

INTRODUCTION TO EAST ORFORD AND ITS EARLY HISTORY

Welcome to East Orford, a beautiful remote piece of the countryside that many of us love. We hope that you will be captivated by it as we are. Before speaking about its history, let's review its geography for those that are less familiar with the area. We are ten miles from Orford Street and six miles from the village of Wentworth. At Upper Baker Pond Road we are at 900 hundred feet elevation, about 500 feet higher than at Orford Street. We are in the Baker River, Pemigewasset, and Merrimack watersheds, as opposed to the Connecticut River watershed for the rest of Orford.

This is an area of lakes, brooks, hills, mountains and most of all forests. There are some resident families that go back well over 100 years. Most of our families have moved here since 1900, attracted by East Orford's beauty, its natural resources, its peacefulness, its potential lumber, and its summer camps. This is also an area bordering on two other towns, Wentworth and Piermont. To the west is Mt. Cube and Indian Pond Mountain. To the north is Piermont Mountain and to the east, Sentinel Mountain and Atwell Hill. There are beautiful views of

Mt. Moosilauke and the Mt. Carr range, also to the east. These areas drain through Brackett Brook, Mack Brook, North Brook, Upper and Lower Baker Ponds to Pond Brook and on down to the Baker River in Wentworth.

We are situated along one of the four mountain passes through western New Hampshire, on a course of travel, now the Upper Baker Pond Road, which was used by Indians and explorers two hundred and fifty to two hundred and eighty years ago and earlier. As explorers and early settlers sought the least difficult transit through the hills and mountains, the current Upper Baker/Piermont Heights road around Piermont Mountain allowed passage to the important Lower Coos area destinations along the Connecticut River (Newbury Vermont/Haverhill New Hampshire). These towns were important agricultural, and early commercial centers as well as being potentially important militarily in northern New England in the 1700's and early 1800's. Whereas today so much traffic is in the Franconia Notch area, two hundred to two hundred and fifty years ago most travelers passed through the various notches in Warren, Wentworth, and East Orford. When the railroad arrived (in Wentworth, 1850) it also followed this course through the mountains from Boston, Concord, Plymouth, Wentworth, Warren, to Haverhill and Woodsville.

Early Explorers

In 1712 Captain Thomas Baker fought the Indians at Plymouth, near the junction of the Baker and Pemigewasset Rivers.. He had been leading a scouting party to the Lower Coos area. As a result the Baker Ponds and River were named for him before this area was settled. In 1753, Governor Benning Wentworth sent Col. Zachaeus Lovewell to explore the Coos via the Pemigewasset, and Baker Rivers. The guides were Robert Rogers and John Stark. In the next year, 1754, with John Stark as guide, Captain Powers followed Lovewell's route from Concord to Piermont via Baker Ponds and Clay Hollow to Eastman Brook and headed further northeast. They returned the way they came. They camped right out here between the Baker Ponds.

Early Settlers

The earliest settlers in East Orford came from southern New Hampshire and Massachusetts, as contrasted to the Orford settlers along the Connecticut River, who came from Connecticut. They were probably very independent spirits seeking opportunities, available land, and freedom. They arrived on foot, by horse or by wagon. The area was not safe to settle until after the French and Indian War ended in 1760.

The earliest East Orford settlers would have had to have been mostly self sufficient as they were in a remote area far from towns and markets, with only primitive roads. They relied on passing travelers for news. People relied on their neighbors for help and for their social life. The Proprietors's Book (vol.1 1760-1797), available in the Orford town office, documents some information about the first East Orford settlers. As you know, the original charter issued by King George III in 1761, which created the township of Orford, granted the town's land to 63 men, who lived down along the New Hampshire seacoast. Almost without exception, these men, who were called Proprietors, did not settle here. Instead, in order to benefit from these land grants, they had to recruit people who were willing to move here and clear and settle the land. In 1772 they wrote that Daniel Clark (lot 20 range 10) and Samuel Haines (lot 19, range 10) received those lots for settling them. William Simpson (lot 15, range 9) received his lot for clearing, sowing, and settling the lot (also in 1772). Ebenezer Brackett settled lot #14 range 9 (that Joseph Palmer was the original proprietor of.) These previous two lots are close by the Davistown/Blodgett Hill crossroads. Most certainly Brackett Brook, which flows from Mt. Cube through Davistown, was named for this early settler.

The proprietors voted in 1772 to pay an allowance of five pounds to Jacob Marston and Experience Cross on account of their being the first persons who settled in the Northeast part of the township. They voted in 1772 to reward Israel Morey for procuring and settling William Simpson. William Haines, a blacksmith was another one of the earliest settlers of Davistown (born 1775, died 1865). In 1782 the proprietors discussed building a road from Baker Pond to the south side of Indian Pond and to “make the main road better from Col. Morey’s to the Wentworth line”. In subsequent meetings, there were many discussions of planning and funding the construction of roads. A surveyor (local resident) was appointed to manage each road under construction. In 1797 the selectmen authorized Thomas Savage to have a” house of publik entertainment for one year”. This was almost certainly in East Orford. In 1829 George Savage petitioned to have a “publik highway” to his dwelling house.

From the same book, the record of marriages records Tabitha Davis marrying Parker Steven’s in February 1795. She, their son Charles Stevens and her grandchildren are buried in the East Orford Cemetery.

The earliest East Orford settlers may have arrived in about 1770. At roughly the same time, in 1765 we know that the first permanent settlers arrived on the western side of Orford along the Connecticut River. The town records state that on February 10th, 1810, "Nathan Davis lost a child". That is the first recorded death for East Orford I have found. There may have been earlier burials with grave sites marked by wooden crosses that have not lasted. The first birth seems to be 1770. My review of the Orford Selectmen's minutes and Orford town meeting minutes shows no clear reference to East Orford prior to 1770. Much of the early settlement seems to have centered on Davistown which is now the area around the intersection of Route 25A and East Cemetery Road. Near there Nathan Davis and others of the Davis family lived. For many years in the early 1800's, he ran a tavern in his home, close to the thoroughfare. At Davistown, he was strategically located at or near the junction of several important roads including The "Old Stagecoach Road", Blodgett Hill Road, the Orford Road (now 25A) and the East Cemetery/Clark Road towards Warren and the Piermont Height Road to Piermont. In the early to mid 1800's, there were homes and farms along all of these roads. Nathan Davis also had a mill on Brackett Brook. There were numerous homes and farms along the Stagecoach Road, which coursed over the high ground above Lower Baker Pond to become Ellsworth Hill Road leading down to the village of Wentworth. The settlers preferred the higher

locations for better drainage and presumed healthier living. The Ellsworth Hill Road connected to the Camp Moonshine Road heading northeast towards Lake Tarleton and then towards Piermont via Eastman Brook, another important mountain pass. Roads from Warren via Ore Hill (the Coos Turnpike) and via the Oliverian Notch were the other mountain passes.

The Stagecoach Road was the primary route to Wentworth for many years. The so called Brook Road (now Rt. 25A) running east to Wentworth, was built later and eventually replaced the Stagecoach Road, but not before about 20 years (1800-1820) of legal wrangling whereby Wentworth asserted that Orford was not doing its fair share of the road work. Part of the unique history of East Orford is that it is a peripheral border area and that it had and still has geographic, social, and commercial relationships with Wentworth. Geographically we are in the same watershed. Most of our lumber and agricultural products would have been transported downhill and downstream to Wentworth, Plymouth, and points south. Little commercial traffic would have headed west and uphill to Orford Street and the Connecticut River. Of course the major markets were to the south (Boston, Concord, Manchester).

Early School Houses:

The earliest reference to a school in East Orford is in an account register for "Baker Pond District #9" and it lists some school taxes back to 1793. The location of that school is uncertain, but we do know that as the population of Orford and East Orford increased in the first part of the 19th century, additional school districts were established and new schools were built. School district #7 was created for the Davistown area and a schoolhouse was constructed in 1844. In 1903, it was replaced by a new school building built on East Cemetery Road where Frank Pushee now lives. The old school building was moved across the road by John Tibbets in 1909, used as a barn and only torn down in recent years. The founding of another school, the 16th district, is poignantly documented in a notebook in the Orford town offices. It was probably the school at the foot of Piermont Heights Road which was located opposite where Dave Bischoff now lives. It was founded in 1852 as a summer school and later that year a wood stove was added to accommodate winter classes. The local residents organized and built and funded the school and they provided boarding for the teacher. Those involved included James Muchmore, Levi E. Sanborn, Amos Paine, William Muchmore, Willys Cochran,

and Henry Muchmore. This prudential committee initially met at John Savage's home, later at the school house.

The early town records show that in addition to electing officials and figuring taxes, some of the major issues of the day were appointing road surveyors to plan and construct the roads and bridges, and licensing tavern keepers. In East Orford, in addition to Nathan Davis' tavern, was Jonathan Steven's tavern from 1815 to 1828 near Lower Baker Pond, and as you will learn at stop D on the tour, there may have been a tavern at Blodgett Hill as well. The arrival of the railroad in Wentworth in 1850 probably caused the taverns to fail due to the loss of stagecoach commerce.

In addition to the first settlers, some of the families prior to 1860 included the Davis's, Haines, Sargents, Blodgetts, Muchmore's, Bloods, and Savage's. These people lived in a remote countryside away from most commerce and transportation except the stagecoach. Just going to church would require a significant trip. But they had abundant natural resources, freedom from outside intrusions, and little governmental oversight. They were largely free to create their own farms, roads, schools and community. You will notice that the original Northeast corner of Orford has been subsequently squared off. John Dana's farm, at his request was annexed from Orford to Wentworth in order to save Orford residents from the cost of

building a school where Wentworth had one nearby (the Atwell Hill School). This was approved by Orford in 1829 and completed by an act of the New Hampshire Legislature on June 28th, 1837. Until the arrival of the railroad in 1850 and the industrial revolution in the cities in the mid 1800's, the main source of employment would have been the local farms, the forests, and the local water-powered mills. The hill farms were not large, and were mainly worked on a subsistence basis, so that there was little need for money to change hands, or for a local store. Grain crops probably included some wheat, barley, rye, and corn, and there were always stones. The Mack farm (#23 on your handout map) was, for example, said by many to be "the strongest farm in the area for raising stones". The barnyards would have included a few cows, some sheep and oxen as the beasts of burden. Neighbors and others often worked together in haying and other harvesting, logging and ice cutting on the ponds.

The 1860 Grafton County map shows that there was a shingle mill on North Brook, to the north of Upper Baker Pond, and a saw mill on Brackett Brook, on the road about halfway down the hill. mills on Bracket Brook and North Brook. The major saw mill was at the outlet to Lower Baker Pond, less than two miles away and over the Wentworth town line. First established in 1799, that saw mill eventually called Brown's Mill, may well have been the most

important industrial area for Wentworth and a destination for much of the logs from East Orford. As you will hear from Claudia and then from Gerald during the tour, there also was here in East Orford a cider mill, a spruce oil still, mica mines, and a quarry for granite fence posts.

Decline in Population

The population of Orford as a whole reached it's highest point in the 1830's, it was almost two times what it is even today, and then, as in many other New Hampshire and New England rural towns, began a steady one-hundred year decline. The causes included the lure of more productive farming land in the Midwest and new jobs in New England's growing industrial cities. East Orford surely was affected by this same trend, along with the abandonment of the smallest and least productive hillside farms. For example, as you will hear later from Ruth Brown, our evidence indicates that in the early 1800's there was a community of twelve or more small farms up on Blodgett Hill. Now, all that remains are some cellar holes and stone walls in the woods.

Toward the end of the 1800's, summer visitors began coming more frequently to New Hampshire, aided especially by the railroads. East Orford, with its beautiful lakes and unspoiled scenery became a favorite place for summer cottages and summer visitor, some of which we will see and hear about on our tour. It also proved to be a perfect location for summer camps for children. There have been four very popular and successful children's camps here, starting with Camp Moosilauke, which was founded right here in 1904. Camp Pemigewasset, which owns considerable land in East Orford, began in 1908. In 1925, another camp was begun here on Upper Baker Pond, which eventually was called Sunset Ranch Camp, and in 1949, Camp Merriwood was established, where we are now. The Appalachian trail, which used to pass through the Mount Cube Farm and the Mack Farm, descends Mount Cube and passes between the Baker Ponds.

Buddy Durham
9/23/2000