

# PAST AND PRESENT, PLACE AND PEOPLE: SOME OXFORD HILLS HISTORY

by David Sanderson



Oxford Hills farmland of the first settlers



Norway town center with first community settlement



Norway town center 1950



The 200th anniversary of Oxford County offers a moment to consider the character of the place in which we live and the reasons people continue coming here to live after two centuries. The character of the Oxford Hills starts with the glacier. Fifteen thousand years ago a mile-thick sheet of ice covered it all. The ice had traveled slowly southeastward, scraping and gouging. It slid up the hills as it came, then froze to the downhill side, ripped the bedrock apart and carried it along. The weight of the ice sheet forced the earth's crust downward, so that the receding glacier left the sea to cover much of southern Maine. The foot of Norway's Main Street was the shore of an estuary, and Oxford Plains is the sand and gravel carried into the ocean from the melting glacier 12,000 years ago.

Our first settlers found that the ice had left a place that was wilder, rougher, and less kind to them than the homes they had left in Massachusetts. The land was rocky, with granite cliffs and bedrock exposed, all hills and valleys—with the best land often sloping uplands—and dotted with ponds and lakes. Birch, beech, and maple forested the hills; river valleys were sandy plains covered with huge white pine and hemlock—"black growth," the settlers called it.

But there was great beauty for the eyes here, even for people whose ancestors in Massachusetts had seen the wilderness as an enemy to be driven back so that farms and towns could be built. Henry Warren, Waterford's first historian, evokes the sight his grandfather Samuel saw when he first came to explore his land:

*"He came to Waterford from the Kennebec guided by his pocket compass. Late one afternoon he reached the top of Beech hill. Climbing a tree to get his bearings he took in the prospect. Before him lay that grand amphitheatre of mountains, stretching from Umbagog on the north to Ossipee on the south, all clothed with the modest yet rich garment that kindly Nature gave them, except where some bald granite face peered through the green robes that enswathed it. Ponds flashed like diamonds below him, while Long Lake stretched out a thread of silver toward Sebago and the sea. A virgin forest unscarred by fire kindly clothed every hill, hiding all physical deformities."*

We know how Samuel Warren felt because two hundred years later these are scenes and feelings that we still experience and value: they are an important part of the character of our towns that we would not willingly give up. But those uplifting distant prospects are not all, says Henry: *"The disrobing of Nature proves often a sad disenchantment. A slope of ten thousand acres, when clothed with a heavy forest growth, shows none of its bogs or knolls, and but few of its rocks."* We know this also—and it is safe to say that our feelings as we work to cultivate and manage our land today are probably not so very different from those of our ancestors.

What is certainly different today is that we come to a settled place, enriched by two hundred years of history. It is a place where people may come to "retire," to live released from the stresses that have filled their

lives, and to join a community that values its history while it works to harness its creative energies to move forward. It was a very different place for the first men and women who came here. They had consciously abandoned their past and come to Maine to create fresh lives for themselves and their children from the resources of the wild land they settled.

They were mostly young, in their twenties. They were ready to take a chance, to buy a piece of land they had never seen from a landowner who had never seen it either, who may well have received it as payment for military service decades earlier and now wished only to sell it.

Many of these young men had already gambled—in the American Revolution—one of the great gambles of the last few centuries, surely. After the War, they found themselves part of a new nation, but without prospects—no money, no land. Land was important; only landowners could vote in Massachusetts. Moreover, primogeniture meant that the oldest son inherited the family's land, all of it.

So, 160 acres in Maine was more than just a piece of land: it was an opportunity to make a living, even if only by subsistence farming, and an opportunity to become a full citizen by being a landowner in a new community. Today we talk about "entrepreneurs." In their time, these men and women were surely that, and more. It is important to remember that the subsistence farm economy of the early 19th century depended almost equally on the responsibilities of men and women: the men focused on work outdoors, the women on the work of managing the household, especially preserving and processing the food and other raw materials that the men produced.

And, of course, there were sellers of this new land as well as buyers. There were men like Captain Henry Rust who bought much of what is now Norway from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and resold it to settlers. Land developers in Maine are nothing new.

Considering how difficult an enterprise it was to settle this wild land, it is remarkable how few failed attempts we hear of. Perhaps it is because although the work could be much harder, it was not so different from the tasks the settlers already knew. You needed to be good with an axe and a scythe, able to hunt some, and able to work with oxen. Put up hay for fodder and grow corn for a basic food supply and you could survive—if you could also survive being alone.

Waterford's first settler was David McWain, from Bolton, Massachusetts, the son of an Irish immigrant who died when David was three. In 1775 at age twenty-three, David bought a lot in Waterford. He came to stay in 1776, Waterford's only inhabitant, Bridgton the nearest settlement. For seven years he lived and worked alone, clearing and starting a farm, before others came.

It could be nearly as hard for families. In 1785 Philip Hor came to Waterford with his wife and two sons. For the next two years they had no shelter but a hut they built, sheathed with hemlock bark. The nearest set-



Tuberculosis patients in outdoor attire at the Western Maine Sanatorium in Hebron. (22 buildings in all.)



Sanatorium's outdoor beds for Tb patients in c. 1910



Hebron Academy, Sturtevant Home in c. 1900



Hebron Academy, Sturtevant Hall in c. 1900

Glaciers recede; Earth's crust sunk from weight of glaciers so that ocean front reaches Norway	PaleoIndians in Oxford Hills; travel Scoggin Trail and others	French group led by Pierre du Guast Sieur de Monts establishes the first recorded European colony in Maine at the mouth of the St. Croix River	Maine annexed by Massachusetts	Lovell defeats Pequawkets at Lovell's Pond	Battle with St. Francis Indians at Snows Falls	Oxford Hills area settlement begins when farmers from Gorham drive cattle and horses to Saco River intervals to winter; Fryeburg founded 1763	Otisfield granted to Capt. John Gorham's company for services in the Canada expedition of 1690.	Paris granted to Capt. Joshua Fuller of Watertown, Massachusetts and sixty-four privates of his company for service in the French and Indian War	Waterford granted to John Gardner and others for service in the French and Indian War	Waterford: David McWain, of Bolton, Massachusetts buys lot in Waterford, becomes first settler	American Revolution begins	Hebron granted to Alexander Shepard, Jr., Newton, Mass., as payment for a chart of a Maine coast survey with which Shepard had assisted; included current Hebron and Oxford	Revolution ends; settlement of Oxford Hills begins	Otisfield: Benjamin Patch becomes first settler in town; begins clearing land on Bell Hill	Norway: 6000 acres purchased by Capt. Henry Rust, Salem, Massachusetts, from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts; first of four tracts of land that would become Rustfield, then Norway	Hebron Incorporated	Paris Incorporated	Waterford Incorporated	Norway Incorporated	Otisfield Incorporated
12,000	8000 Years Ago	1604	1652	1755	1755	1762	1771	1771	1774	1775	1776	1777	1783	1787	1792	1793	1797	1798		



Oxford County Fair, 1908



Harness racing at the Oxford County Fair, 1908



Morgan & Wright Team at the fairgrounds, 1896

tlar was three miles away; during one winter six weeks passed without the family seeing another human being.

We see today how the qualities of these early settlers shaped our history. First and foremost, the energy that cleared those first farms did not abate. A century after our towns were established, the countryside was mostly open, productive farmland and pasture, marked by miles of stone walls that today enclose land returned to forest. Our people were proud of their success and showed it in fine sets of farm buildings that remind us today of their achievement.

Second, our settlers were in a situation in which individual initiative offered great rewards. These men and women had left a place where not only farming, but also mills and manufacturing, were well established. Every Massachusetts town had its grist mills and sawmills. But here in Maine, the new communities needed these basic facilities, and there was an immediate market for the entrepreneurs who undertook to build them.

Rugged hills may make reluctant farmland, but our towns' uplands drained to a network of lakes and streams that offered innumerable sites for water-powered mills and factories. Old maps show that most of our lakes and streams had dams. Often these "water privileges" (the deeded right to dam and use the flow of the stream for power) stretched one after the other down a stream. In Norway, half-a-dozen sites developed on Penesseewassee Stream; in South Waterford there were seven water privileges between Keoka Lake and Bear Pond. The 1880 county atlas shows that our towns supported a wide-ranging, busy manufacturing economy, with local companies that could supply almost any need, especially if the raw materials came from local resources.

The third key quality that shaped our history is what has lately been called "innovation." As our towns grew, the emphasis was on building and making things, on physical tasks, and tangible products, with few barriers to participation. In such an economy someone who can create a better, easier way of doing or making things has great value and is rewarded in proportion. If we look at our history since those early days, we can see that these skills have persisted. We have been, and still are, very good at figuring out how to make things, and at making them, especially if we can use our timber and other renewable natural resources.

Look back a century at the C.B. Cummings Company of Norway: impatient with making wooden dowels one at a time the way everyone else was, they designed and built a cutting machine that shaped four dowels at once. Then, as their business grew, they designed from scratch a whole factory full of specialized woodworking machines that performed complex operations. For example, when Parker Brothers came to them for Monopoly pieces, they set up a production line that produced two or three freight car loads a week

for millions of copies of the popular game. To see these native abilities express themselves today, go to Oxford Plains Speedway and look at the results of hard and skillful work by ordinary people from our towns.

Today we find that changes in the world limit what we are able to do with our skills. C.B. Cummings is gone, along with other Oxford Hills manufacturers, and we work to find ways to adapt our talents to new circumstances. The development of a state-of-the-art manufactured home industry here is one good example of finding a new way to take advantage of our skills and our resources.

Economic change is, of course, not a new story. Our settlers left Massachusetts for opportunities in Maine; a century ago, young people left our farms for the cities. In 1903 Norway businessmen formed the Board of Trade to promote economic development in the area, and today we have similar organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce, active anew on our behalf.

Our manufacturing economy has shrunk, but the importance of our natural environment has increased. The descendants of people who came here for the land continue to care for their land, so that visitors today still see much of the natural beauty that the early settlers appreciated. And, as Americans began to be trapped more and more in the artificial environments of cities, they turned to places like the Oxford Hills for relief. During the 1920s thousands of children came here to summer camps each year and many formed a bond with our hills and lakes that brought them back again and again. There are surely few places in the world where so much natural beauty is part of one's daily life.

As we have approached our 200th year, Oxford Hills has become more and more a special part of the lives of people who come here to visit, to vacation, and perhaps eventually to live and work. Those of us who spend all our time here often do not realize how much this place can mean to some of our part-time residents, how strong the desire is to return here and how painful it is to leave and go back to their ordinary lives in a suburb or city.

We live in a time of transience, when it seems we are privy to every event that occurs on the other side of the world. It is not necessarily a time that is friendly to us as human beings. We instinctively seek connections, and, in the end, can exist in only one place at a time. In the Oxford Hills we have been fortunate in saving our history as part of our lives. Here we connect naturally with our past because it is an important part of the particularity of the place. And, because we preserve our natural environment, we connect again and again with the immediate details of the natural world—a grove of trees, a piece of rocky lake shore, or a view of hills in autumn. The Oxford Hills remains a human place in a world that is, all too often, less than human. ■



C.B. Cummings Mill



Masonic Temple in Norway, 1900



Advertiser Square in Norway after 1865



1804 Hebron Academy founded

1805 Oxford County incorporated

Harrison Incorporated - new town assembled from parts of Bridgton and Otisfield



1811 Cyrus Hamlin, born in Waterford, arrives in Constantinople; founds Robert College there in 1863.

Maine becomes a state, part of the Missouri Compromise enacted by Congress



1821 Tourmaline found at Mount Mica

1824 Paris: Asa Barton begins publication of Oxford Observer, first newspaper in Oxford Hills

1829 Oxford Incorporated, new town divided off from Hebron

1839 Otisfield: Bell Hill Meeting House built by Otisfield architect Nathan Nutting Jr.

1842 Norway: Oxford County Agricultural Society holds first fair

1844 Norway: Thomas Higgins starts the hardware store that will become L.M. Longley & Sons

1847 Waterford: Calvin Farrar and Dr. E.A. Kittredge open the Hydropathic Institute

1849 Oxford: Oxford Woolen Manufacturing Company incorporated; produces 156,000 yards of woolen cloth in first year



1850 Railroad reaches South Paris

1851 Norway: First great fire; Oxford Bear Fire Station built



1859 Norway: Freehand Howe founds his insurance agency, still in business as Goodwin's Insurance after 140 years.

1860 Hannibal Hamlin, born Paris Hill 1809, elected Vice President

1861 Civil War begins, Oxford Hills towns raise men and money for the war

