridge made suitable for foot passengers; but for weeks the people had to hitch their horses to fences and trees along the road at the north shore, and walk into town and back, conveying their produce and merchandise as best they could.

As soon as the lake was sufficiently frozen over to admit of driving teams upon it, the building of the present bridge was begun.

Below the low water line, it is constructed of logs, alternately laid lengthwise and crosswise, and pinned together, and above that line all stone, as can be seen.

In building, the work was begun where the water was deepest, some over 40 feet, and so shaped to the bottom of the lake, the form of which was found by careful sounding. At times, during the construction, it was necessary to load it with stone, in order to sink it at a proper level to prosecute the work.

The old bridge was floated down, to the outlet, and much of it used in the construction of a building, used by "Ed" Fifield as a paint shop, and the platform around it.

It was located where the carriage repository of Mr. Fish stood later, and from the shape and dimensions I am inclined to think it is the same building that is standing there today.

REMINISCENT.

RAILROADS

The R. R. between Dexter and Newport was built in 1868-9. It was through the efforts of the leading men of Dexter and Corinna that this was accomplished. These two towns loaned their credit as security for the money obtained to build the road. After its completion it was leased to the Maine Central for \$18,000 a year and at the end of that time in 1898 they purchased the road for assum-

ing the debt. In 1890 this road was put through to Foxcroft.

CHURCHES

The first church edifice in town was that built by the Universalists in 1829 on a lot given them by Jonathan Farrar.

In 1834 the Methodists and Baptists built a Union church which soon after became the property of the Methodists.

The Baptist church was erected in 1839 and in 1846 the Congregationalist chapel was built.

PHYSICIANS

Benjamin Clement was the first physician to come to Dexter. He came in 1816. Two years later Dr. G. M. Burleigh came and was one of the prominent citizens at that time.

HOTELS

In 1820 the first hotel was opened by Benjamin Green on the site where Charles Hutchinson's residence is located. It was called Green's inn. Four years later John Bates opened a public house on Main street, a little below Hutchinson & Gates' furniture store. This building is still standing. Ten years later Mr. Davis opened a hotel on Main street, where the Dustin block now stands. This was for a long time run by Jonas Wheeler who in 1843 built and run the Dexter House also on Main street. This a short time ago was sold to Mr. Waldron and moved away to give place for the erection of the Waterville Trust bank.

The Exchange was built by Loring Hayes in 1866, the land being purchased of Augustus French who kept a dry goods store where E. G. Ayer is now located.

NEWSPAPERS

The first newspaper was published here in about the year 1850 and was called the "Isonomy." This was 5x6 inches, four page paper and was published by Elder Withereil. He later published "The Gem." In about the year 1862 the Gazette was published.

A sheet called "The Neighbor" was issued bi-monthly sometime between 1850 and '52 published by "Black and White." Four to six copies were issued in manuscript, and addressed by mail to the business men on the street, each issue to different ones. The publishers (W. G. Cutler and C. W. Curtis) were careful not to be known as such. This sheet continued about three months. A little before its discontinuance another sheet was issued of a similar character, named "The Mince Pie," which made but a few appearances. Not long after a third sheet appeared styled "The Hornet," which had a short existence, its personals having too sharp a sting for general approval. None of the authors of these papers were generally known.

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