



Norridgewock Historical Society Newsletter * Winter 2022

President's Report

I am writing this letter as March arrives and with it hopes of an early spring. With March also comes one of the great traditions of our town, the Norridgewock Annual Town Meeting. Thus, I thought it would be interesting to look at some historic decisions/warrants from the past. I've been particularly mindful of late of our NHS Museum neighbor, The Grange Hall. Let's preserve it!

The Covid era continues to impact some NHS activities. However, it was a great pleasure to be able to participate in the 2021 Town Holiday Stroll with our 4th Annual Classic Christmas Trees Open House and we are cautiously optimistic about resuming our monthly meetings: April – November, 4th Wednesday @ 6:30 P.M.

Many thanks to all for your continued support of NHS! Special thanks also to Tom and Donna Michewich and Eastman Wilder for all the time they give to NHS and to DMO Landscaping for plowing so we have been able to easily access the building this winter.

In keeping with our strong commitment to the importance of preservation this spring we will begin Museum roof repairs/painting and window-related restorations.

We hope to see you at our first meeting of the season, Wednesday, April 27.

Becky Ketchum,

President of NHS

and Newsletter Editor.

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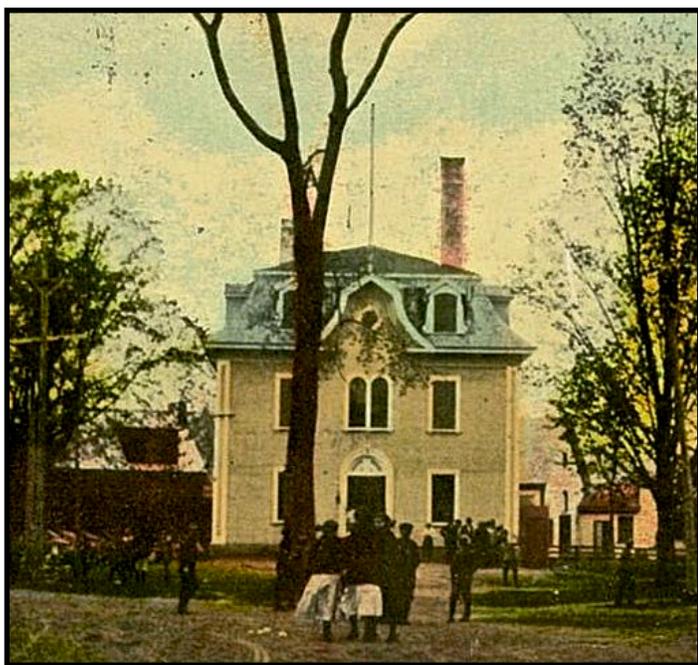
A Brief History: The Grange Hall/Eaton School; Home to the Masons, too! *by Becky Ketchum*



One of the great icons of our town is "The Grange Hall", (originally commissioned to house The Eaton School). In June, 1988 the Maine Historic Preservation Commission and the Department of the Interior in Washington, D.C. and under the provisions of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 entered the building upon the National Register of Historic Places. The declaration stated that: *"By inclusion in the National Register the building is recognized as a part of the Historical and Cultural Heritage of our nation and should be preserved as a living part of our community life and development in order to give a sense of orientation to the American people."*

Grange Hall (continued)

Even before the opening of the Eaton School, Norridgewock had a strong reputation as a champion of educational opportunities for its young people with the establishment of The Female Academy in 1837. (The Female Academy, which currently houses the Norridgewock Historical Society, is also on the National Register of Historic Places.) The Academy was a highly successful school and ran until 1860. In 1865, Hamlin Eaton came to town and engaged town support to start a school here. At first the school used the Female Academy and the old Village School on the north side of the river. However, the student body grew very quickly and after only one term more space was required. A subscription drive (which was a fairly common practice in that era) was held to raise money to build a large school on the corner lot next to the Female Academy building. One of the major subscribers was Lebanon Lodge No. 116 F. and A. Masons whose plan was to utilize the third story of the building as a meeting hall. (The Masons occupied the third floor for over 100 years, from 1867-1986. If you look at the front of the building you can still see the place on the façade where the Mason's emblem was affixed.)



Hamlin Eaton ran the school until 1883. For a few years after he left the building was used for other schooling (private and public) and then usage lapsed until about 1895 when it re-opened as the Norridgewock High School. It served as the high school until 1916. One of the considerations for the building's eligibility for the National Register, as stated by the Maine Preservation Commission, reads: *"The building's long history as the focus of Norridgewock's educational activities is of particular associative significance. Built from local donations, the former school house embodies the spirit of this community's 19th century interest in providing a place for the instruction of its youth."*

When Did the Building Become the Grange Hall?

The story of how the building became the Grange Hall further embodies the spirit of the community – in this case the Grange's spirit. Just as the Eaton School had outgrown its original housing in the Female Academy, the Norridgewock High School started to outgrow the Eaton School Building. For a number of years, the need for a new high school building was a topic of concern for the town. Meanwhile one block away from the school, on the corner where Skowhegan Savings Bank is today, the Grange had erected a huge building in 1906. (Photo below taken circa 1910).



Grange records show that as of January 1916 the Grange had 223 members — down from its post-Civil War peak, but still a sizable body and a number were "pillars of the community" /elected town officials. Thus, it is not surprising that the Grange was actively involved in conversations surrounding the need for a bigger high school.

Grange Hall (continued)

Ultimately, the Grange started to think about their building as a solution to the problem of high school housing. The following was recorded in the Grange meeting notes for 11/18/1915:

Voted that the trustees should look into the matter of either selling or exchanging the Grange property if the town so desires.

On 12/16/1915 the trustees made their report and it was accepted by the members.

Excerpts from the records of Town Meeting, March 6, 1916 show that in response to warrants 34-35 the inhabitants of the Town:

34: Voted to accept the report of the special committee appointed to investigate and make recommendations in relation to the building of new school buildings for the village schools in which they recommend the exchange of the High School building and the Grange Hall.

35: Voted that the selectmen be authorized to pay the owners of the Grange Hall \$4,500 (according to 2021 inflation chart this would be \$113,400 today) and voted that \$10,000 be appropriated in effecting the exchange and making the necessary changes in the Grange Hall as will be needed for school purpose.

Grange meeting notes June 1916 include this: "Matter of moving into new hall left to the trustees. No meetings will be held in July".

In fact, no meetings were held in August either. The only mention of the Grange's transition to the current Grange Hall is this notation found at the top of the page for the first meeting in September: "9/17/16 New Grange Hall ". As of this writing, the Grange has been meeting in what we know today as "The Grange Hall", for over 100 years!

For the record: The selectmen at the time of the switch were C.J. Savage, H.L. ("Harry")Heald and Herbert A. Gilman.

All three selectmen were officers of the Grange, too. Horace S. Jones was the Master of the Grange in 1916; Harry Heald was a Grange trustee at the time and served as Master of the Grange a number of times over the years 1912-19.

Architecture/The Architect Were Also Key Factors in Making the National Historical Register

The building is significant historically not only for education and use as a social/meeting hall, but also architecture. It is one of the first known designs by Charles F. Douglas, a Maine born architect whose career bears considerable distinction. The majority of his Maine commissions are in Auburn and Lewiston. However, Norridgewock is where he built not only The Eaton School but also his spectacular Italianate style villa (1868). This house also made it to the National Register of Historic Places. It is located across the street from the Town Office.



The Somerset Agricultural Society (SAS) by Eastman Wilder

The Somerset Agricultural Society (SAS) was formed January 1, 1818 in Norridgewock. That was two years before Maine was formed, before any government agency was teaching farmers how to farm. The purpose of the SAS was to introduce new breeds of farm animals, new species of grain, seeds, fruit trees and plants, new machines and tools. Anyone could join SAS by paying \$1 per year and 141 men did so in the first year, from all over Somerset County and a few beyond. In June 1819 the SAS was made a corporation by act of Legislature.

The Maine Historical Society has an original hand bill for the October 1819 SAS Cattle Show and Exhibition:

THE SOMERSET AGRICULTURAL SOCIETY
will have a
CATTLE SHOW AND EXHIBITION OF MANUFACTURES
at the Court House, in Norridgewock
on Tuesday October 19, 1819, at 9 A.M.
PRIZES - for the best pair of oxen, \$6
for the best bull, \$4
for the best colt, \$3
for the best home-made cloth, not less than 10 yards, \$4
for the best flannel, \$3
for the best cheese made in the County, \$5
for the best plough, \$2
for the best mechanical invention for agriculture, \$5
and for the person who has raised the greatest quantity of good clean wheat,
on one acre of ploughed ground, this season, in the County, \$12.00.

These and other prizes announced on a handbill published at Norridgewock,
August 4, 1819. Signed, Wm Allen, Jr. Treasurer

SAS was the project of a few progressive men mostly in their 40's. Richard Sawtelle of Norridgewock was voted President the first year, Eleazer Coburn of Bloomfield (Skowhegan) the second year. We're puzzled by claims made by Skowhegan State Fair that it was organized in late 1818 as the "Somerset Central Agricultural Society" with its first fair held in January 1819. The fair claims Eleazer Coburn was the first president of the Fair,

succeeded in 1820 by Richard Sawtelle. We can't disprove these claims, but we have the original records of SAS for our facts. The organizations may have been one and the same, or they may have been separate, as 57 similar agricultural groups had formed in Maine by 1869.

Maine became a State on March 3, 1820. Twelve days earlier the SAS met and planned a procession to go from the Danforth Tavern down the road to the Court House, consisting of SAS officers, orator and chaplain, trustees, members, and finally any interested citizens.



Danforth Tavern on River Road (above); the Court House, which was close by, is shown below.



The Somerset Agricultural Society (continued)

It seems the SAS was prominent in Norridgewock, but membership was already dwindling. In 1821 dues were reduced to fifty cents, yet only 24 members paid. The next year only 12 members paid. Yet funds kept coming from somewhere because SAS voted \$8 to \$50 each for rams, bulls and stud horses kept at specific villages in order to accommodate SAS farmers. A Miss Rowell was voted \$1 for “a very excellent pair of worsted hose” she had made.

Bylaws required annual or more often meetings of both SAS members and trustees, but many meetings had to be postponed for lack of quorum. Finally in 1836 it was voted to divide the remaining

funds in the treasury, half to be used in setting out trees by the road and other useful agricultural purposes in or near the village in Norridgewock”, and the other half for useful agricultural purposes near Skowhegan village. And it was voted to deposit the SAS records and treasurer’s books with the Town Clerk of Norridgewock, and to suspend all further SAS proceedings. The SAS record book was discovered in the Town Office in the summer of 2021 and is now part of the archives of the Norridgewock Historical Society. Thank you, town clerks of nearly 200 years, for bringing us the early history of agriculture in Somerset County.



About Richard Sawtelle

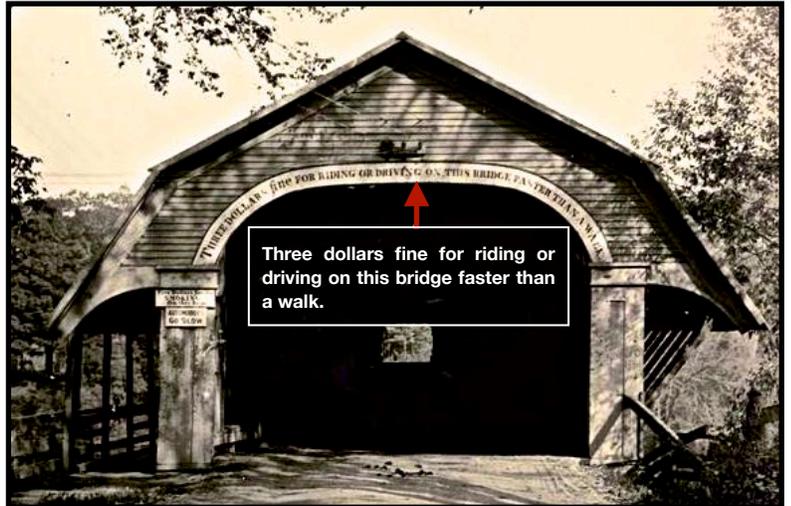
Richard Sawtelle, who was the first president of SAS, was one of the early settlers of the North Village of Norridgewock (1801). He owned a house with attached trading post next to the current Congregational Church building on River Road. Unfortunately, the house was taken down several years ago. Many of you will remember the house. (The postcard above shows the Sawtelle house along with a well-known icon of the early town, “the old willow”.)

The Covered Bridge

(Before the Advent of Speed Bumps)

While pursuing old Town Reports for the Grange Hall story I noticed this warrant from the March 1912 Town Meeting:

34 To see if the Town will adapt a law to prevent automobiles and teams and drivers from crossing the covered bridge at a rate of speed faster than a walk. **The warrant passed !**



This bridge was erected in 1870 and was used until the "new" bridge was built in 1928.



View of the covered bridge SIDE by side the new bridge. The covered bridge was demolished in 1929.



A look inside the bridge.

The covered bridge can be seen in the background and to the right in this photo of the old railroad bridge.



Some More Photos from the NHS "Vault"



High mud season over 100 years ago: taking a right turn coming off the covered bridge onto River Road. The Quinnebasset Hotel is on the right (burned in 1902).

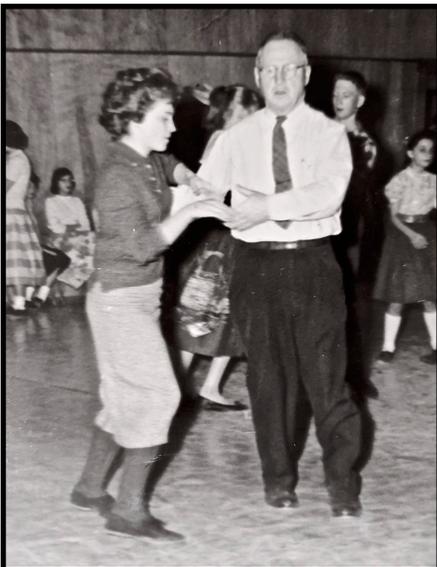


Back in the days when Norridgewock had a movie theater on Main Street (photo circa 1913, based on the movie poster in the window).

Please help us with our photo archives !

Can you identify any of the students that beloved principal Bar Hatfield is dancing with? Also, a special request: We are looking to complete our collection of Norridgewock High School yearbooks and senior class group photos. We would also like to have Central Grade School graduation photos.

Contact Becky if you can help. THANKS !





Norridgewock Historical Society
P O Box 903
Norridgewock, Maine 04957

If you haven't already, please join the Norridgewock Historical Society !!!

Dues/Contribution Form

Make check payable to NHS. Send to NHS at P O Box 903, Norridgewock, ME 04957

Name: _____

Address: _____

City/State: _____

Zip Code: _____

Phone # _____

Email Address: _____

Basic Membership: \$10

Supporter: \$25

Patron: \$50

Conservator: \$100

Business Ad: \$75