

# New Hampshire's Cultural Landscape

James L. Garvin

New Hampshire is a museum of its own history. About 10,000 people lived here in 1730, after a century of European settlement. The state's population has grown to over a million, yet things that were familiar to the people of 1730 can still be seen today, along with everything that has accumulated since.

The history of New Hampshire, like that of much of the United States, is a story of initial settlement, the clearing and cultivation of the land, the rise of industry, the arrival of new immigrants from many parts of the world, the decline of small-scale farming, the growth of tourism, and the advent of a service economy.

The landscape here is a gift of nature, great in beauty but meager in fruitfulness. The state's lofty mountains have slopes too steep and soil too thin to yield any crop but timber. Its innumerable streams flow too rapidly to form flood plains with rich, level land. The soil is fertile but so filled with glacial debris that the most permanent record of three centuries of farming is written in thousands of miles of stone walls. New Hampshire's cool, salubrious summers are counterbalanced by long, cold winters that drive frost three feet into the ground.

Over nearly 400 years, with immense human labor and ingenuity, New Hampshire people have transformed their natural environment. Settlers in the 17th century began the generations-long task of subduing the forest, making wood products our first great export. New Hampshire pine supplied masts for the



Located northeast of Lake Winnepesaukee, the town of Tamworth has a beautiful complex of typical 18th-century buildings, including a town hall and a church. The Remmick Country Doctor Museum, with its historic farm buildings, adds to the historic character of the town. *Photo by Lynn Martin*

Royal Navy and houses for the Caribbean; oak made ships and casks. New Hampshire people became masters of the use of wood, and this skill remains powerful today.

New Hampshire became a place of farms, part of a New England that increasingly resembled old England. By 1830, 80 percent of New Hampshire's land was under cultivation. But the northern forest does not submit permanently to the plow; it regenerates itself. Woodlands have reclaimed much of New Hampshire as farming has declined. Today, New Hampshire is over 80 percent forested. Products from a renewed and husbanded forest still represent one of New Hampshire's great industries and exports.

People learned to split and shape the stone that lay everywhere in the "Granite State." Beginning in the 1780s with the

glacial boulders that litter the landscape, stonecutters began to transform granite into building materials. By 1840, quarrymen had begun to penetrate solid ledges, discovering stone of many colors and grains. The most famous is Concord granite, one of the whitest in the world, with a fineness that tempts the hand of the sculptor. The state capitol was built from Concord granite in 1819; so was the Library of Congress in 1890. New Hampshire retains a powerful role in America's granite industry today.

New Hampshire learned to use the cold of its long winters. Before the advent of the railroad in the 1840s, it was during the winter that most of New Hampshire's produce found its way to market on horse-drawn sledges over frozen roads and snow. Until the development of mechanical refrigeration in the 20th cen-



ture, the ice of New Hampshire's pure lakes was cut into thick cakes and sent by rail or ship to cool the food and drink of Boston, New York, Savannah, and even India and South Africa.

Scandinavian immigrants of the late 19th century discovered the greatest economic value of New Hampshire's winters. Norwegians, Swedes, and Finns introduced skiing into a land that had known only Indian snowshoes, transforming New Hampshire's snow-covered mountain slopes into one of the first winter resort areas of the United States.

But more than any of nature's other gifts, New Hampshire came to value its water. Beginning in the 1630s with the construction of some of the first water-powered sawmills in North America, New Hampshire people learned how to harness the power of lakes and streams. By the 1820s, New Hampshire millwrights and engineers had begun to dam and control even the largest rivers. Immense water wheels and systems of pulleys and belts were constructed to power spindles and looms. Brick mills were built that surpassed any structures ever seen in North America.

New Hampshire's industrial development made the state an internationally recognized center of textile production. The Amoskeag mills of Manchester grew to become the world's largest single textile manufacturing complex. By 1870, New Hampshire had become one of the nation's most heavily industrialized states in proportion to its population. It remains so. Industry's ever-increasing demand for labor brought wave after wave of immigrants in the 19th and early 20th centuries, enriching and diversifying New Hampshire's population. Mastery of the many skills needed to manufacture cloth earned New Hampshire a high reputation in engineering, in the production of foundry products, in the machine tool industry, and in power generation and transmission.

But the rise of industry was counter-

balanced by the decline of farming. Tired of fighting stony soil and short growing seasons, the children of New Hampshire's farms moved west by the thousands after the Civil War, or turned to nearby cities and mills. By the late 1800s, New Hampshire witnessed the abandonment of farms on a frightening scale.

Turning a crisis into an opportunity,



Above: The double-arched Carr Bridge in Hillsborough, New Hampshire, is a remarkable example of dry masonry stone work. A double-arched bridge allows for the necessary volume of water to flow through and still keeps the height of the bridge consistent with the roadbed. The granite was probably cut from deposits right by the river. *Photo by Lynn Martin*

Right: Floating in a pond, logs dusted with a November snow wait to be pulled into Garland Mills, one of the few water-powered sawmills remaining in New Hampshire. Built in 1856, it is located north of the White Mountains in Lancaster. *Photo by Lynn Martin*



state government allied itself with hundreds of farmers, boarding house proprietors, and hotel operators to make New Hampshire a tourist destination. Capitalizing on the state's beautiful scenery and healthful climate, promoters conveyed an image of New Hampshire as a place of wholesome rest and recreation. "Old Home Week," introduced in 1899, enticed those who had moved elsewhere to return to New Hampshire, perhaps for just one week. Yet the memory of that single week moved many a visitor to buy an abandoned farm or build a lakeside "camp" as a place of yearly summertime refresh-

ment. The tourist boom that was launched in the 1890s has grown to represent New Hampshire's second-largest industry.

New Hampshire townships, the basic units of government in New Hampshire, are filled with dispersed farmsteads and homes. Nearly every township has somewhere within it a town hall, a place where the inhabitants gather one or more

times each year to express "the will of the town" in the purest form of democracy known in North America. But the village is the characteristic element in any township. The village may reflect 18th-century origins, perhaps with a common, a church, and a cluster of private dwellings and former stores or taverns. It may be the creation of the railroad, perhaps with brick business blocks, a depot, and a freight house. It may be a place of manufacture, with a great brick mill set next to a stream and a cluster of boarding houses and private homes for mill workers.

New Hampshire was a place of reli-



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gious foment in the early 1800s, with several sects being founded here, including the Free-Will Baptists and the Seventh-Day Adventists. But since colonial days, each New Hampshire town had also had an established church, supported by taxation. This practice ended with passage of the "Toleration Act" in 1819. Shortly thereafter, church buildings of

state to authorize its towns to raise money by taxation to support such libraries. In 1891, it became the first state to provide state assistance to any town choosing to create a public library. In 1895, it required every town to establish a library unless the electorate voted each year not to do so.

Away from the city and the village, the land in New Hampshire, like the soil of

the first European ships land on the New Hampshire coast in the 1620s.

Constant change is written in New Hampshire's cultural landscape. But one image has persisted for many generations. Outsiders and inhabitants alike often regard New Hampshire as an almost mythical place of natural beauty and rectitude, a place where hard work, intelligence, and character will be rewarded with happiness. It is no accident that Thoreau, imagining one place in New England that was still filled with possibility, pointed to "a New Hampshire, everlasting and unfallen."

## Suggested Reading

Gilmore, Robert C. 1981. *New Hampshire Literature: A Sampler of Writings*. Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England.

Hall, Donald. 1987. *Seasons at Eagle Pond*. New York: Ticknor and Fields.

Heffernan, Nancy C., and Ann Page Stecker. 1986. *New Hampshire: Crosscurrents in Its Development*. Grantham, N.H.: Tompson & Rutter, Inc.

Jager, Ronald, and Grace Jager. 1983. *New Hampshire: An Illustrated History of the Granite State*. Woodland Hills, California: Windsor Publications.



many sects, built by congregations that had been freed from support of the old established church, began to replace colonial meeting houses. It is thus no accident that New Hampshire villages are filled with church buildings that date from the 1820s, the 1830s, and later.

The most impressive building in many New Hampshire villages is the free public library. New Hampshire claimed the first public libraries in the United States with the establishment of a free public library in Dublin in 1822 and a fully tax-supported public library in Peterborough in 1833. In 1849, New Hampshire became the first

an ancient civilization, holds evidence of more than one stratum of human occupancy. The forest floor is pockmarked with half-filled cellar holes from the age of settlement. Roadways are flanked by stone walls that restrained long-departed herds, stone-lined wells, the foundations of barns, and broken milldams whose streams have reverted to a wild state. This, too, is part of the cultural landscape of New Hampshire, revealing itself only to the sensitive and experienced eye. In certain locations, that eye may also discern traces of the villages and fishing sites of a still earlier people who watched

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