

Glimpse Of Our Local History

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(The Important Events in Our Town's Development
Interestingly Sketched)

by
Mrs. Lilla Graves

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The Important Events in Our Town's Development Interestingly Sketched

by Mrs. Laila Graves (Mrs. Sidney) (Mentioned in Register of
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In the year 1820, three men came up the Aroostook River from New Brunswick and made a clearing a short distance below the mouth of the Presque Isle stream. They were Lewis and Charles Johnson and Mr. William McCree. They had the whole country to themselves. There was the only campfire in all the vast region of wilderness. Soon they were followed by others, and in 1825 there were seven families living in their log houses on the river banks. The river being the thoroughfare, naturally the first settlers made their homes as near it as possible. All their supplies were brought from New Brunswick in boats poled up the rivers.

Seventy-five years ago, the land on which the village of Presque Isle is situated was a cedar swamp, inhabited solely by the now coveted prizes of the huntsman. At the foot of Academy Street was a deep muck hole that has been filled in to the depth of three or four feet. Fort and Academy Streets, was a spruce knoll and there was another dry spot beyond Fort Street, swamp land north to Chas. White's farm and south to the Ryan farm. The South half of the town was originally known as letter F. Range 2; the North half, Letter G, Range 2, later the town of Maysville was annexed to Presque Isle in 1882, giving us a town 12 miles long and 6 miles wide. In 1828 Mr. Dennis Fairbanks, of Troy, Waldo County, made a clearing on the bank of the Presque-Isle stream about where the Aroostook Lumber Co.'s mill now stands and later obtained from the State a grant of a mile square of land on condition that he would erect and maintain a saw and grist mill. The material for the mill was loaded upon two batteaux at Old Town, and two men poled each batteau up the Penobscot to its head waters, hauled across the portage to the Aroostook, boated down the Aroostook to the mouth of the Presque Isle stream, then up the stream to the mill site. Any one having been a passenger on the loaded boat, being poled up a swift stream, can have some idea of what

Methodist
Church

Burned
1920

an undertaking this must have been, Robert McCann, an adopted son of Mr. Fairbanks, poled one of the boats and made a clearing on what is now the Charles Phair farm, and erected a log house, which is still standing, or was a few years ago.

Mr. Veranus Chandler came in 1834 and he with Silas Blodgett, who came about the same time, kept "Bachelor's hall" in this house built by Robert McCann.

Around the Fairbank's mill there soon sprang up a little settlement which for some time was known as "Fairbanks". Mr. Cook tells us in his story of early days published in the "Independent", that two years before Mr. Fairbanks came here, one Peter Bull built a mill on the Presque Isle stream, on what is now Walter Steven's farm, and that but for the superior business and enterprise of Fairbanks, who drew the business from Peter Bull's mill, our village would have been located there, certainly a much more desirable location than the one chosen by Dennis Fairbanks. The mills built by Mr. Fairbanks were primitive affairs. In the grist mill all varieties of grain were ground in one run of stones, and one can easily imagine that the bread of the early settlers was not of the whitest. The first flour in town was not, however, ground in the mill, for previous to its completion Mr. Joseph Ireland had a hand mill, turned by a crank called "Ireland's Coffee Mill", with which he ground wheat and other grain. The house-keeper who was fortunate enough to have a barrel of Baltimore or Genesee flour in the house was often called upon to loan to her neighbors when there was company expected.

Table delicacies were few in these days and many schemes were entered into to supply the needed variety. Apple pies were imitated by cutting pumpkin into thin slices, sweetened with molasses or brown sugar, and made acid with home made vinegar, made largely from the sap of the birch tree. There were times when the adage "necessity is the mother of invention" was often demonstrated. Quilting parties were the great social events during the autumn and early winter.

A PIONEER PREACHER WHO HAD TO HUSTLE

In 1839 the road from Houlton was cut through to Monticello. All north of that point to Presque Isle, then known as "Fairbanks", was almost a trackless wilderness except for winter roads used by lumbermen. The first clergyman who came here was the Rev. Mr. Pingree, a missionary of the Methodist Society. He came in 1839. His field of labor included Houlton, Patten, Masardis, Ashland, Presque Isle and Fort Fairfield. Over this territory he traveled on foot, winter and summer, for two years preaching in lumber camps and the small settlements, traveling many miles on snow shoes in winter, and suffering many hardships. In 1840, Mr. Leonard Reed came down the Aroostook River from Masardis with his family and household goods on a raft, and built on the site of the present Presque Isle Hotel, the house now occupied by Mr. J. B. Smart. He kept a hotel, his customers being for the most part lumbermen, as lumbering was the principal business of the country. There were no stores at this time. Mr. Fairbanks kept a little tobacco, rum etc. in his mill, which it is safe to conclude he sold at a fair margin of profit. Capt. Moses Rose, Benjamin Whidden, James Cloudman and Emmons Whitcoze came in 1841, and settled on the Houlton road. The Parson's farm originally the property of Messrs. Josiah and G. W. Rowle and Solomon Parsons, father of Mr. Geo. A. Parsons. They were lumbermen and raised hay and grain for their lumber operations. Capt. Rolfe, a veteran of the Aroostook was was one of the first to settle in the north half of the town. His stories of how he carried his grain to the Fairbank's mill on his back, through the forest guided by a spotted line, and brought his flour and groceries in the same manner are interesting. When Capt. Rolfe bought his first supplies of Mr. Fairbanks, pork cost \$50 per barrel, flour \$20 per barrel, tea \$1 per pound and molasses \$1 per gallon. Mr. John Allen came to town in 1840, and cleared the farm now owned by Mr. Samuel C. Greenlaw. Mr. Allen was one of Presque Isle's most prominent citizens. The last years of his life were spent with his son in California. Our town clock was a gift from him.

MAIL ON HORSEBACK AND THE PIONEER SCHOOL MA'AM

In 1842 the first mail came to Presque Isle, brought on horseback from Houlton. Mr. Noah Chandler, of Houlton "line store", was the first post-master. In 1843 Mr.

Fairbanks built the two story house now standing back of the Stone block, known as the Sumner Whitney house. About this time Eleazer Packard bought Reed's Hotel, and afterwards sold it to Sumner Whitney. He in turn sold it to his brother Jerry Whitney, who moved the original house, and built the house burned in the fire of 1884. Mr. Sumner Whitney afterwards bought the Fairbank's house and opened another hotel.

Mr. Story Hooper lived in a log house on the Parson's intervale, and in a room of this house a private school was taught by Miss Susan Hooper, afterwards Mrs. Daniel Duff. This was the first school taught in town. The first school taught in the village was over the grist mill. Can our teachers to-day imagine the trials of the "school marn" who had to "hear lessons" and try to keep order, with the rattle and jar of the mill underneath the schoolroom. The date of the building of the first school house is not known. It was called the "Red School House" and was situated on the Rackliff's farm, Center Line road.

State & Third

The next school was built in Weyssville in 1844, where the burying ground is, and the next one in 1857, where the Cottage Hotel now stands. The old Academy situated near where C. P. Allen's house now stands was burned in 1860, and a new building containing a town hall, was built on the site of the present school building. The new Academy opened Sept. 11, 1860, in charge of George Curtiss, Jr. and B. P. Hines, as principals. In this building was placed the first bell in town. This bell was rung for several years by a small boy at six in the morning, twelve at noon and nine at night. Dorothy Graves owns a gold dollar which was the money paid her father for his service as "bellringer". The St. John School opened in Sept. 1884, and the present High School building was erected in 1893. The Academy was moved down town, and is known to us as the Pomroy building.

The first store was built about 1842, near where the B & A railroad crosses main street. This is said to have been the first store north of Houlton. In 1849, a store

was built where the new Perry block now stands, and was occupied by D. & A. W. Dudley. The next one was built on the Bolton Corner known as the Winslow Hall Store. Next in order came the Dudley store, now owned by A. M. Smith.

OLDEN TIME SOCIABILITY

There were about fifteen or twenty families in the town in 1855. The social relations of the people of that time were of the friendliest kind. A friend of our town has written, " They were a genial, good hearted, generous people, and enjoyed themselves exceedingly in the society they themselves made. This open, free hearted, generous spirit is still characteristic of the place. Nowhere can a stranger sooner become acquainted and be placed at his ease, and in no village of equal size will a hat passed around for a worthy object be more generously filled than in Presque Isle. " Dr. G. H. Freeman came to town about this time (1855) and in addition to the practice of his profession carried on a drug business, under the firm name of Rowe & Freeman. About 1867 he sold the drug store and opened a hardware store on Main Street. In 1857, two years before the incorporation of the town, the Aroostook Pioneer, the first newspaper published in Aroostook County, was established here by Joseph B. Hall and W. S. Gilman. Mr. Hall edited the paper for three years, then sold his interest to Mr. Gilman who carried on the good work until 1868, when he removed the paper to Houlton, where it has since remained. In 1860 Mr. Hall commenced the publication of the Aroostook Herald in Presque Isle but two years later removed the material to Portland, where it was used in founding the Maine State Press. The next newspaper published in town was the "Loyal Sunrise" edited by Mr. Daniel Stickney, established in 1860.

In looking over some of the first papers published, I was much impressed by the conspicuous absence of town news. Two or three local items in a paper, where a column and a half was given up to a glowing description of a spiritualistic meeting. The scissors seemed to be much more used than the pen. In one of these "first copies"

was a notice stating that the "Ladies Dramatic Club" of Presque Isle would give an entertainment for the benefit of the Soldier's Monument Fund, so we can see even in the early days of our town the women had clubs. In 1876 the Sunrise was sold and moved to Fort Fairfield, where it lived but a short time. The next paper was the "North Star", published by Dr. F. G. Parker & Co. After his death it was sold to George H. Collins. Mr. Hall returned to Presque Isle in 1884, and again started the "Herald" which he edited until his death, which occurred on July 5, 1889. After Mr. Hall's death, the Herald was sold to F. S. Bickford, who retained it only a short time, selling to Mr. Collins, who consolidated the two papers, giving us the "Star Herald" of today. About this time a paper called the "Democrat" was started, but lived only a short time. The infant paper is the Independent.

The first Maine Press excursion which came to the county in 1858 did much toward increasing the population of the wilderness towns. The editors wrote glowing descriptions of the great new country, its productive soil and great possibilities and many more were induced to try their fortune here.

The village met with its first fire disaster in 1860, when almost the whole northern part of the town burned. "The Pioneer" estimated the loss at \$25,000. Not discouraged, however, by their misfortune the people went at once to work and soon rebuilt the district. In a "Pioneer" of that time, I find the following notice: "the school in this village commenced last Monday in charge of Miss R. Abbie Hall (she is now Mrs. R. A. Bartlett of Caribou) and kept in the shed adjoining the Fairbanks store, for want of a better place. Soon after the fire Mr. G. F. A. Johnson came here and bought out Mr. Hiram Brackett, who was in trade in a store situated where the G. H. Freeman's store now is, and laid the foundation of the business which afterward increased under the firm name of Johnson and Judd and the late Johnson and Phair. This brings us to the time of the war, when Presque Isle did her part by sending many brave men to fight for our own flag. With the rest of the country, our own town felt the business depression and few enterprises were engaged in and the town grew very little at that time.

In the winter of 1863 the Fairbanks mills were burned. Before this, however, they had been sold to Mr. John Allen. The next year Mr. Sidney Cook bought the mill privilege and rebuilt the mills a little farther upstream at a cost of \$20,000. Mr. Fairbanks left Presque Isle when he sold his mills, and spent the rest of his life on the Tobique River in New Brunswick. His wife continued to reside here till her death, which occurred about 1870, at the home of Columbus Hayford. Her age was 93.

The Congregational Church was the first church built in town. The society was organized July 25, 1865, with five members, Mr. & Mrs. C. F. A. Johnson, Mr. E. E. Parkhurst being in this number. Before this church was built, religious services were held in school houses and private dwellings.

The Baptist Church was organized in a log school house on the Houlton road and is said to be the oldest church organized in the county.

THE "CULLEN" MURDER

In April 1873, the terrible tragedy occurred which brought terror to every heart in the town. A small quantity of goods had been stolen from Mr. David Dudley's store at Ball's Mills, and suspicion rested upon one Cullen, a native of New Brunswick. Sheriff Grenville Hayden with two other men, Mr. Hubbard, and Mr. Bird, went in search of the thief, finding him in a lumber camp owned by one Swanbeck, and as it was late, decided to spend the night at the camp. While they slept Cullen killed Mr. Hayden and Mr. Hubbard with an axe, burning their bodies, the other men awaking and by promising not to tell of his terrible deed were allowed to go free. They at once, however, gave the alarm, and a party went in search of the murderer, finding him in a cellar of a house in Castle Hill, where his wife and child were. Constable Hughes of Mapleton with six assistants started for the village with Cullen, were met about one mile from their starting point by about seventy-five men in disguises who surrounded them, taking the prisoner from them and hanging him to a tree till he was dead. Cullen's body was buried on the Mapleton road, and the locality bears the name of Cullen's Grave to this day.

Twenty-nine years ago a few public-spirited persons met at the home of Mrs. G. A. Parsons, and organized a library association. The members gave from their private libraries what books they could spare and in this way our public library which to-day numbers two thousand volumes, was started. Some of the original members were, Mr. and Mrs. Parsons, Mr. and Mrs. Geo. A. Rowell and Mrs. Lydia Whitney Luce.

PRESQUE ISLE ONCE A SEAPORT

It may not be known to everyone that Presque Isle was almost a seaport town, at least it had a steamboat all its own. The boat, the "Nathan Perry", built by Mr. Sidney Cook, was run between Presque Isle and Caribou, carrying freight to connect with the New Brunswick R. R., and made a trip to Ashland. The boat was run successfully two years, and in the spring and fall, but the water was not of sufficient depth to make the enterprise a success, and the "Nathan Perry" was beached near the covered bridge where she ended her days.

The covered bridge, which was built across the Aroostook in 1858 at a cost of \$ 6,000, was washed away in the spring of 1885.##### The present bridge was built the next summer at a cost of \$ 10,000. In 1874 Mr. Wheeler of New Hampshire, built the first starch factory in town. It was located near the grist mill. The next year, the Aroostook Starch Company, a stock company, at the head of which was the firm of Johnson and Phair built the factory near the Aroostook Bridge. The starch business has continued to increase, till now Ho. T. H. Phair owns and operates 13 factories in this and adjoining towns.

Presque Isle has for many years felt the need of a railroad and much time and thought has been given the matter. Mr. Fall, Editor of the "Herald", worked long and earnestly for a "direct line" to connect with the European and North American R. R. at Mattawankeag. Later, all united to secure an Extension of the New Brunswick R. R., at which time had been built to Fort Fairfield some years before, and on Thursday, December 1, 1881, a large concourse of people assembled at the station to see the first railway train to steam into Presque Isle. This train had on board the Messrs.

Burpee and other interested men and was in charge of the present C. P. Conductor, Mr. Jerry Holt, with Mr. Dan Doherty as engineer. The road was narrow gauge which was widened a few years later. The New Brunswick Railroad was afterwards sold to the Canadian Pacific Railroad Co. About this time Presque Isle first listened to the music of her own brass band, led by Mr. Lewis F. Nash, now of Harrington, Maine. The town was connected to the outside world by telegraph on January 1882.

On the morning of the first day of May, 1884, occurred the destructive fire which left nearly the whole business portion of our town in ruins. Starting in the third story of the Johnson and Phair store on the corner where the new Perry Building now stands, the fire swept both sides of the street to A. M. Smith's store. Then the people realized their need of an organized fire department and the present Fire Company was organized that year. Before many months the village was rebuilt as we see it today. The years of 1887 and 1888 were marked ones in the progress of our town. During the summer of 1887 the water works was constructed at the cost of \$ 30,000. The Electric Light Co. was organized, the lights being turned on in Dec. of the same year. The First National Bank opened its doors for business on Jan. 2, 1888 with a capital of \$ 50,000. In 1892 the Merchant's Trust and Banking Co. was organized. In 1893 we were connected with neighboring towns by telephone and now we can have speech with the great cities if we have money. The Bangor and Aroostook R. R. was built in 1894, giving Presque Isle the Direct Line which Mr. Hall worked ~~#6#~~ for so many years ago.

The census shows that Presque Isle had a population of 27 in 1840, ten years later there were 288 people in the town; in 1860, 726; 1880 970; and in 1890 with Maysville population added we have 2,246. The last returns in 1900 gave us 3,804. While Presque Isle's growth has not been of the rapid western type, it has been steady and substantial. Today the town is a prosperous business center, surrounded by productive farms and comfortable homes. Nowhere in the country are there better farms than on the Center Line road and in Maysville. Spragueville, hidden away in a valley

like a little Swill hamlet, with its church, school house, and mill, watched over by his majesty, Quaggy Joe with Echo lake at his feet, is certainly one of the most picturesque places to be found in the country.

For the dates and facts of early history in this paper, I am indebted to Hon. Edward Wiggin, who kindly allowed them to be taken from his History of Aroostook, to Mr. Sidney Cook, who has given me valuable assistance, and also to Editor Collins.