

OTISFIELD'S VILLAGES

Eighteenth Century: Beginnings

When in 1775 George Peirce arrived in the land northeast of Sebago Lake, he found hills, lakes, streams, but no people. For centuries the land that is now Otisfield had been traversed by Passamaquoddy Indians on foot and in canoes, but no archaeological evidence exists of any permanent human settlement before Peirce's arrival. Peirce, the agent of a group of Boston-based businessmen, had a specific commission. From what was essentially an untouched wilderness, he was to build a town. He was to run a town's boundaries and divide the land within those bounds into hundred acre lots, thus allowing for individual ownership. He was to clear a road and build a bridge over the Crooked River to allow access to those lots. On the river he was to construct a saw mill and grist mill. In short, Peirce was commissioned to establish the structure that would allow a new town to take root in the western hills of the Massachusetts territory of Maine.

Otisfield's beginnings actually reach back close to a hundred years before George Peirce's arrival. Otisfield became one of many so-called "Canada towns," towns tracing their origin to 1690 when Massachusetts sponsored an unsuccessful military expedition against French-held Canada. In 1736 the Massachusetts General Court had actually granted a township to the heirs and descendants of the military company headed by Captain John Gorham which participated in that expedition. For various reasons that land grant was cancelled and in 1771

superseded by a second grant of land to the heirs of Gorham's Company. Twenty Boston businessmen, most of whom had no connection to the original grantees, acquired rights to the land and became its proprietors. In 1776, presumably to honor Col. James Otis, one of the major property holders, the proprietors voted to name their town Otis Field. At their bidding, George Peirce arrived in Edes Falls (now part of Naples), and set to work establishing the new town.

Eighteenth-century Otisfield encompassed a much larger area than it does now. Bounded by Raymondtown and Bridgetown, the new town eventually would be the northernmost town in Cumberland County. Its western bound included the eastern half of what is now Harrison. (Harrison was established in 1805 by setting off the land east of Long Lake and west of the Crooked River from Bridgton and Otisfield.) To the southwest the town extended from Edes Falls across the outlet of Long Lake to include much of what is now the village of Naples. (Naples was formed in 1834 from parts of Otisfield, Raymond, Harrison, Sebago, and Bridgton.)

George Peirce chose Edes Falls for his foothold in this wilderness first, because of the water power supplied by the falls on the Crooked River, and second, because of the ease of access to more developed towns to the south by way of the Crooked and Songo Rivers and Sebago Lake. One of Peirce's conditions for undertaking this task was the use of the proprietors' boat for ten years.

The aim of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in establishing new towns was to expand settlement, thus increasing trade, security, and the wealth of the colony. Therefore the General Court imposed certain conditions

on the proprietors. They could not simply strip their land of virgin timber and abandon it. To retain their grant, within six years the proprietors were to settle thirty families, build a meetinghouse, and settle a "Learned Protestant Minister" in town.

The town's second settler, Benjamin Patch, arrived in 1776 from Groton, married George Peirce's daughter Sarah, and soon moved onto Bell Hill, where his son Levi built what is now thought to be Otisfield's oldest house. Despite the outbreak of the American Revolution, more new settlers continued to arrive, principally from Wrentham and Groton, in Massachusetts, and from Gorham and Falmouth in what is today Maine. By 1783 fourteen families had purchased hundred-acre lots from the proprietors, clearing land, building log homes, and producing large families. They were the families headed by George Peirce, Benjamin Patch, Ebenezer Kemp, Joseph Spurr, Daniel Cobb, Samuel and Micah Whitney, Jonathan Moors, David Ray, Mark and Zebulon Knight, Jonathan Britton, Samuel Reed, and David Mayberry.

Edes Falls, with its access to Long Lake and the Songo River and with water power for Peirce's mills, was the first part of the original Otisfield to be settled. From there settlement spread to the north and east. Perhaps because of its longer growing season, Bell Hill was the earliest settled section of present-day Otisfield. Bell Hill, originally known simply as "Otisfield Hill," was also the location for the town's first school district and the first town school, built in 1800. It was also Bell Hill that the proprietors selected as a site for the meetinghouse they commissioned George Peirce to build. That meetinghouse was dedicated on November 7, 1797. The propri-

etors' gift of half a barrel of New England rum and half a barrel of West Indies rum made the dedication ceremony a bit merrier. Two weeks later eight men and women—one Peirce, three Spurrs, two Hancocks, one Turner, and one Thurston—formally covenanted together to form the Otisfield Congregational Church, with the Rev. Thomas Roby as the first minister. In 1839 the present Bell Hill Meetinghouse, designed by Nathan Nutting, Jr., was erected.

Through these early years, as the first settlers struggled to carve their farms from the forests, they looked to the proprietors for the necessities of a civilized town—roads, bridges, schools, churches. The proprietors, after all, owned the town. The townspeople were increasingly dissatisfied with a system where decisions were made by absentee landlords in Boston, where months, often years would pass before their requests were answered. As the settlers gained control of the land, they also sought to gain control of its governance. In 1787 the residents successfully petitioned the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to gain the status of plantation. The first plantation meeting, the precursor of our present-day town meeting, was held on May 18, at the house of Deacon Stephen Phinney, with David Ray acting as moderator. Eleven years later, on February 19, 1798, the General Court of Massachusetts passed an "Act to incorporate the Plantation called Otisfield, in the County of Cumberland, into a Town by the name of Otisfield." With the town's incorporation, the proprietary role of the Boston businessmen came to an end. The residents of Otisfield had now to look after their own affairs.

Nineteenth Century: Villages

During the first decades of the nineteenth century, when transportation moved no faster than a horse could walk, when communication was either by word of mouth or a note delivered across town by a friend or neighbor, Otisfield's wilderness evolved into an agricultural society centered around a number of small villages, each clustered around a store or a mill, a school, a blacksmith shop, or a church. Each village by modern standards was relatively isolated from the others; each had its own particular character. Otisfield's population increased rapidly after 1800. Soon the communities already established at Edes Falls and on Bell Hill were supplemented by such settlements as Jugtown, Wardwellville, Hancockville, Dunkertown, Swampville. Though these names are not often used today, during most of Otisfield's history they denoted separate villages. Today a few of these places retain their nineteenth-century names and vestiges of that village character.

Spurrs's Corner was named for one of Otisfield's first settlers, Enoch Spurr, a Revolutionary War veteran and the first town clerk. Perhaps because of its good road access to Edes Falls, the village developed into a town center. Otisfield's second school district included Spurr's Corner. A general store opened by 1838. In the 1850s the Spurr family was operating a nearby shingle mill. During the Civil War, a clothing manufacturing business

was established, and a large tin shop was set up in 1868. Although these early mills and factories were gone by 1900, as late as the 1950s Glenn C. Henry, an inventor and engineer, sometimes called "the folding man," ran a small shop which produced collapsible record albums, notebooks, and even folding boats. In 1887, as the town's population shifted away from Bell Hill, the Congregationalists moved their regular services from the Bell Hill meetinghouse into a church built in 1871 at Spurr's Corner. The Otisfield Grange was first organized here in 1875 with forty charter members and E. J. Sylvester as first master. This Grange closed in 1959.

East Otisfield. In the eastern part of town the Sucker Brook flows from the outlet of Saturday Pond to Thompson Lake. Along its course two important mill sites developed, and two villages sprang up, known as Rayville and Pugleyville.

In 1783 David Ray moved his family by ox sled from road's end at the Patch house on Bell Hill through the woods to the outlet of Saturday Pond. There he built the first grist mill and sawmill within the bounds of present-day Otisfield. The cluster of dwellings, school, and church that grew up around the mills came to be known as Rayville. Ray was one of early Otisfield's most important citizens. He was the town's first physician. He opened his own school some years before the first town school was built on Bell Hill. He was elected moderator for the first town meeting. After the Civil War Joseph W. Holden rebuilt Ray's mill and operated it until 1890. David Ray's house and the remains of the granite dam

that once powered his mills still stand in Rayville.

Another important part of Rayville was its early church. In 1829 the town's Baptists and Methodists jointly constructed a Union Church, the same church that now serves as the East Otisfield Free Baptist Church.

Probably the best known citizen of Rayville is Joseph W. Holden (1815-1900), mill owner and later prominent member of the Flat Earth Society. Because Joe Holden willed a small sum in support of a Sunday School picnic, East Otisfield still celebrates a Joe Holden Day each summer, honoring "the old astronomer" who, as the inscription of his gravestone tells, "discovered that the Earth is flat and stationary, and that the sun and moon do move." In 1977, Otisfield native William Spurr also left money for the picnic. Spurr's bequest stipulated that strawberry ice cream must be served.

The origin of the name "Pugleyville" is uncertain. Historian William Spurr's explanation is that "puggling around," meaning fussing around, was the favorite expression of one village lady named Mrs. Samuel Edgley. Another theory is that the village was named for an early family named Pugley. Like the other town centers, Pugleyville had a number of early industries. Until 1846 George W. Barrows operated a tannery and made shoes and boots there. The mills built in 1812 by Timothy Fernald on Sucker Brook near Thompson Pond were operated by a succession of individuals, the last of whom were the Kemp Brothers, who closed down in the 1930s. Early in the twentieth century, Harry M. Stone operated a small shop in Pugleyville for canning apples, vegetables, and jellies. Since 1865, at least, when Zachariah Wardwell opened his store, the village had a retail store.

In the twentieth century a number of individuals owned and operated the East Otisfield General Store, including Ellis R. Stone, Chester Lamb, and David Bean. After the store finally closed about 1960, the building was torn down.

Through the nineteenth century Rayville and Pugleyville each had a one-room school. In fact, the school system, based on the premise that children could walk as much as a mile and a half to school, at one time included fourteen school districts, each with a one-room school. Once automobiles became established, the district school system ended. Otisfield's first consolidated school was opened in 1950 in East Otisfield, after the economically-minded townspeople moved the old Spurr's Corner schoolhouse north a few miles and joined it to the one-room school in East Otisfield. The last step in the consolidation process was the opening in 1990 of the Otisfield Community School, serving grades K-6, on the Powhatan Road. In 1992 the building in East Otisfield which had served as the town's elementary school for over forty years became the Otisfield Town Office. Since 1966 Otisfield has been part of School Administrative District 17, along with seven other towns, and students in grades 7-12 attend the Oxford Hills Middle and Senior High Schools.

Bolsters Mills, first known as Pinhook, was named for Isaac Bolster (1769-1835). Although originally Otisfield's boundaries included both sides of the Crooked River, in 1805 the river became the line between Otisfield and the new town of Harrison. Today Bolsters

Mill remains a distinct village within the two towns, with its own traditions, such as a Bolsters Mills Day, which ignore town boundaries. It is also a matter of local pride that Bolsters Mills has recorded some of the lowest daily temperatures in Maine, on occasion even in the United States. But its first settlers were doubtless drawn by the possibilities of water power. Over the years, seven mills were built here. In 1819 Isaac Bolster built a dam, saw-mill, and gristmill on the east side of the Crooked River. William Bolster later built a fulling mill on the Harrison side of the river, where later a district school, Methodist Church, Grange hall, and public library were also located. About 1920 Fred Clark closed down the last mill in the village.

Isaac Bolster, Jr., built a general store on the Otisfield side of the river in 1821. The store, which once served also as post office, has been in continuous operation ever since, operated in the twentieth century by (among others) Lawrence and Rose Spiller, Albert and Nellie Hamlin, James and Judy Colburn, and David Dale. In 1997 it was the only store in Otisfield open year-round.

South Otisfield, which includes the Mayberry Ridge overlooking Pleasant Pond, was once called Dunkertown, perhaps a corruption of "Donkeytown." Today it is a residential area which, except for its cemetery, bears few obvious signs of its industrial past. But about 1900, in addition to its school and Baptist church, Dunkertown featured Forrest Edwards' apple orchard and Ephraim B. Jillson's cornshop, established in 1890 and operating

until about 1925. The cornshop probably constituted Otisfield's largest commercial business.

The Gore began its history as Phillips Gore, named for Samuel Phillips, an early owner of the land. It began its existence as a rectangle of unincorporated territory that fell between the surveyed boundaries of adjacent towns, in this case between Otisfield and Oxford. Otisfield annexed the Gore in 1803. The area was settled early and was distinguished by a number of large farms, including those belonging to the Sawyer, Lombard, and, moving into the twentieth century, the Linnell, Brett, and Thomas families. The Frederick Robie Grange, organized in 1890, served as a social center for the Gore until it merged with Oxford in 1997. The Gore school, because of its distance from the Otisfield Central School, continued in use well after the closing of the town's other one-room schools.

Twentieth Century: Change and Continuity

With the arrival of the twentieth century, Otisfield began to change at a faster rate. The most obvious changes were technological. In 1903 the Oxford and Otisfield Telephone Company began constructing the first telephone lines in town. In 1909, Nellie Pottle and her classmates saw their first automobile, driven by Dr. Orin Stevens of Oxford, come chugging past Pugleyville school. By 1926 there was enough automobile traffic to prompt the town to replace its snow roller with a truck-driven plow. During the 1930s, lines bearing electric power spread through the town, brightening lives and lightening everyone's workload.

Other changes were more subtle, particularly the change in how people in Otisfield earned a living. Starting in the second part of the nineteenth century, Otisfield, like other southern Maine towns, suffered a steady decline in agricultural production and income. So many left for better opportunities in the Midwest that the population of Maine's cities and towns fell precipitously. Otisfield was no exception. From a peak of 1307 in 1840 the population declined over a hundred years to only 488 in 1940. It may have been coincidental that the town's poor farm, first opened in 1865, shut down in 1924 partly because it had no residents.

From 1910 to 1920, especially, a considerable number of families of Finnish background arrived in town, in many cases buying up the old farms which the earlier settlers had given up on. Hard-working families named

Heikkinen, Tikkanen, and Jaakkola settled on Bell Hill. They brought not only new blood into town but also new customs, traditions, and such novelties as saunas and skis. At the end of the twentieth century, the Finnish heritage remains an important element in Otisfield.

About 1920, at the same time that sawmills and farming were waning, the advent of the automobile helped create new opportunities for profit-making—tourism and real estate. A number of children's camps opened on Otisfield's three major lakes: Ohuivo, Wacipi Pines, and Wayaka on Thompson Lake; Great Oaks on Saturday Pond; Powhatan, Truda, and Arcadia on Pleasant Pond. The camps flourished from the 1920s into the 1960s. Most now have been closed and sold off as individual building lots. Arcadia, however, continues to flourish, and Powhatan has gained a new life as the Seeds of Peace Camp. The rapid development of shore property for summer cottages and second homes, begun in the 1920s and 30s, continues unabated today.

World War II served as a watershed for Otisfield. During the war many young people from town served in the armed forces, some never to return. Others found work in Maine's booming shipyards. Since 1945 the town's population has turned around and shown steady growth, rising to 1136 by 1990. Modern roads and automobiles have allowed residents to take advantage of country living while commuting to neighboring towns and cities for work. Otisfield is no longer a farming community; on the other hand, Otisfield has maintained a strong rural character. Since World War II particularly, the town has attracted not just vacationing visitors but individuals and families who enjoy outdoor activities,

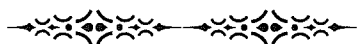
hunting in the fall, snowmobiling and ice fishing in the winter, and water sports in the summer.

As the twentieth century is about to give way to the twenty-first, Otisfield is no longer the wilderness that George Peirce found in 1775. Neither is it any more the collection of distinct villages that it was in the last century. Industry has moved out of town, leaving Otisfield without a post office or business center except for the one small year-round store in Bolsters Mills. On the other hand, technological changes and changes in the town's population and economy have tended to unify the town and lend it a single character. Newcomers to the town still remark, with pleasure, about one aspect of Otisfield that has remained the same for two centuries, its form of government. Otisfield citizens still gather together at a town meeting every spring to elect three selectmen and to conduct the town's business, just as they first did in May of 1787. One recent political change shows how seriously Otisfielders take their political responsibilities. In 1978, led by Albert Willis, the townspeople staged a rebellion possibly inspired by America's revolt from England two centuries before. Otisfield objected to being taxed to pay for Cumberland County's new civic center in Portland. It was, they felt, simply a device on Portland's part to pass the tax burden on to towns which would not benefit. Richard Bean flatly declared, "We will secede." And so they did. Eventually, with the blessing of Oxford County, the Maine legislature passed an act enabling Otisfield to withdraw from Cumberland and join Oxford County. Otisfield's victory was complete.

Doubtless more great events of this kind will occur in

the twenty-first century, transforming Otisfield in ways we cannot even guess. Whatever these changes are, let us hope that the town will always remember its history. It is Otisfield's past, after all, that is responsible for what it is today—a small town with pride in its natural surroundings, its relaxed way of life, and its tradition of independence.

George Peirce would approve of what has become of his wilderness.



Information Sources

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This short history was prepared for the Otisfield Historical Society by Jean and David Hankins in celebration of Otisfield's bicentennial.