



Female Academy

Norridgewock Historical Society Newsletter

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EARLY ROADS, EARLY MILLS

We don't have a good history of our town's roads. We have records of when some were laid out, but others just turn up suddenly on maps. One such map is Figure 1 from a 1795 survey by Daniel Steward. (1) He shows the town as almost square except for the extension on the Skowhegan side. Already roads follow along both sides of the Kennebec, connected only by the ferry at Oosoola. River routes like these were probably the ancient Abenaki paths, followed later by explorers and settlers. Steward shows only one road that doesn't follow the Kennebec, coming down from the north, crossing at the ferry, and going southeast toward Fairfield.

A note on his map says "The lines of the town of Norridgewock was surveyed March 1790. No bridges. The roads in this town are very new and only such as are laid out by the Selectmen for the use of the Town. Those usually traveled are drawn. No house of public worship except a fraim recently raised on the common. No court house. 2 Mills. No other manufactures or mines." The note implies there were other less traveled roads, and of course there must have been lots of cart roads and paths connecting houses.

For more detail Steward enlarged part of his map; Figure 2 shows the area near the ferry at Oosoola. As in his larger map, the road from the north crosses at the ferry and swings southeast. The other road comes in from the west and swings northeast. The roads cross perpendicularly a little east of the Mill Stream. It's interesting to compare Steward's enlargement with a map of 1859, Figure 3. More roads had been added in 64 years but the main 1795 routes are still fairly obvious. Now in 1859 the route from the north crosses at the ferry, comes up Ferry Road, and continues across Main Street into Hotel Street. So Hotel Street

may have been the original Smithfield Road; no wonder the Sawyer Hotel was built on that corner. By 1859 Mechanic Street had replaced Hotel Street as the main route to Smithfield.

Steward's other 1795 road coming from the west must have been what is now Main Street, crossing the Mill Stream and swinging to the northeast. The 1859 map shows two northeasterly roads both going to Bloomfield, one over Sunset Hill and the other along the river, now the Skowhegan Road. The Sunset Hill Road was probably the earlier because wagons and sleds couldn't deal with the side-sloping ground along the river. If so, then in 1795 our Main Street went up over Sunset Hill, then ran down behind Edith Blake's house to flatter land near the river somewhere in the Dickinson - Dunlap neighborhood. Finding just where it and the Skowhegan road met would make a good exploration.

Steward said "No bridges" but one of his roads clearly crossed the Mill Stream. The high dam behind Everett's garage wouldn't have been there in 1795 so maybe the Mill Stream was shallow enough to be forded. Otherwise the crossing must have been on floating logs or corduroy.

Steward's Figure 2 shows two other interesting features, X's marking mills on the Mill Stream. The upper one must be "the old grist mill". Timothy Heald started mills on "the mill lot" in 1778, and his son Josiah Heald continued there as town miller until 1816. Our town began on the North side of the river but the Mill Stream with a 10 ft drop in 330 feet offered by far the best water power in the area. (2) Heald's grist mill and later mills gradually drew people over; the South side had "a village of 300" by 1869. (2) As Fig. 3 shows, by 1859 the old grist mill had been replaced by a new one on higher ground near where the Recycling Center is today. Flooding may have been a reason for the move, but the present average river level wasn't reached until 1921 when a Skowhegan dam went in.

Steward's other mill is shown on the Mill Stream south of Main Street where today there's only a wide mill pond. A water-powered mill needs a drop in water level; it's hard to imagine a waterfall where Steward's "X" is shown. Still, as surveyor and head carpenter for the town's 1794 Meeting House (Congo Church) Steward ought to be reliable. Maybe the pond hides ledges that water fell over in 1795. In the 1870s a coat factory (later the Boat and Canoe factory) stood on the edge of the mill pond near Steward's "X". Around 1900 George Harlow had a

steam-powered sawmill where Perkins Street crosses the Mill Stream. Steward's water-powered "X" might have been at either location. Someone with a snorkel might find evidence.

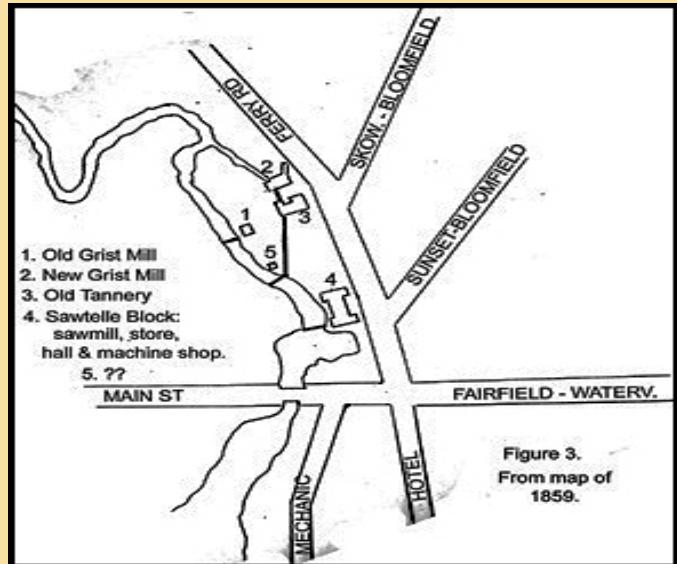
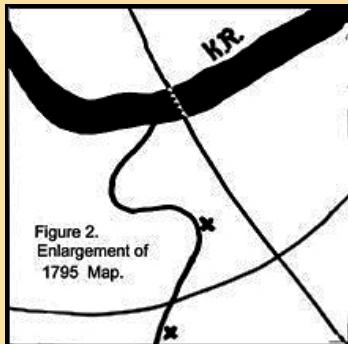
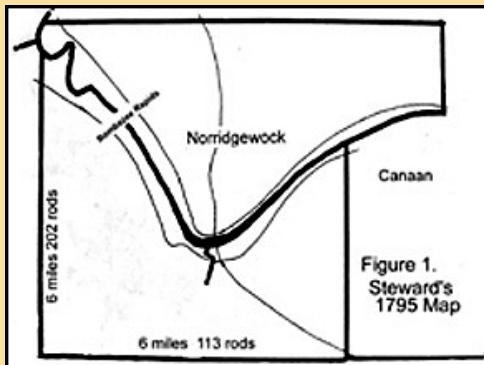
After Steward's day other mills were built along the Stream between the high dam and the river, mills for carding wool, fulling woolen cloth, making oil from flax seeds, and a tannery. For water power there were 3 dams in all, Fig. 3. One dam about 50 feet below the high dam still has a few stone blocks on both banks. Another dam about 50 feet below that seems to have completely disappeared. Sidney Emmons remembers in the 1940s a metal pipe maybe 10 inches diameter that ran along the Mill Stream, probably a "penstock" carrying hi-pressure water from one dam down to a lower water wheel or turbine. That may be the straight line on the 1859 map running from the middle dam to the newer grist mill.

The old mills didn't make people rich so they often changed hands in a tangle of ownerships that a deeds study might unravel. The mills themselves didn't last. Floods took their toll, some mills burned down, others propped up on stacked stone blocks just fell down. And needs changed as sheep raising went out of style, electricity came to town, and less expensive flour and feed could be brought in. Two mills however are almost within memory. Into the 1920s or 30s a "feed mill" sat near the present Recycling building, probably the New Grist Mill in Fig. 3. The feed mill was somehow associated with the Brackett and Russell store on the corner where Everett's Garage is today. And there was a large sawmill in the "Sawtelle Block" building at the east end of the high dam. The building also held a planing mill, a store, a machine shop, and a big hall on the second floor where for years all the town's public events were held. The entire Sawtelle building left town in 1934 in a spectacular fire that sent sparks as far as the Martin Stream Road.

Is there any part of our old town that has seen bigger changes? Seven roads came together there bringing people to the mills, eight if you count a faint weedy track along the Stream now half buried by US Rte 2, perhaps the mill road put in by Josiah Heald in 1788. (3) More people meant hotels with horse-shoeing, harness and blacksmith shops, wagon repair, and stores with everything a small town could need. Now nearly all have vanished. Widening the Skowhegan Road pushed rubble right to the edge of the Mill Stream covering a lot of mill history. Oosoola Park and a Recycling center have replaced houses along Ferry Road. Heald's old

yellow Mill House that hung over the Skowhegan Road was taken down. Fire has wiped away most of the downtown stores. There are still buildings downtown but the only real stores left are a small grocery store and a brand new Dunkin Donuts. We can hardly believe our eyes when we go there and look around. Daniel Steward wouldn't believe any of it.

P.S. About 5 years ago Norridgewock Historical Society installed a monument and plaque in Oosoola Park to commemorate our early mills. Vandals soon destroyed the plaque.



- 1) Book 2, Plan 1, Somerset County Registry of Deeds. Survey done "agreeable to the resolve of Court June 26, 1794".
- 2) Water Power of Maine, Walter Wells, 1869.
- 3) History of the Old Towns, J. W. Hanson, 1849, page 216.

Submitted by: Eastman Wilder

NORRIDGEWOCK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

2015 was a very active year for the Norridgewock Historical Society. Our monthly meetings (4th Wednesday of the month, April-October, 7 PM) generally consist of a presentation related to local social, political or natural history, followed by a business meeting. This past season we enjoyed a nice variety of presentations. In April Warren Balgooyen spoke on the role micro-organisms play in our changing

natural world. In May Mel Croft and Richard Witham discussed their book “The Making of Smithfield – The Early 1800s.” Patricia Horine, who has done a terrific job with the gardens at the Skowhegan History House, gave us in June a “tutorial” on constructing and maintaining a heritage garden. In July webmaster Kyrie Thompkins explained our new website, and in August Eastman Wilder led a discussion of historic photos from glass plates in the NHS collection. Historian Jay Robbins spoke in September on “Traditional Paths of Travel: The Native American’s Great Carrying Place, Upriver Forts on the Kennebec, The Arnold Expedition, and the Old Canada Road.” In October Dr. Daniel Tortora of Colby College spoke to us on “Father Rasle and the Norridgewock Indians.”

There were several other highlights of our 2015 season. In May we were very pleased to receive from Albie Barden a beautifully framed print of an historical description of the 1724 massacre of Father Rasle and the local Abenaki villagers. In July we participated in the Taste of The Past event coordinated by the Central Kennebec Heritage Council; several NHS members made historic snacks which were sampled by all in attendance. In addition, we were treated to a spinning demonstration by Julie Drever and Sallie Wilder. Donna Mickewich presented a rug braiding exhibit and demonstration in August.

We are pleased with our new website, which was constructed this past summer. It is still to some extent a work in progress, but we think we have a good start. You can visit us at www.norridgewockmuseum.com. We also now have an e-mail account; the address is norridgewockhistsoc@gmail.com.

We invite you to join the Norridgewock Historical Society. Our dues are still only \$10/year (\$100 for a lifetime membership), and include a subscription to our quarterly newsletter. Among the 2015 newsletter articles were discussions of the early years of the Norridgewock Baptist Church and Norridgewock’s Paul Revere bell, and several “Tidbits From Old Times.” Our monthly meetings resume on April 27, 2016, at 7 PM. We hope you will join us.

Sincerely,

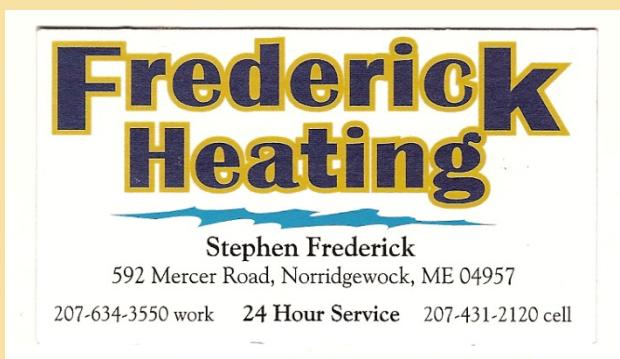
Tom Mickewich, President

Norridgewock Historic Society
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Next Meeting: April 27 2016, 7PM. Speaker: Albie Barden-Native Americans of Norridgewock
Speakers: May 25 - TBA June 22 - Steve Pinkham, Stories of the Maine Woods