



NORRIDGEWOCK HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

Winter 2024

Notes from NHS...

The Norridgewock Historical Society (“NHS”) had a busy year and we want to take this opportunity to thank everyone— patrons, volunteers, guest speakers and visitors for your support and interest.

We are always surprised when people tell us that they have lived in Norridgewock for years/all their lives but have never been inside the Museum . If you are in that category or have not been in for years, please visit! The Museum is open by appointment April-November. We’d love to take you through anytime! Also contact us year-round through our website or by phone if you have questions about genealogy, local history, old homes or other topics.

We meet at the Museum on the fourth Wednesday of the month, April to October at 6:30 P.M. All are welcome. We hope to see you there!

Becky Ketchum, President & Newsletter Editor

The History of Ashley J. Wing Family Memorial Park By Becky Ketchum

Acquisition of the Park

Ashley Wing dreamed of preserving the magnificent pines that were on the property he owned over by the Martin Stream area of town and making them accessible to the public. One of the trees is one of the tallest white pines in Maine (about 200’). He shared his idea of having a park with fellow townsman Howard Jackson. His idea was to use some of the planks he had salvaged when he took down the old grist mill and use the planks to build steps to go down the 14-16 foot embankment. He would then put some signs up coming into Town advising people of the scenic walk. While this was just a dream, the seed had been planted! Both Howard Jackson and local conservationist Warren Balgooyen also recognized the importance of the trees. Around the time of the town’s 200th , the two men started to work on making Ashley’s dream come true. (Ashley died in 1970.) They wrote to Theodore O. Wing, one of Ashley’s grandsons and current owner of the parcel and asked if he would consider deeding the property to the town for a park. The rest is history!

The deed to the land was transferred to the Town on 12/28/1987 and the Ashley J. Wing Family Memorial Park was dedicated during the celebration of Norridgewock’s Bicentennial Weekend in June, 1988. The deed was transferred with three stipulations:

1. The park is to be known as The Ashley J. Wing Family Memorial Park.
2. The Inhabitants of the Town shall take all reasonable steps to preserve the century old large white pines on the land.
3. If the Inhabitants of the Town cease to use the land as stated herein, then the land will revert to the living heirs of Merton E. Wing .

At the time of the transfer :the town manager (Randolph Huber) heralded the gift as a nature preserve rather than a park “to throw Frisbees in.” Warren Balgooyen said there was an immediate need to preserve the roots of the giant trees, especially if more people began using the land as many of the roots are above ground.

Consistent with the deed stipulations and Warren’s assessment, one of the articles in the 1988 Town Meeting was to appropriate \$1,000 to purchase materials for improvement of the park, including construction of a boardwalk to protect the root system of the trees.



A handwritten signature in cursive that reads "Ashley John Wing".

Ashley John Wing was born in Phillips (1879) to Morrell and Elvira Prescott Wing. He was educated in Phillips and in 1906 married Rosie Dill, also of Phillips. The couple moved to Norridgewock in 1923.

Ashley was a farmer and a carpenter. (According to Census Data it appears that his farming years were in Phillips; carpentry in Norridgewock.) In an interview with *Somerset Reporter* Bruce Hertz during the 1988 dedication of the park, Ashley’s daughter said her father “ was always Involved with the woods and lumbering. When he was 80, he would get on his bicycle and ride with a bucksaw and ax on his back to the woodlot.” Coincidentally, while working on this article I asked Eastman Wilder if he remembered Ashley. His quick response was: whenever I saw someone riding around town on a bicycle it was usually Ashley. He rode everywhere.

Another fun fact about Ashley is that he called the biggest pine by name,(“Big Ben”).

Ashley was a member of the Grange and the Reeds Mill Baptist Church, which he helped construct, including laying one of the corner stones.

The Wings had five children, (sons Carl, Clyde, Earl, Merton Wing and daughter Freda Wing Kelley). Rosie Wing died in 1937. Ashley remained in town until 1966 when he moved to Avon to live with his son Merton E. Wing. He died in 1970 and is buried in Sunset Cemetery (lot 1).

Going Full Circle in 50 Years : A Look at the Deed Chain for the Parcel that became Ashley Wing Park



The park land was originally part of a large tract of land that changed hands a number of times because of its rich granite deposits. Within the tract was a small parcel that , while granite-poor , had the great pines. Among the owners were: Dodlin Granite, I.S. Bangs (involved with both rr and granite), and the Norrrdgewock Granite Company (“NGC”). In the mid-1930’s the Town took the land from NGC for back taxes. Then in 1938 Ashley Wing purchased the small parcel with the pines from the Town. Going full circle, 50 years later (1988) the Wing family gave the parcel back to the Town to use as a park.

*Ashley J. Wing
Memorial Park*



**NORRIDGEWOCK
MAINE
1988**

↑ Photo of the cover of the
Park Dedication Program

**1988 Dedication of the
Ashley J. Wing Family
Memorial Park**



*** WELCOME ***

The Ashley J. Wing Family Memorial Park has been set aside under the dual stewardship of the Norridgewock Conservation Commission and Historical Society. The Project is designed to protect and maintain the exceptional trees and unspoiled natural beauty of the area, for the lasting benefit of the community.

The park's intended purpose is to conserve the land, in perpetuity and to promote a greater awareness, understanding, and appreciation of our natural environment. The area is well suited for family walks, visiting school classes, and environmental education.

** ABOUT THE TREE **

It is altogether fitting that the dedication of our new town park takes place in the Norridgewock Bicentennial year. The big white pine, for which this park was created, is clearly historical in itself. A recent dating of the tree was attempted by drawing a thin core of wood with an increment borer. The borer was not long enough to reach the center of the tree, but by extrapolation, from the 90 odd annual growth rings counted in one foot of core sample, it is now evident that the pine is far older than our town. A safe guess would put it between 250 and 300 years of age. The tree, older even than these United States, saw the forest primeval, before the arrival of the early settler. It's life encompasses all of American history to date. The years 1825 and 1987 were years of high risk for the tree. In 1825 a big forest fire swept the area. The tree was spared by its wet location, and probably protected by Alder Brook. The site worked against the tree in the 1987 flood when Alder Brook filled the swampy hollow where the tree resides. Waters lapped at the roots and trunk from all sides, but failed to topple the venerable giant.

The late Ashley J. Wing, during his ownership of the land, protected and promulgated public interest in the tree. The park has been named in recognition of him and his surviving family members, who by unanimous philanthropic intent, have donated this land to the town.

DEDICATION

THE ASHLEY J. WING FAMILY MEMORIAL PARK

A BICENTENNIAL EVENT

June 17, 1988 - 4:00 p.m.

- Opening PrayerRev. Cecil Jones
- Opening Remarks.....State Rep. Alex Richa
- Historical Background and How the Park Came to Be
 - Julie Magoon.....Town Manager
 - Freda KellyWing Descendant
 - Elizabeth Miller.....Local Historian
 - Howard Jackson.....Local Volunteer
- Volunteerism)
- Community Stewardship).....Warren Balgooyen
- Park Management)
- Nature Walk to Pines & beyondWarren Balgooyen

Before entering the park it must be understood that some recreational activities are not compatible with the maintenance of a natural area. Use of the area by any off road vehicle is not permitted. Picnicking will be allowed in designated areas. Visitors are asked to please stay on the paths and refrain from littering.

The maintenance of the park depends in large measure on volunteer effort. Anyone who wishes to assist may contact the town office, or any member of the steering committee.

The conservation minded donor, and all those who assisted with the establishment and planning for this beautiful park welcome your assistance in protecting this unique spot.

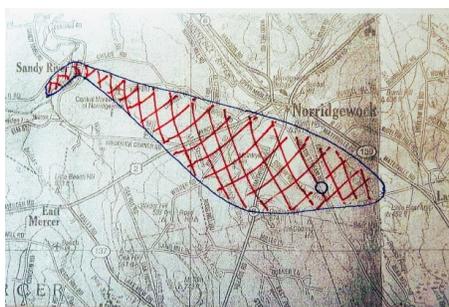


Sidebar: The Great Fire of 1825 Threatened the Huge Pines

One of the key histories of Norridgewock, *The Early Days of Norridgewock* by Henrietta Danforth Wood, includes a description of the Great Fire of 1825 that ripped through the South Village. The description is a direct quote from a piece written by Marshall Hale one of 19th Century Norridgewock's "pillars of the community". Based on the written description Eastman Wilder, NHS historian, was able to plot the likely path of the fire. By Eastman's calculations the fire went down Sandy River (approximately 282 Sandy River Road) and then changed direction going toward Dodlin and Bear Hill. The small circle on his map indicates the general vicinity of AWP. Despite the inferno the great pines themselves survived and continued their reach for the sky. (Thanks to Ashley Wing's stewardship a century later, the trees have also been spared another hazard: ending up in a lumber yard!)

The quote from *Early Days*/ Marshall Hale's Diary:

"Norridgewock suffered greatly by the drought and great forest fires of 1825. The first fires were on the south side of the river. It commenced by clearing land in Starks and when it reached the town line the inhabitants turned out en masse to stay its onward progress. I was present to assist but when I arrived on the ground I was surprised by the modus operandi of fighting fire. Instead they were busy setting what they termed back fires but there was no staying it. Onward it came, licking up everything in its way, dry or green. It seemed to linger in the muck beds doing great damage to the soil. The fire brigade made a stand in the southwestern part of the town. Mr. James Mills had made a clearing there, built a log hut and made a small house. He had some hay and straw stacks but the efforts of the firefighters proved unavailing. The west wind blew the flames over the bounds and human efforts were fruitless. The Mill Stream seemed no barrier, over it went and up the hill and commenced the sad havoc on the plains which extend east from Martin Stream to the base of Otis Hill. There it stayed. The plains of Norridgewock were covered with a growth of timber: beech, maple, hemlock, spruce and pine. The low, moist land produced a growth of huge pines from two to five feet in diameter. The forest was so dry that the coarse bark of the hemlock would readily burn from the roots to the very top and scatter the embers right and left. Onward it went over log and brook until Bear Hill and its surroundings were all ablaze. A magnificent sight it was in the night. The vast forest of fire and scattered trees soon began to fall, forming a tangled mass that would defy a regiment of pioneers. The value of this territory was a dead loss. Wood and charcoal were cheap for some time. The soil was mostly a sandy loam with water near the surface. The wood/timber worth twice the value of the land."



SQUIRE JOHN WARE of NORRIDGEWOCK

by Eastman Wilder



About 250 years ago a young man came to Norridgewock with nothing but a suit of clothes. He began keeping a store, and when he left town 30 years later he had the biggest store north of Augusta. He had done much to improve Norridgewock, had helped create Somerset County, and had been largely responsible for making Norridgewock the county seat. Along with local fame he was probably the richest man in Somerset County when he died.

Remarkable John Ware was born in 1767 in Groton MA, the son of Ephraim Ware III, a doctor – but maybe not much of one as a competitor called Ephraim a quack. Ephraim apprenticed young John to a cooper, gave up any medical practice he had, and moved up to the Maine wilderness. John learned barrel making so quickly and well that his master released him before he was 20. Then John followed his father and older brother Abel to the part of Solon, Maine then called “Caratunk”.

That’s probably when John made his “chopping”, i.e. cleared a piece of land. Another man his age from Groton, David Moore, had a thriving store in Norridgewock. Life in town sounded a lot more promising than tree chopping, so John came to Norridgewock and set up barrel making in a small shop near River Road and Willow Street. Although apparently no deeds were recorded John soon sold his Solon land for 150 bushels of rye. In his own barrels he somehow rafted the rye down to Fort Western in Augusta where he traded the rye for supplies which he brought back to Norridgewock. He went into business with Moore, so successfully that in 1799 he bought Moore out. John Ware’s store at the busiest intersection of town was busy from morning to night as he traded with both settlers and Indians. He understood the nature of the Indians, treated them fairly and they liked him. They came from miles around to sell him their furs which was very advantageous to both parties. No doubt some “fire water” was also traded.

The Ware store was on the river bank, its back propped up over the water. One time an Indian sold John a beaver which John kept as a pet in his store. He kept the beaver indoors during the day, much to the enjoyment of visitors, and let it out at night. One night when high water was expected John didn’t let the beaver out. In the morning he found a lot of water on the floor; the river had flooded in under the door. To try to stop the flood his beaver had cut up several chairs and tried to build a dam by the door. Ware’s store was later moved up the street to just below the Danforth Tavern. It had many owners over the years and as “the old red store” finally burned about 1870. Except for being married to his business John Ware was always single. He was a hard worker, apparently devoting every minute to his store. At night by candle light he would work on his accounts and weigh out packages of things like beans and wheat, so they’d be ready to sell in daytime. He was what we’d call “tight”, frugal, careful with every penny and driving close bargains. He gave credit to those he trusted, asking 5 pecks at the end of one year for every bushel loaned. (That would be a 25% interest rate.) But for people who gave John trouble, William Allen says he used the law with rigorous severity. Someone disgruntled said John used his fist on the scales when he weighed things, but this probably wasn’t true.

In 1802 John took Richard Sawtelle into partnership. Richard had married John’s sister Sarah in 1796 and lived in “the Sawtelle house” on the corner of Willow Street. When the house was taken down by our Jeff McAllister a few years ago he found in it an old sign for John Ware’s store and it now hangs in our barn. After Richard became county sheriff John partnered with



Calvin Selden and then with Amos Fletcher, a nephew-in-law of John and the father of Caroline Fletcher Dole. His partnerships freed John to pursue his many civic interests:

- * In 1794 he was on the committee to build the meeting house, the town's landmark until 1947. John furnished nails, glass and the very necessary rum for the builders.
- * In 1797 he was one of 24 who formed the town's first church, (paid \$54 for his pew, about \$800 today).
- * He was town treasurer 4 years, and moderator one year.
- * He was the town's first postmaster, probably having the post office in his store.
- * When a Social Library was formed in town John Ware bought 10 shares.
- * In 1810 he gave an acre of land for the County jail, and \$800 toward the jail.
- * When trees were planted along the street John furnished the rum.
- * He was agent and a proprietor of the first bridge built over the Kennebec River.
- When the bell from Father Rasle's chapel was found many years after the fire, he acquired it and later gave it to the Maine Historical Society.

In 1808 and 1809 John Ware was a representative to the General Court in Boston, the forerunner of the Massachusetts Legislature. Somehow he found the time - trips to Boston must have taken 3 or 4 days by stagecoach, but maybe boats could go quicker on the Kennebec. John was on the Court when it split Somerset County off from Kennebec County in 1809. The new county would need a 'county seat' and John Ware was strongly in favor of it being at Norridgewock, the most important town in the area. Norridgewock had several mills on Mill Stream and at least 2 stagecoach lines crossed in town. Other towns, especially Anson and Canaan also wanted the seat. John said he was happy to have them get everything they deserved. Asked what that was, he said "The gallows to Anson and the whipping post to Canaan." To favor Norridgewock John offered his house to the county for a court house. Thanks largely to him Norridgewock got the county seat, and held it until 1872. Court was held in the Ware house for 10 years, then a proper court house was built. John Ware's house (built 1803) still stands on River Road today.



Due to John Ware's affluence he was called Squire Ware. He was influential in appointing the first officers of Somerset County, but after a few years his influence diminished. Roads to other towns were better, distances were shrinking. People in other towns were voted into office so he was less surrounded by good-old-boy friends

By 1817 a bank was wanted in the county. Naturally John wanted it in Norridgewock, but by then Skowhegan had grown and people there wanted the bank too. John was the "monied" man of the area and the planners knew the bank would need his money. But now John's character was in question. William Allen says John had an excitable temperament. Someone asked if John was the right sort of man to be connected with a bank. "His money is good enough, that's true." John's insistence on Norridgewock resulted in a stalemate until after he died, then in 1833 a bank was formed in Skowhegan.

By 1817 John was very unhappy over his Norridgewock taxes. Leaving his business with Selden and Fletcher he moved first to Bloomfield (Skowhegan) and then to Athens where his brother Abel's family lived. Abel had died in 1803 and maybe now John felt needed. In 1820 John Ware was "in commerce" in Athens with Abel's widow and 4 children in the household.

William Allen says John Ware was indefatigable in accumulating property. Deed records in Lincoln, Kennebec and Somerset counties show John made about 500 deeds buying and selling property, mostly in the last 20 years of his life.

John Ware was afflicted with dropsy (edema or swelling) for many years. He was also troubled by spectral illusions. (Does that mean he saw ghosts?) He believed he was visited by supernatural messengers. Maybe his dispute with taxes, the increasing isolation, and the changes in character were other indications of a failing mind.

From starting with nothing John Ware had become quite wealthy, probably the wealthiest man in Somerset County. His estate worth about \$200,000 would be about 8 million today. John kept changing his will, even a week before he died. He left half of his estate to Abel's son John, who would become one of the directors of the new bank and the president of a railroad. The will was famously contested by others in the family but it was finally approved. For heirs in Norridgewock silver coins in kegs arrived by stagecoach, and sat overnight in Danforth Tavern's barroom with the door unlocked. John Ware died in Athens in 1829 at 62. There's a small grave marker for him in an enormous Ware family cemetery plot in Waterville. His stone says "John Ware ESQR" meaning Esquire. His father, brother, and other Wares also have small markers there as probably arranged by the now wealthy nephew John Ware. A cemetery in Athens also has a Ware tomb, so our John Ware Esquire may be resting at either.

A few pictures from the time of the dedication of the Ashley Wing Memorial Park



The Big Pine

Pines of Maine

O pines of Maine, dear pines of Maine
With thy proud heads uplifted high

Telling thy tales of days long dead
To all the woods and streams and sky.

O pines upon Maine's thousand hills,
Whose perfume scents the restless air

Whose voices sooth our sleep at night
Sweet as a softly murmured prayer.



Howard and Gladys Jackson by The Big Pine

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