



Norridgewock Historical Society

Newsletter: Spring 2026

Birthplace of “Sophie May” Added to NHS Registry of Historic Homes ! (RK)

Rebecca Sophia Clark (“ Sophie May”) was born on February 22, 1833 in the last house on Maple Street (near the intersection of River Road). The house is currently owned by NHS members Charlie and Carmen Dickinson. The age of the house had been pondered for many years, with historical lore suggesting that it was built in the late 1790’s. In an effort to pinpoint the date Nathan Richards, creator of the NHS Registry of Historic Homes, took up the task of tracing the deed chain. Unfortunately deed chains are not as easy to come by as simply going online to the Somerset County Registry of Deeds and calling up an address. The chain is determined by tracing the transfer of the deed from one owner to another over the years. Nathan found that in total over its 200+ years the property changed hands about a dozen times! The original deed for the land was issued in 1812 and at that time there were no buildings on the property. Using census data, tax records, marriage records, etcetera Nathan estimates that the house was built circa 1825. Specifically, Nathan reported: John Clark’s son Asa (age 27 at the time) received the deed to the land from his father in 1812. The 1820 Census reveals that Asa was still living with his father . However, the 1830 census clearly shows Asa with his own household, living nearby, presumably in his own house. The Vital Records of Norridgewock show that Asa married Sophia Bates in 1824. At that time, it was very unusual for a man to build a house before marriage. An average period of time for a house to be built in the 1820’s was 7-9 months. Along with tax records of the time, this information *suggests* an approximate construction date of 1825.

Deed chain completed, the home was added to the NHS Registry and a Registry plaque put up on the house!



Charlie & Carmen



A Few Tidbits about Asa Clark ...

Asa and Sophia raised five children to adulthood: Harriet (born 1826), William (1830), Rebecca (1833), Mary (1836) and Sarah (author "Penn Shirley", 1840). They lost one child (born 1828). The children were adults when Asa sold the house (1864) and moved to what is known today as the Sophie May Home (Sophie May Lane).

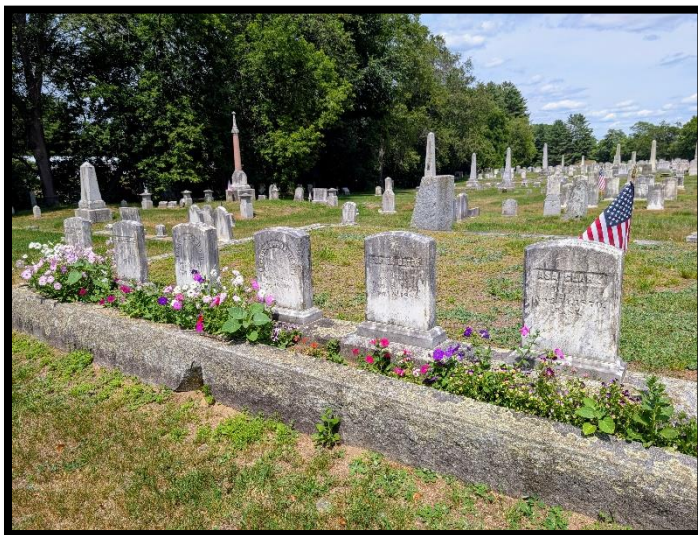
While Sophie May and to some extent her sister Penn Shirley were the famous members of the family, father Asa Clark was well-known locally, a true pillar of the community. Among Asa's credits:

- Elected Registrar of Deeds in 1821 and held the office by re-elections until 1847
- Selectman and Assessor for 12 years (1821- 31 and 1841)
- Town Clerk and Justice of the Peace for a few years in the mid-1830's

Asa's father John Clark (Revolutionary War Veteran) was one of the Town's early settlers. Newlywed John and his wife Dorcas (who was expecting their first child) came to town all the way from Hallowell by canoe (loaded with household goods) in late November 1777. They came by canoe after finding the roads impassable due to ice and snow. Fortunately, John had spent the summers of 1776 & 1777 clearing his village lot and building a log cabin so at least they had a place to go when they disembarked on the wintry shores of the Kennebec!

A Visit to Sophie May's Grave

Sophie May's grave at Old Oak Cemetery is just a short hop from the Asa Clark house. The picture below on the left shows the Asa Clark family lot; on the right, a close-up of Sophie May's stone which is in the middle of the lot.



For years Sallie Wilder, President of the Village Improvement Society, has planted flowers at Sophie May's grave. If you want to visit the site it is easy to spot from the road during the summer months. Heading toward Skowhegan about 10-12 "rows" down from the first row of the cemetery look for a row of bright colored petunias! (The Asa Clark family lot is not close to the road, so look for flowers that are in a middle row.) The tallest pillar style monument (pink if you have a color copy of the newsletter) in the far left of the photo above is also a good aid in locating the Asa Clark family lot.

The Danforth Tavern: Eastman Wilder Recalls Its History (EW)

Have you looked around Norridgewock lately? Are you one who used to know the dear old town as well as your kitchen stove, but now can't quite remember which building was where? If you took a stroll today on River Road from the north end of the bridge down past the old cemetery, you might think you had missed one old landmark. But no, you didn't miss it—the famous 200+ year old Danforth Tavern that was located at 14 River Road is gone! It was demolished in 2017.



The Tavern was built by Israel Danforth in 1806 and lovingly kept in the Danforth family for 150 years before being sold outside the family. In 1804 Israel, a saddle maker by trade, bought 2.5 acres next to the town common where the town's meeting house already stood. There in 1806 he put up a building about 25 x 25 for his young Danforth family. Then in 1809 Norridgewock became the county seat and a courthouse was built right next door to the Danforth homestead. People flocking into town on county business needed meals and a place to stay. Seeing opportunity Danforth added onto the back of his house almost doubling its size. In 1814 a sign with "I. Danforth" drawn inside a picture of a heart (a symbol that was commonly used in those days to indicate a tavern) was fastened to the front door. Soon an east wing was also added that included what would quickly become a very popular barroom.

In those days transportation was limited to stagecoach, except for horseback and wagon or sleigh. Stages came to town from all directions but how did stage travelers cross the river? The first bridge was built in 1810 but it and those that followed were often not usable. When there was no bridge, a ferry could be used part of the year, but could stagecoach and horses go onto a ferry? Maybe the river could be forded in summer, otherwise travelers who had to get across must have gone to Canaan (Skowhegan)

Anson. Delays plus stayovers for court business must have been frequent, so other hotels were built on both sides of the river, all with shelter for a number of horses.

Nine of Israel's 11 children survived to adulthood (5 sons/4 daughters) and most helped run the tavern. Buying more adjacent land enabled farming. After Israel died in 1855 sons David and Calvin ran the tavern, their sisters doing a lot of the work. It was a flourishing business known for good cooking (dinners cost 25 cents). When there was talk of moving the county seat to Skowhegan one county judge said he didn't want the courthouse any further from the Danforth Tavern than it was right then.

But Skowhegan did get the county seat in 1872. Then the railroad came to town in 1873, another huge blow to the town's stagecoach business. In 1873 David Danforth took down the 1814 tavern sign saying the work was getting to be too much for his sisters. Still the family/ descendants lived there, gradually closing off fireplaces and moving furniture to the attic. Finally in 1956 it was sold outside the family and used as rental property for many years before someone bought it intending to renovate it and use it as a single-family residence. But the big building was already too much to keep up, and year by year it only got worse. Clapboards were coming loose, windows were broken, water was getting in—and every year there were taxes. It sat vacant for a number of years. In 2016 the property was deemed to be dangerous and the Norridgewock Board of Selectmen ordered the building's removal. It was demolished in 2017. A very sad ending to a place that played such an important part in our Town's history.

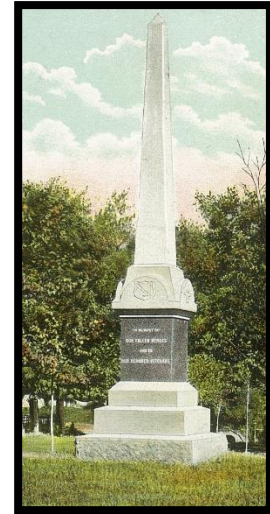


Editor Note: In the last two chapters of her book *Early Days of Norridgewock*, Henrietta Danforth Wood, who lived in the house for a number of years, described some features of the property and the work that Israel's family did when they ran the tavern. Some of the property features that she wrote about are: 32 rooms / all beautifully furnished; a ballroom on the second floor with arched ceilings for good music acoustics; a large dining room (where the male guests ate hearty, multi-course meals while the women, thought too delicate to eat such fare, stayed upstairs in the ballroom having tea and toast). A total of 70 cords of wood were burned annually in the 12 fireplaces. In the backyard there was a stable with stalls for 40 horses and a large barn for cows and another for sheep. She wrote that "All that went into making these buildings, even the nails, was done by hand ."

As far as jobs for the family members: Israel and his oldest son were saddlers (a small building was erected on the street for this work and the front room of the building used for a social library). The other four sons farmed and managed the inn. The women, in addition to housekeeping, did spinning, weaving, dyeing and made soap and dipped candles. One of the daughters even kept silk worms for sewing silk!

Norridgewock's Civil War / Soldiers Monument (RK)

The Village Improvement Society ("VIS") gave the monument to the town 125 years ago (1901). It is located on the green near the Post Office. (In the photo below the house w/ fence is where the PO is today.)

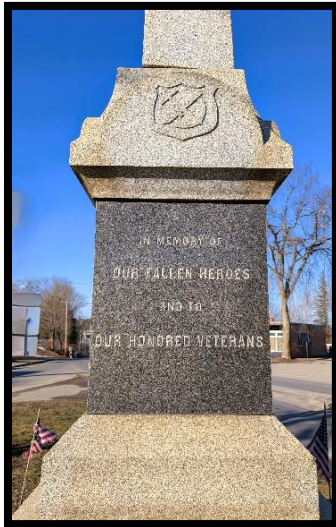


In the late 1800's the land where the monument was erected was a sandy knoll often used as a "dumping ground" (literally—farmers/businessmen left their horses and cattle on the knoll while they did their business in town). During the Civil War years, a flag pole was erected there along with a sign where a list of "Dead-Wounded-Missing" was updated daily. At some point the bandstand that was on Main Street just past the little bridge over the Mill Steam was moved there. (Later it was moved across the street to the corner of Perkins & Main in order to make room for the monument.)

In 1896 "VIS", which had been founded in 1892 and was all women, started cleaning up the area. After improving the grounds, they began raising money for a monument. In a relatively short time through numerous simple fund-raiser events, they raised a total of \$600-700. Some of the local quarry owners stepped up and donated some granite; quarries/others donated time or reduced the price of their labor.



With the exception of the black stone that came from Quincy, Massachusetts the monument is made of Norridgewock granite. The inscription on the shaft reads: ***In Memory of Our Fallen Heroes and to Our Honored Veterans.***

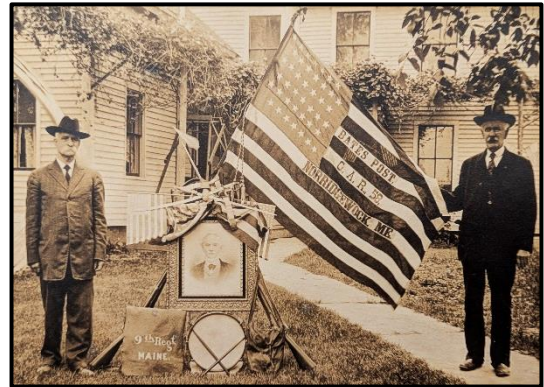


Generally referred to today as the “Civil War Monument”, it was originally known as the “Soldiers” or “Soldiers and Sailors” Monument. If you take a walk around the monument and look just above the black stone, you’ll see carvings of Civil War era military symbols such as the emblem shown in this photo.

The monument was dedicated on Memorial Day ,May 30, 1901. There was a big parade with several bands including the popular Norridgewock Cadet Band. The procession was from the G.A.R. Headquarters to Riverview Cemetery on Upper Main Street. Wreaths were laid and then the Cadet Band led the procession to the monument for the unveiling and dedication ceremony.

The three pictures shown below are not from the dedication ceremony, but are from that time period so they have been shown to help provide a sense of the day.

First photo: The bandstand on the corner of Perkins and Main Street. The photo to the right was taken in front of G.A.R. Bates Post No. 58 headquarters on Memorial day 1903. Post Commander Billy Hobbs is on the right/ Herbert Hale on the left. Third photo bottom of page: The Cadet Band was formed around the turn of the century and played until WWI. Photo was taken in front of M. Hale house on Depot Street.



Norridgewock Cadet Band:

Shown from L to R: George Lyons, Jr., Scott Rogers, Verne Blaisdell, Vernon Keene ,Harry Staples, George Lyons, Sr., Percy Berry, Carroll Staples, Phillip Carr, Lyndon Hale, Harold Pierce, Thomas Theobold, George Sawyer, Charles Oliver, Leland Moore and Ulmont Stanley.

NHS 2025 Letter Report to the Town of Norridgewock (RK)

Every year NHS submits a letter report to the Town. The letter is published in the *Town of Norridgewock Annual Report*. Whereas many of our newsletter readers are “from away” or live locally but may not have read this year’s town report, a copy of our 2025 letter has been posted in the box below.

NORRIDGEWOCK HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Explore! Dream! Discover!

If you have not visited our museum or have not been there recently, put it on your “to do” list for 2026! Come with a group (family/friends/an organization you are in) or by yourself. We are open by appointment April to October. To set up an appointment visit our website (Norridgewock Historical Society.org) . The tour is an enjoyable experience for all ages -- and it’s free!

Also consider coming to an NHS meeting/program the fourth Wednesday of the month, (6:30 PM), April - October.

Some of our programs this past year included: Gardening in New England (Kathy Hopkins), Growing Up on Winding Hill (Bob Farley), Cemeteries- Where History Comes Alive! (Colby Professor Veronique Plesch), Stories About Rural Maine Life (author Lew-Ellyn Hughes) and a series on Main Street Area Businesses 1860-1960 (Becky Ketchum).

We greatly appreciated the community’s support of our two 2025 fund raisers, the Duck Drop during Oosoola Days and our Fall Yard Sale. Special thanks to Dave Obert /DMO Landscaping for winter plowing and for conducting the Duck Drop.

One of our favorite events of the year was when the Mill Stream Elementary School third graders visited in June. The tour started with a brief talk about the Museum and Norridgewock’s History and was followed by a tour of all the rooms, including the barn. The class split into three groups for the tour and the tour hosts were Nathan Richards and retired teachers Janice Malek and Barbara Winslow. A few photos from the 2025 visit :



Submitted by: Rebecca Ketchum, President of NHS



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To:



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NHS Museum number: 207 634- 5032 or contact us through our website: [Norridgewock Historical Society.Org](http://NorridgewockHistoricalSociety.Org)

**Basic Membership \$10/ Supporter \$25/ Patron \$50/ Conservator \$100*