

II.

Viewing A Promised Land.

In old New England the great source of wealth was land. Families were large and ancestral acres in Massachusetts Bay Colony admitted of only limited subdivision; pioneering was the only solution. Signers of a petition (1721) for the valley of the "River Merrymake", describe themselves as "being straitned for Accomodations for themselves and their Posterity." Fifty years had passed since the first petition for land in our valley had been presented to the General Court of Massachusetts, but the valley was still an highway for marauding savages and massacres were recurrent along the frontier settlements. Both Massachusetts and New Hampshire organized frequent scouting parties hoping to make the land safe for settlement, the former being zealous to extend her domain to the north in order to assure new towns of the Puritan faith.

Hampton, alone, among New Hampshire towns, was a Puritan stronghold, unless we except Dunstable which then extended into the present city of Nashua. A few Puritans had settled in Dover and had established a Congregational church—the approved or "orthodox" church of the Puritan order. Churches of like faith were to be found in Exeter and in close proximity to Queen's Chapel (Episcopalian) in Portsmouth. A Presbyterian church had been founded in the Merrimack valley, little to the liking of Puritan Massachusetts.

It was in 1718 that a group of Scotch-Irish immigrants attempted a settlement on Casco Bay. Their ancestors were Scots from Argyleshire who, because of persecution, migrated to Ulster in Ireland a century earlier. Settling upon Crown lands, they preserved their racial integrity and their Presbyterian faith during their exile. At odds with the Irish, many of them looked toward New England for freedom but the Puritans viewed them with suspicion. It took years to change that suspicion into respect for the piety, loyalty and moral courage of the Scotch-Irish pioneers.

The Casco Bay colony suffered a first winter of extreme cold and near starvation and so, in the spring of 1719, the party sailed along the coast and up the Merrimack river as far as Haverhill. Exploring northward they found a promising location for settlement and named the place Nutfield (later Londonderry). Sixteen families including that of their Presbyterian minister, made the settlement and obtained a charter direct from the King, agreeing to pay His Majesty an annual rental of one peck of potatoes and to reserve all trees suitable for use by the Royal Navy. They safeguarded their title by purchase from a grandson of Rev. John Wheelwright who had acquired the land from the Indians. In a brief time this frontier town numbered seventy families—all Scotch-Irish Presbyterians. Alien in customs, manners and religion to the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay and the Royalists in New Hampshire, they faced Indian foes alone. The one consideration shown them was that New Hampshire authorities seem to have authorized them ~~them~~ to build a fort on the east side of the river at Pennycook, for defence against Indians from the north.

About that time Massachusetts Bay commissioned Capt. John Lovewell of Dunstable to raise a company of "rangers" in order to destroy their enemy Indians", with a generous bounty for scalps. These rangers scouted north to Winnepesaukee and east to Fryeburg, in Maine where Lovewell met his death. Our adjoining town of Pembroke was granted to his family by Massachusetts Bay for his service and in the early days it was known as Lovewell's Town.

Northeast of Nutfield the settlement at Chester was incorporated by New Hampshire in 1722, but it remained for Massachusetts Bay to sponsor the northernmost frontier settlement in the long desired intervals at Pennycook. The Essex County men who signed the petition of 1721 made a brave attempt in the very next year, in spite of Indian threat. In a deposition ~~the~~ during the Bow controversy, pioneer Jacob Shute testified that in 1722

* Original in Concord Room, Public Library

II. 3.

he had spent about three weeks at Pennycook as agent for Ebenezer Eastman of Haverhill. During that period a goodly tract of land was fenced in. As late as 1724 there was a massacre of Dunstable men near Thornton's Ferry on the Merrimack, but, nothing daunted, the Essex County men renewed their petition the following year, urging that "a parcel of Irish" (Scotch-Irish) had built a fort at Pennycook and might obtain a grant in the disputed territory from the government of New Hampshire. This moved the General Court to action for they wanted no new Presbyterian churches in northern New England.

Before following the details of the settlement in Pennycook, it is necessary to understand the calendar year which, at that time, began on March 25. This custom was current until 1752 when the American colonies, in common with all British possessions, by act of Parliament began the year on January 1. In use of dates from Jan. 1 to March 25 inclusive and prior to 1752, the letters "O.S." (Old Style) indicate the difference from the modern calendar.

On Jan. 17, 1725 (O.S.) or 1726 according to present reckoning the Great and General Court of Massachusetts voted to grant the petition of Essex County men and proceeded to set aside a township seven miles square at Pennycook for the settlement. There were certain conditions attached: each man of the one hundred Proprietors must be carefully chosen, must pay five pounds for his lot and must build a suitable house for his family within three years: each settler must break up and properly fence in six acres of land within the same time: houses must be built within twenty rods of each other for mutual protection and "a convenient house for public worship of God" must be finished within the three year limit: three lots must be provided - one for the minister required by the grant, one for the parsonage use, and one for the school "forever". Such was the standard for a Puritan town in the early eighteenth century.

The General Court appointed a committee to accept would-be settlers to the number of one hundred and, when chosen, these men were empowered to meet and make for themselves the rules to govern the enterprise. When the conditions had been met each settler was guaranteed by the committee of the General Court, the possession of the deeds to his new property. William Tailer, the young Lieut. Governor of Massachusetts, was chairman of the committee and the clerk was John Wainwright who kept his records with great care. The new Proprietors elected their own clerk and their original records covering many years, are treasured by the N.H. Historical Society.

Early in February 1725(O.S.) the committee under William Tailer journeyed from Boston to Haverhill and, at the inn of Ebenezer Eastman, met the petitioners. The character and ability of each man was carefully investigated before he was accepted as a Proprietor. The petitioners themselves were intent upon careful selection and at this meeting, one of them, Rev. Christopher Toppan, suggested that would-be speculators in land be eliminated by a ruling that "no alienation of any Lott shall be made without the consent of the Community" on penalty of forfeiting the same. The wisdom of this highly selective policy was proven repeatedly during the years to come.

In mid May of 1726 the preliminary survey of Pennycook Plantation was made. The surveyors, one of whom was Richard Hazzen, a Proprietor, with chain men and members of the committee of the General Court and a group of the new Proprietors--some forty men in all--travelled on horseback to Nutfield. John Wainwright kept a diary of the trip which is to be found in Bouton's History.

It was "Cloudy Weather" but the travelling was easy as far as Nutfield which they reached about noon. As was the custom with travellers, they carried their own provisions for the mid-day meal, but bought their "Small Beer" at a tavern run by John Barr. Resuming their journey, they followed a cartpath—"very indifferent travelling" toward Amoskeag where they camped for the night. They found company in this wilderness place—"several Irish people catching fish, which that place affords in great abundance."

On the next morning, Friday the thirteenth, the company made an early start and, travelling over "Very Hilly and Mountainous Land", they passed a "Fall called Onnahookline (Hooksett)*****" from a Hill of the same name". An hour later they forded a deep brook and reached the large interval bordering the Suncook river. Fording this stream near the present bridge in Suncook village, they found it "a rapid Stream, and many loose stones of Some Considerable Bigness in it." Two riders had reason to remember that ford for they were thrown into the river and one of them lost his bag of provisions; but good cheer awaited the party on the farther bank where two Proprietors, Benjamin Nicolls and Ebenezer Virgin, were discovered with extra provisions which they had brought in advance of the main expedition.

From then on the route must have been along old Indian trails through Pembroke to the ford across "Shew brook or Sow Cook" river at a place near the original town line and about eighty rods north of later Head's Mills. This was the route which the future highway would follow and the first bridge across the Soucook was to be built near this ford. The fording place was "pretty deep and very rocky" and another luckless rider was thrown. Passing Pennycook falls (Garvin's) they steered their course straight north over "a large pitch pine plain, "indifferent Land," and, in late afternoon, arrived at Sugar Ball, their destination. Peering through the budding trees, the travellers had their first glimpse of

II. 6.

their Promised Land and found it goodly to look upon. Down the high bluff, "steep as the Roof of an House", they carefully picked their way, and, "in a smart Thunder Shower" which caused much ado to protect their bread, they made their camp in the lovely plain surrounded by winding river and "very high mountainous Land."

Early on Saturday morning the surveyor and chainmen set out to run the line of the township on the east side of the river, beginning "where the Contoocook falls into the Merrimack" and extending southerly for seven miles. Another party began a survey of the east side intervalle for house lots and a third party crossed the river in canoes to survey the intervalle on the west. At noon of that day visitors arrived in camp—three men representing the government of New Hampshire, who made protest against any settlement under Massachusetts grant. This was no surprise to the committee who "made them answer, That the government of the Massachusetts Bay had sent us to lay the Lands here into a Township;***** that we should proceed to do the Business we were come upon **** and that it was the Business of the publick and not ours to Engage in, in order to determine any Controversy about the Lands." Clerk Wainwright noted that with the New Hampshire men were "about half a score of Irish men, who kept some Distance from the Camp", but all departed peaceably and in mutual courtesy. "Fair Weather."

"Sabbath day, May 15th. This day Mr. Enoch Coffin, our Chaplain, performed divine Service both parts of the day. Fair and Cool." On the height above the plain where this first religious service in Concord was held, there is a granite marker in memorial.

The surveying parties had been instructed to provide fifty lots on the east side of the river and an equal number on the west side—a plan which would serve to hold the disputed territory against possible interference. But on Tuesday the east side surveyors brought back to camp the disquieting news that a large island in the river north of

Sugar Ball bore resemblance to the island on a plan of the Gov. Endicott grant of five hundred acres, at the time in possession of Judge Samuel Sewall of Massachusetts. Here was a dilemma indeed, for the Sewall Farm, as it was called, included the most fertile land on the east side as well as most of that suitable for house lots, with water power for grist and saw mills, essential to a new settlement, available in the nearby brook. The only solution was to lay out all the house lots on the west side of the river.

There were problems to face on the west side for the surveyors "met with Great Difficulty to find a tract large enough to lay out the Number of Lotts." During intervening years the river has changed its course again and again at flood time, but otherwise the contours of the land are much the same as they were in 1726. Then, as now, there were three levels to be considered: the wide intervale subject to flood, a narrow shelf of upland rising more or less abruptly into the range of hills to the westward. These hills densely wooded in pine, hemlock, spruce and chestnut, were not practical for settlement within the prescribed time limit. A few of those primeval trees remain today in the easterly part of the State Hospital grounds, where one may find a half dozen ancient oaks which watched the first survey of Pennycook Plantation.

The intervale attracted the surveyors because it was open land dotted with graceful elms—an excellent place for fields but unsafe for house lots because of flood hazard. Nearby was the narrow and irregular shelf of upland—the only practical place for a village street. Aside from the house lots and the accompanying six acre lots for immediate cultivation, the remainder of the township was to be left as "common land" to be surveyed and allotted in future years to the Proprietors, the Minister, the parsonage right and the school in equal shares.

The village street must be as compact as possible for protection against savages, but when this shelf land was surveyed it simply could

not accomodate all the settlers in one long street stretching from Pond hill on the north to present West St. on the south. Because of its contours this strip of upland necessitated two slight bends in the street and hence our Main St. is double-jointed with bends near Montgomery St. and Fayette St. The pioneers had a vision of an avenue of noble proportions for they planned this village street with a width of ten rods. Range I of the house lots was on the east side of the street and Range II was along the west side. These house lots were generally twelve rods frontage and twenty rods deep and each had a six acre home lot for cultivation on the intervale or as closely west of the street as was possible. At best this provided for only about seventy of the settlers, so Range III was opened on the west side of present No. State St. between Penacook St. and Franklin St. with another ten rods wide highway which is still in evidence today. Additional lots were provided on the Island Range west of Horseshoe pond and at the South End where Hall St. runs today, Eleven Lots which combined both the house and home lots, were laid out to complete the one hundred and three required.

There were hazards in the work of this survey but only one is given emphasis in the record: "divers Rattlesnakes were killed Dayley", but, "Thanks be to God no Body received any Harm from them."

It was early September before plans for the actual settlement could be made and then the Proprietors met the committee from the General Court at Ipswich. The Proprietors made all arrangements according to vote of their membership and met all expenses by assessment in advance of expenditure. The most pressing need was an adequate road to the Plantation over which ox-carts might travel loaded with the household goods of the settlers. It was voted to appoint Ensign John Chandler and William Barker of Andover and John Ayer of Haverhill as committee "to go out and clear a sufficient cartway to Pennycook, the nighest and best way they can, from Haverhill."

The next problem to be solved was that of the Sewall Farm in the very midst of the Plantation and it was voted to ask "the Honorable and General Court" for compensation for the loss of the five hundred acres included therein. Ultimately this was granted by moving the south line of the township one hundred rods further to the south. The new cartway was partly cleared before snow fall and followed a course well to the west of the "Irish" at Nutfield. It left the highway at Chester meeting-house and ran along the easterly side of Lakin's pond in Hooksett, to the ford across the Soucook river and thence along the northward route followed by the surveying party in May 1726.

Road making through the wilderness was a toilsome business; the preliminary work was done by a surveyor and his party with compass and chain, who sought out the best location and then marked the route by spotted trees. At the end of each mile they marked its number on a tree. The axemen followed, cutting away trees and brush for a space two rods wide. Causeways and log bridges were built through swamps and over brooks to make the road passable for saddle horses and ox teams—the only means of travel for years to come. Most of the horses of that day were trained to carry double and a woman could ride on the pillion behind the man in the saddle. A road so rough discouraged all but most essential travel and Pennycook Plantation prepared to be self-sustaining and independent.

In January 1726 (O.S.) the Proprietors drew their lots according to the accepted plan of the settlement. In February they met at Andover and voted to build a block house to be used as both meeting-house and fort, but the real settlement awaited the spring. Tradition says that a few men including Henry Rolfe and Richard Urann, spent that winter of 1726-27 at Pennycook in a hut on land long afterward occupied by Capt. Benjamin Emery, Rolfe's grandson. (125 No. State St.) It was a season of intense cold and only the friendliness of the local Indians, so the story runs, saved the white men from perishing of cold and hunger.