

Harpswell Historical Society

Newsletter

Winter 2013-14

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The Harpswell Historical Society is dedicated to the discovery, identification, collection, preservation, interpretation, and dissemination of materials relating to the history of Harpswell and its people.

The Wilson's High Head Farm

Continuity and Change

Pat Barnes Moody

Except for a year after college and when I was first married, I have always had the privilege of living in Harpswell. Among my many fond childhood memories are the visits that my family made to other Harpswell homes. It was a common practice then to just “drop in” for an afternoon or evening visit. Of course, I especially liked to visit families that had children my age, my favorites being the Morse or Williams families. Another favorite place was Katie and Elmer Wilson’s farm at High Head. Their daughters, Mary and Eleanor, were older than I, but they always brought out games or dolls and a big box of paper dolls that they had saved from when they were younger. I played happily in comfortable surroundings while the adults visited. As I look back on those times, I can think of no place in Harpswell that through the years has changed more than High Head.

Life on the Farm

At that time when we went to High Head, we drove down what is now Mountain Road, turned right at the end of the road, drove by the former George Barnes home (the old Andrew Dunning farm) where my father was born and grew up, and then down to High Head. Toward the end of High Head was the farm where Katie and Elmer Wilson and their family lived.

Katie Wilson was a Curtis and had grown up in the house in which she and Elmer lived after they were married. The area was first settled by Katie’s ancestors in 1762. These early settlers came from Hanover, Mass. and before that from England. In 1881 a farm

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Harpswell, England. It could be our namesake

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house was built to replace the smaller Revolutionary War time house. At that time Harpswell had several grist and saw mills which depended on tide for power. One of those was located on Mill Cove. The house at High Head was built with lumber that came from that Mill Cove saw mill. The causeway on the present High Head Road is built on top of the old mill dam.

At the time when I was a young child, Elmer and Katie had a dairy farm at High Head. They owned 10 Jersey cows and sold the milk and cream that they produced. Katie's sister Elizabeth, who also lived at the farm, raised hens and sold the eggs. The family grew vegetables and had some fruit trees, as well as blackberries and raspberries. However, their main source of income came from their dairy products.

About fifteen years ago, a group of

students from the third and fourth grade class that I was teaching had the opportunity to interview Mary and Eleanor Wilson. The sisters told my students about life on their family farm. As we listened, we realized that there was always work to be done, including caring for the animals, raising crops, taking care of the orchards, cutting wood for the stoves, haying and weeding, preparing silage for the cows, hand milking the cows, and transporting the milk and cream to Brunswick each day. Each morning after the cows were milked, Elmer strained the milk and put it through a separator. The milk and cream were then put into 20 or 40 gallon cans, and Elmer transported them to Brunswick, where they were put on a train and eventually sold.

One interesting note connected to the milking of the cows involved Elmer's

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The Sam Alexanders of Harpswell

By Louise Huntington

Sam Alexander has reminded me that our property, next to his at Sunset Hill Farm in North Harpswell, was once in the Alexander family. Recently I sat down with him to satisfy my curiosity about the early days in our part of Harpswell.

The Alexander family first came to Harpswell in 1719. Originally they came from Kintyre on the Firth of Clyde in Scotland. In the days of William of Orange many farmers were driven off the land, and the Alexanders moved over the water to Ulster, Ireland, where they lived for 40 years or so before sailing to Boston in 1717. From there they moved to Maine, most likely attracted by the chance to clear land and start their new life.

The family first built a cabin on the Cathance River in Topsham in 1717, where the father in the family, David, was killed by Indians.

In 1719, William Alexander moved to Harpswell and his brother James settled in Bowdoin. Life was very difficult in those early years because of the constant threat from Indians. Much of the land in what is now Maine was owned at the time by the Pejepscot Proprietors, a group of eight wealthy land speculators from Boston. Their money-making plans did not materialize, and they sold their land in Harpswell to a Henry Gibbs, also of Boston. Gibbs in turn sold land to the early permanent settlers who arrived after the Indian Wars of the late 17th century.

The Alexanders originally purchased the land known today as Two Coves Farm. William Alexander built a home on the shore of Widgeon Cove in 1737 that survived into the 20th century. A photo of this simple dwelling is reproduced in W.T. Alexander's *Harpswell On Casco Bay*. Clement Dunning, owner of the property until recently, burnt its remains, and only a depression in the ground can still be found.

In 1821, Isaac Alexander (Sam's great great grandfather) purchased Sunset Hill Farm. At that time the main part of a family house was brought by oxen from the west side of Widgeon Cove where the Kuhls now live. It had been built for a son of William Alexander. The house was situated by an older barn on the property that was built in 1792. The Alexanders sold the property on Widgeon Cove to the Dunnings in 1840.

Life in the Early Days

When the first settlers came to Harpswell, they subsisted by hunting and fishing. Duck hunting is popular to this day. On Sam's shore there are some gunning floats, a reminder of earlier days. To clear the land for growing crops and pasturing animals, the first settlers practiced slash and burn. They kept only the best wood to use for building and furniture.

In the early days, hogs were an important part of the settlers' diet. The town elected a Hog Reeve at town meeting. Wild hogs had to be rounded up and corralled in pounds to prevent

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Growing Up in Harpswell - Reminiscences

Anne Anderson

Imagine growing up in Harpswell with one telephone in a small community group. If Mother needed a car, she took Dad to work. Unless it was an emergency, you never missed school for a doctor or dentist appointment. I was a lucky kid. My much older cousin had a telephone and a car. You couldn't depend on either, however, if you wanted to talk or play with a friend. You walked or rode your bicycle.

At school, one teacher took care of us and kept the wood stove going with

the help of the older boys. She taught all nine grades (K-8th). Every subject. Friday afternoon was usually for art and music. She taught that also. It was really something to behold when the Superintendent would come to check our teacher's method of teaching. He would always sit up back and have his lunch. He never stayed all day, but he must have had a lot of schools to visit as we were in the Freeport District.

We all walked to school; some students were 3/4 of a mile away. Three students to a class was average. My class was two boys and me. We usually

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Christine Miller checking the mail at her store, Holbrooks, in Cundy's Harbor (circa 1959). For more about Cundy's Harbor and Christine visit our website at www.harpswellhistorical.org

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love of singing. He always said that the cows gave more milk when he sang to them. Although I never was there at milking time, I'm sure the cows listened to many old time hymns in those early morning or late afternoon hours.

All of the farm work at High Head was done without electricity. There was a generator, but it almost never worked. The only bathtub on the farm was in the barn. It was one that Elmer ingeniously set up so that the cows could get water without someone making frequent trips to the well.

In talking to Mary and Eleanor, we learned of the fun times that they had as they were growing up and the importance of their church and school. We also learned that the High Head farm was truly a family farm and that the girls helped with the many chores. By age 11 or 12, Mary was already helping by driving a truck with a hay rack on the back, and as she drove, her father operated the hay loader. Finally, when the hay was ready to be transferred to the haymow in the barn, Mary would drive a car away from the barn, and a pulley would lower the hay onto the loft. Mary also helped with milking, and both girls worked in the gardens and helped with canning, jam making, and other household chores.

Disaster Strikes and Brings Changes

The daily farm life continued until Mary and Eleanor were seniors in high school. Then, in the early morning hours on April 14, 1943, there was a violent thunder storm. My family's home was on the main road of Harpswell, and my

bedroom was toward the east. I probably had been awakened by the thunder, but I remember my brother calling to me and telling me to look out my window. When I looked, even though it was not yet daylight, I could see a large red area above the trees. It was a frightening sight, and, even as a child, I knew there must be a fire. It wasn't until after daybreak that we learned what had happened.

Elmer was awake at 4:30 a.m. when the chimney of the farmhouse was struck by lightning. It was soon apparent that the attic was on fire, and Elmer woke the rest of the family. No attempt was made to call a fire department. The farm was two miles from the main road. During the mud season the road was impassable, and the Wilsons kept their car near the beginning of the High Head Road. During the frantic first moments after the fire started, every person except for the grandmother began carrying pails of water to the attic in an attempt to extinguish the spreading fire. As they were running with the water, Mary suddenly looked out the window and saw that the barn was also on fire. The barn had apparently been struck at the same time as the house. Elmer ran to the barn, hoping to save the cows. He found the cows all lying down and all dead. It appeared that they had been electrocuted and had died instantly.

With the realization that the barn and cows were a loss, Elmer ran back to the house telling the family that there was nothing they could do and that they had to get out. Grabbing a few things,

High Head, continued on page 6

such as bank books, they prepared to escape. As Katie's mother was blind and unable to walk from the building, she was put in a rocking chair and the adults dragged her to a shed that was not close to the burning buildings. All of the family and their dog escaped through the heavy wind and rain to the shelter of the shed. After they were in the shed, one cat appeared. The night before, that cat had refused to come in the house and was the only cat that survived.

Not long after the escape, Will Dunning and some other men arrived with a horse and wagon. As they approached the devastation, their fears were that they wouldn't find anyone alive. The loss was tremendous, but all were so thankful that the family had survived. While nothing could be done to save the farmhouse and barn, the men were able to save a cottage that was not far from the main buildings. The family was taken in Will's wagon to the main road where George Wilson, Elmer's father, lived.

While there was some consideration of living in the cottage that escaped the fire, Elmer's father insisted that everyone move into his home. The family lived there for the next five years.

On that April morning, not only did the Wilsons lose their home and all of their possessions, but with the loss of the barn and cows, Elmer's livelihood was also gone. He was later hired as a custodian at Longfellow School in Brunswick and remained there for more than 20 years. While I'm sure that he missed his former life, he was happy with his new job and thoroughly enjoyed his interac-

tion with the teachers and students at the school.

Those who have known Mary and Eleanor Wilson won't be surprised to know that in time they were able to find some good in the aftermath of the devastating fire. As they spoke to my students, they expressed those thoughts. While they loved the High Head farm, the family was isolated. After they moved in with their grandfather, they enjoyed being near other people. They felt that the remainder of their grandmother's life was happier because she had more contact with friends and neighbors. They reflected on how hard their parents had worked on the farm. While they weren't idle after the fire, their work wasn't as hard nor their hours as long. This resulted in better health for both parents. The family adjusted to the changes and found happiness in their new lives.

The Birth of Today's High Head

It was twenty years after the fire when two men, a lawyer and an engineer, approached Katie with a wish to purchase the High Head land. They wanted to develop the area and make house lots. Katie was reluctant to consider selling property that had been in the Curtis family for over 200 years. After much soul searching, she decided that it was better to bring happiness to the people that would be living on High Head than to continue owning the large tract of land. The Wilsons kept the lot where the cottage stood and one other piece of property. The rest was developed into more than 70 lots where many beautiful homes have been built.

Below is a copy of an early (1756) warrant with our best translation of what it says.. From the web

York: By Virtue of A warrant To Me
 Directed by the Committee
 In his Majesties name I Hereby (notifie and) warn
 all The freeholders, and other inhabitants of the Second
 Precinct in North. yarmouth, qualified according
 To Law, To vote in Precinct Meetings, That they
 appear at the house of (Mr) William Alexander
 on Thursday the Nineteenth Day of This first
 February, at Ten of The Clock in the forenoon
 Then and there to Act on the following
 Particulars
 Viz
 1 To Chuse A Moderator
 2 To Have A True Account of The Money The
 Precinct have Raised
 3 To see wt. the Prec. think Proper to Do
 with the former Collectors that have not
 Paid in There Respective Assessments
 4 To see if The Prec. will make A
 Revocation in Part or Extenuation
 in The second vote Passed on April ye 23
 A.D. 1755 And any other Partic-
 ulers they think proper to act on
 Given under my Hand This fourth Day of Feb
 Anno Domini nostri Christi 1756
 J. Sam. Eaton Cler

By Virtue of A warrant to Me Directed by the Committee In his Majesties name I Hereby (notifie and) warn all The freeholders, and other inhabitants of the Second Precinct in North. yarmouth, qualified according To Law, To vote in Precincts Meetings, That they appear at the house of William Alexander on Thursday the Nineteenth Day of This First February, at Ten of The Clock in the forenoon Then and there to Act on the following perticulars
 Viz

1. To Chuse A Moderator
2. To Have A True Account of

The Money The Precinct have raised
 3. To See wt. the prec. Think Proper to Do with the former Collectors that have noting (sic) Par (sic) in There Respective Assessments
 4. To See if The Prec. will make A Revocation in Part or Extenuation in The Second vote Passed one April ye 23 A.D. 1755 And any other Perticulars they Think proper to act on ___ day Given under my Hand This fourth Day of Feb Anno Domini nostri Christi 1756 E.C
 Per Sam Eaton Clerk

High Head continued from page 6

Eleanor is now the lone survivor of the Wilson family that lived at High Head, and she continues to live on Route 123. She very kindly lets me gather some rhubarb in the spring and later blackberries that still grow near the old cottage. It is a very quiet and peaceful place to visit, and I often linger for a while after I gather the fruit. There is one very beautiful and stately maple tree that stands near the dividing line between Eleanor's property and the lot where the farmhouse once stood. I am always impressed with this picture-perfect tree and think about how close it must have come to being destroyed at the time of the fire. To me it is a symbol of continuity and a reminder of the High Head that I remember.

Update On The District #2 School

Our last newsletter featured an article on plans for using the District #2 School House behind Centennial Hall. In recent months, Sam Alexander rebuilt the interior ceiling and floor and constructed several student desks. In June, HHS Board member Anne Standridge participated in a mock school-day session at the historic Growstown School in Brunswick to observe the research and work of volunteers there for possible adaptation and use at Harpswell's District #2 school. Additional research on dress, school supplies, textbooks, lessons, and other materials all needs to be done before we will be ready to open our school, hopefully at the end of next summer. We are looking for volunteers to help. Specifically, we are seeking a teacher's desk and two blackboards, as well as a volunteer to paint the floor.



Tuna Day crowd watches aqua-activities in Mackerel Cove circa 1940

Anne Anderson, continued from page 4

managed to go on a school trip each year-- to a beach and picnic or even to the Maine Museum. Parents drove us. Usually, we put on a play to raise the money we needed to get into special places. One of our plays was "Wildcat Willy." We were very fortunate to have the Harpswell Center Improvement Hall (now the Scout Hall) next to our school. It had a stage so we could stay after school to practice.

At school we had an hour at noon to eat. Eating didn't take long as we wanted to get outside to play; no Phys.Ed. class was needed. We played games like Red Rover, Giant Steps, tag, hopscotch, and when winter came and the pond near the school was frozen, we could bring our skates. The bell rang 10 minutes early to warn us that we should get our boots back on and not be late.

In my second grade the school department decided to transport all the upper grades to the West Harpswell School and the younger grades would continue to go to the Center School. The only thing I remember about that year was that a boy in the 3rd grade liked me, and he decided that he was going to kiss me (or maybe it was a dare). I spent most of my time running that year. I'd run around and around the school house, and one time I slipped and fell into a puddle. I don't remember that kiss, but I do remember how muddy and wet I was and how mad I got at him.

The year after the separation of the upper and lower grades, we went back to combining our nine grades at one school. My mother was the teacher. I remember that I just couldn't call her "Momma" at

school, so I always called her "teacher." She taught there for three years.

Sunday was the only day that the church was heated. After the service, we would run down to the store and spend our five cents for candy. One of the church deacons owned the store, and he opened it from 11 to noon so that people could get their Sunday paper and any needed items. We were known as the "Kellogg Juniors", and every month we had a special party at a member's house for skating, sliding, picnics, etc.

Growing up in Harpswell had many advantages. We were doing the same things and played together with our friends. We had our chores each day and probably complained, but I don't remember that we did it out loud. A "time out" was sitting in a corner facing the wall, or if we were really bad, there was always a spanking. If you ever saw the size of my father's hands, you would know why we paid attention!



Halloween at the Town House, 2013

Sam Alexanders, continued from page 3

them from roaming freely. Most farms would have had a pair of oxen in those days before horses were doing the local farm work. People treated their oxen very well.

Sam tells that in the early 1800's some of the Alexander family owned shares in ship building concerns owned by the Pennell family in what is known as Pennellville in Brunswick. Family members would walk from Harpswell to work in the Pennell boat yards. Ship building had become a very important local industry. Many of our fine local carpenters came by their talents naturally. The boat builders used oak for frames, pine and spruce for spans, white oak (now rare here) and southern pine for decks.

Around the time Harpswell was founded in 1758, it seems the local people were beginning to consider

hiring schoolmasters and building school buildings. In 1755, according to articles in a Town Warrant that Sam just recently turned up in his barn at the farm, there was an article asking "to see if the precinct will approve a schoolmaster." Likely school would have been held in homes at first, but there were also articles appearing at the time asking for approval for school buildings. Eventually, during the 19th century, Harpswell would have 20 or more schools, some of them on the islands including Whaleboat and Birch Island.

One of the most prominent features of the Alexander farm is its wonderful network of stonewalls. Sam and his brother David helped their father to keep them up, and to this day, Sam mows as close to the walls as he can, and he faithfully keeps the bushes cut back.

The Society would be grateful if you sent in your membership dues, if you haven't already. If the information is on your check, there is no need to fill out the form.

Harpswell Historical Society Membership

Please give whatever amount you feel is appropriate for you.

Name _____

Address _____

Town, State, Zip _____

Winter address, if different _____

Your Contribution is tax deductible.

Please make your check payable to Harpswell Historical Society and mail it to Harpswell Historical Society, 929 Harpswell Neck Road, Harpswell, Maine 04079

Harpswell's Shipbuilding Heritage

Thomas Skolfield and family were among Harpswell's most prominent shipbuilders, operators and owners in the late 1700s and early 1800s. An Irishman by birth, Thomas, and wife Mary, by the mid 1700s owned 200 acres of land immediately to the north of the old Indian Carrying Place along the current Harpswell-Brunswick town line at the top of Harpswell Neck. Five of their seven sons were sailors or shipbuilders. Son Clement bought 85 acres adjacent to his parents' property in 1774 and another 99 acres in 1785. By then, the Skolfield land holdings stretched from Middle Bay Cove in the west to the upper part of Harpswell Cove in the east. The Skolfiels both farmed their land and built at least seven ships there. In his later years, father Thomas Skolfield was not happy with his neighbor and sought to buy his land, too. Hubbard Goodrich of West Harpswell explains why in the following article.

Skolfield's 1791 Letter to Absentee Landowner Neighbor

by Hubbard C. Goodrich

Thomas Skolfield (1707-96), owner of the Merrucoonegan property on the Brunswick/Harpswell town line, was a selectman, shipbuilder, merchant and prosperous farmer. He wrote a letter in January 1781 to his absent neighbor, Capt. Robert Williams (or Samuel Grasman, it is unclear), that his tenant, Jeremiah Allen, was "an unfit person to carry on a farm and (had) four lazy boys doing nothing and living on what the owners ought to have." He added that

the people on Mere Point were afraid to say anything fearing that their cattle would be killed. He reported that his son Jack had half a dozen lambs killed last spring. "Your farm," Skolfield penned, "should raise four times as much as it does" and "double the butter and cheese" and make "100 weight of pork ... fit for the Boston market." Skolfield added that he was 80 years old [actually 74!] and "on my farm myself with the help of a small boy raise ... more corn and potatoes than is raised on your farm" by the four "lazy scoundrels". He offered to buy the farm for one hundred dollars to make it more productive. [From a letter in the Thomas Skolfield Account Book, Pejepscot Historical Society]

Thank You to Our Docents

Thanks to all of our docents who volunteered to work at the Historical Society Museum every Sunday afternoon from May to October. The Museum had a successful season with an increase in visitors and researchers, all of whom were greeted and assisted by our docent on duty. Most of the visitors brought stories and new information with them, and several made important donations to the Museum as a result of their visits. We hope they were enriched by their time exploring our collections. Thanks also to June Phinney for managing our docent program and drawing up the weekly work schedule. We appreciate your help!

Board Members

Paul Dostie, Dave Hackett, Ed Phinney, Rob Porter, Ann Standridge, Burr Taylor

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