

PART IV: 1784-1800

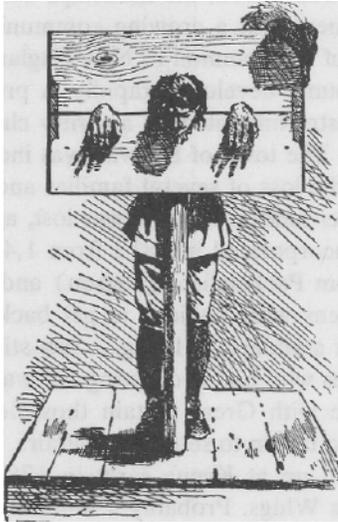
The end of the American Revolution brought peace and security never before enjoyed in the western New Hampshire townships. There were still wild animals lurking in the nearby forests, but organized hunts were clearing out the bears and other dangerous animals. A bounty of 40 shillings on wolves was offered in 1782. One wolf was trapped in Keene as late as 1789, and for even a longer period they continued to menace sheep.

New families arrived in the village, homes were built, mills erected, and local organizations strengthened. The town that greeted homecoming soldiers weary from the hardships of war was no longer a rude frontier settlement, but a growing community enjoying nearly all of the advantages of life common to New England in that era. The whole of Cheshire County developed rapidly, a prosperous region of farms and infant industry inhabited by a thrifty class of husbandmen and clever mechanics. The town of Sullivan was incorporated in 1787 despite opposition at the loss of several families and 1,920 acres from Keene's territory. Other land to the east was lost, again under protest, when Roxbury was incorporated in 1812 from 1,472 acres of Keene as well as sections from Packersfield (Nelson) and Marlborough.

While most citizens were anxious to get back to the routine of work to improve their standard of living, a few still harbored resentment against the Tories who had fled during the war. Under the terms of the treaty of peace with Great Britain those loyal to the Crown were to be permitted to return to settle their affairs. When Tory lawyer Elijah Williams turned up at Keene early in 1784 he faced threats from the more zealous Whigs. Probably a number of them still owed him money and were seeking a means of escape from a settlement. Williams had to be placed in the custody of the sheriff for his own protection. Even this did not insure his safety. He was seized and carried to a tavern in Ash Swamp, where vengeance was prepared. More considerate citizens soon gathered and attempted to arbitrate the matter, which was resolved with the escape of Williams, though not before a few heads had been cracked. The incident was somewhat unusual in the generally quiet township where law and order were maintained by the sheriff and his sworn deputies, although the militia might be called out in emergencies.

A new meetinghouse was proposed in November 1784 and plans

were drawn up for its construction. A wooden jail was erected in 1785 on the site of the town pound at the corner of the present Washington and Mechanic Streets, and a work or poorhouse was established in 1790. The whipping post and pillory were moved from Main Street to the street which soon became known as Prison Street (now Washington Street). These grim signs of Puritan justice disappeared soon afterwards, but a jail remained on this spot until 1884. Although punishment was less severe in some respects than formerly, imprisonment for debt was still occasionally enforced, and Ebenezer Barden of Stoddard died in the jail on November 3, 1806, having been confined some time for debt. Both whipping post and pillory were occasionally used, and a form of branding criminals with a permanent mark was practiced in Keene as late as 1795.



The new meetinghouse, with a tower at the west end where a bell was first hung in 1792, was dedicated on October 29, 1788. The architect and master builder was Benjamin Archer and the 70 x 50 foot frame was raised in June 1786 by a large throng, who made of the event a gala social gathering enhanced by a bountiful supply of rum. The main entrance where public announcements and notices of marriage intentions were posted was on the south facing the Green and Main Street. Within the church a broad aisle led to the pulpit opposite the door. The pulpit was built in the form of a huge wine glass, accessible by circular stairs on either side, and over it was sus-

pended a dome-shaped sounding board. Although 63 pews on the main floor and 25 in the gallery were sold at public auction in 1785, before construction, and realized a total of 849 pounds, or about \$3,000 (mostly paid in cattle), the building project was not accomplished without financial difficulties and shortages.

The unpainted box pews, about seven feet square, and each seating eight persons were enclosed, had doors, and were topped by spindle balustrades a foot high. They were furnished by the individual families, the appointments reflecting the social standing of their owners, as did their position and distance from the pulpit. Since there was no provision for heat, the high partitions and doors helped combat drafts and aided in the conservation of such warmth as might be provided to each pew in winter by the family bringing from home (in a tin foot warmer) a heated stone wrapped in cloth or live coals from the hearth.

It was the custom in church at this period to stand during the long prayers, the hinged seats being pushed upwards. At the close of the prayer every worshiper would drop his unupholstered board seat with a clatter that sounded like a volley of musketry. Sermons were usually an hour or more in length, and two prayers were the normal number at each of the two Sunday services. At the base of the pulpit were deacons' seats and a hanging leaf that could be raised to become a Communion table. Nearby was a cupboard for the elements of Communion; a pall or grave cloth to cover coffins at funerals was purchased in 1792. The elderly men sat facing the minister on long front seats called the "old men's seats." In the gallery sat, among others, servants, Negroes, and boys, as well as the singers, who had a section reserved for them. Efforts to improve the quality of the singing were made several times, and finally in 1806 the town voted six dollars for musical instruction. Shortly thereafter certain musical instruments, notably the bass viol, appeared among the musical equipment of the church, but it was some years before a pipe organ was used in any Keene house of worship.

Outside the church, where Ball's Block now stands, was a long row of horse sheds built in 1789, and nearby was a single horse block for the convenience of women and children in mounting. Those coming into the village from Ash Swamp and more distant points lacked time to return home during the one-hour intermission between services and were usually entertained in the homes of friends in the village. These gatherings were almost the only social contact farm people had and made their visit to town an anticipated weekly adven-

ture for young and old alike. Order was maintained within the church and in the village on Sunday by tithingmen whose long staff was a badge of office. Tithingmen were elected each year at town meeting until 1830.

In 1792 Thomas Wells, a hatter, owned the town's only vehicle or carriage. Called a "chair," it was without a top and seated only two persons. A short time later Judge Daniel Newcomb drove the town's first chaise. The second one was owned by Rev. Aaron Hall. Almost no one traveled any great distance; the condition of the roads and the rude bridges made horseback the only practical means of transportation.

In 1787 William Lamson located his tannery on West Street. Joseph Brown opened a store in competition with Abijah Foster's in what is now West Keene. This area around the corner of the present Hurricane Road and not far from Jesse Clark's mill and tavern was also the location of a blacksmith shop, the pottery of Zebulon Neal & Co. about 1794, as well as other small businesses, and was expected by many to become the center or main site of the town in the future. It might have been so had the meetinghouse not been built in the east part of Keene where, in spite of the fact that only about 40 families lived in the vicinity of Main Street, business gradually centered. **In** 1786 Keene's total population was 1,122; by 1790 it was 1,314, including two slaves.

Some businesses, like Captain Wyman's tavern, a blacksmith shop in the old fort, a few stores, and the school clung to the lower Main Street region, where Keene had been first planted, and which was sometimes called "court" or "gentlemen's end." However, with the new church located up on the Common, stores sprang up in that area, and Central Square took form with the increased activity and construction.

When James Davenport Griffith established the first printing office in Keene and commenced publication of southwestern New Hampshire's first newspaper, *The New Hampshire Recorder and the Weekly Advertiser* on August 7, 1787, he located in the lower Main Street area but soon moved northward. Though encouraged by "95 public-spirited customers" to bring the advantages of the press to Keene, Griffith soon experienced difficulties obtaining materials, support, and payments for his newspaper, which was suspended in 1791. One of his issues reported on the great tornado of August 1787 that destroyed buildings and livestock and killed and injured a great number of townsfolk.

Griffith printed as a pamphlet Rev. Aaron Hall's oration commemorating New Hampshire's ratification of the United States Constitution and delivered at a civic celebration on June 30, 1788. This was the first book published in Keene. Rev. Hall had been the town's representative at the Exeter Convention to consider the proposed Federal Constitution. In order for it to go into effect nine states had to vote in the affirmative, and New Hampshire, on June 21, 1788, was the ninth state to so act, thus creating the new Federal Union.

On the press he had carted from Boston Griffith also printed Masonic orations, Rev. Hall's sermon against profane swearing, a military manual, and several miscellaneous pamphlets.

Alexander Ralston's inn was long a famous local meeting place. It stood on the west side of Main Street at the corner of the present Emerald Street. Across the street rose a series of business houses, and these mechanics' and artisans' shops were known as Federal Row. Moses Johnson had a general store just north of this area but later moved to the other side of the street where the Buffum Block now stands. Johnson carried on a varied business including a pearlsh works and a distillery near Castle Street. A distillery was an important community industry, since water as a beverage was seldom used even by children in early New England.

The sharp and spicy advertisements of Moses Johnson and his rivals in mercantile business filled many issues of the early newspapers while customers profited by the ensuing price wars. John F. Vent, "goldsmith and jeweler from Europe," opened a business in 1793 which offered silver shoe, knee, and bridle buckles, and two shoemakers from Lynn, Mass., Robert Spinney and John Newhall, established themselves in town soon after 1794.

Daniel Newcomb was joined in the practice of law by Peleg Sprague, who came to Keene and opened an office in 1787. He soon built a fine house on the site of the present Colonial Theater. Newcomb was appointed judge of the Inferior Court in 1790, and in August 1798 Sprague became the first Keene resident to be elected to Congress, although he served only until 1800. Samuel Hunt, later a congressman, practiced law in Keene in the 1790's on the east side of Main Street.

Several taverns did an active business not only for the accommodation of the occasional traveler but as centers for many local meetings. Major Josiah Richardson's tavern stood on Pleasant Street (now West Street) where he was in charge of Keene's first post office, established in 1791. It is said that here the Duke of Kent, son of

George III and father of Queen Victoria, spent the night of February 4, 1794, on his way from Canada to Boston.

Aaron and Luther Eames took over Dr. Ziba Hall's tavern (site of the later railroad engine house) on the east side of Main Street. Opposite it the Asa and Mary Dunbar Tavern was erected in 1785, and still stands as the Crystal Restaurant. After her husband's death Mrs. Dunbar continued the tavern until 1795, when she sold it to Daniel Watson and left for Concord, Mass., with her children. Her daughter Cynthia, born in Keene on May 22, 1787, later became the mother of famed writer, philosopher, and naturalist Henry David Thoreau. Lemuel Chandler opened a tavern "at the sign of the Lyon and the Brazen Ball nearly opposite the meetinghouse" on the corner of the present Roxbury Street in 1788. Later it was called the Chandler House and was the site of the famous Cheshire House. The building had a large meeting hall located in the upper story, a flat roof, and was painted yellow. When Chandler died this establishment came into the hands of Dr. Thomas Edwards and was kept by him for many years. Along its north side, presently Roxbury Street, stood a row of Lombardy poplars.

Other taverns were located in West Keene, where about 1805 Colonel Abraham Wheeler opened what was known after 1814 as the Sawyer Tavern. During sessions of court a group of talented attorneys and lawyers made Shirliff's hotel, the present Eagle Hotel, the center of stimulating debate, witty conversation, and good eating. For the traveler the tavern provided a welcome haven from the mud or dust of the road, even though it was customary to sleep from four to six or more persons in one room. To local folk taverns served as almost the only social gathering places or clubs available dispensing food, gossip, and strong drink. Almost every merchant had a license to sell liquor which, together with the reported assortment of gamblers, created what amounted in some minds to a social scandal in places of public entertainment. The newspaper decried drinking, gambling, and horse racing as "fashionable vices."

Pioneer textile industries, such as fulling mills for the treatment of cloth, were in operation **on** several brooks, but power looms were still unknown. A tailor advertised in Keene, but most cloth was still spun and woven by hand at home.

The first town meeting to choose electors for the office of President of the United States and three members of Congress was held **on** December 15, 1788, at which electors **favorable to** George Washington and **John Adams were selected.**

Israel Houghton and Lockhart Willard were teaching private schools in 1789; Mrs. Ruth Kidder taught one in 1791. A public exhibition by Willard's pupils was held at the Court House in June 1789, and at another in September George Lilla's drama, "The Tragedy of George Barnwell," was performed, probably the first play given in Keene. Proceeds of the event went to buy books for the library that had been established, the first reference to such an institution in Keene. Nothing else is known of this literary venture; another pioneer library was briefly mentioned in the Keene press during 1795.

Prior to 1793 Judge Newcomb realized the need for schools of a higher order, and established a "grammar school," sometimes known as "Judge Newcomb's School." This school was to be taught by a man with a college education and was supported by the tuition of the students. The first teacher was John Peter Ware, a Dartmouth College graduate of 1792, who was known for his "hickory stick" discipline. Tuition was 12¹/₂ cents a week, with a small additional charge for those learning to write. Rev. Aaron Hall reported 12 school buildings in the whole town in 1794 with an enrollment of 300 pupils. In 1795 Asa Bullard Jr. was a teacher. He later became a respected educator and physician in Boston. For almost a century a schoolhouse stood on Main Street at the site of the present Keene State College's Spaulding Gymnasium. By 1790 town support for schools amounted to 100 pounds and this was doubled in 1795. Frequently teachers were students earning money between terms at college, and if the scholastic progress was somewhat uncertain, so too were the methods and equipment.

The construction of mill dams on the Ashuelot and neighboring streams cut off the supply of salmon and shad which swam up the Connecticut and its tributaries each spring. This raised a complaint at town meeting in 1790, and inspectors were appointed to check dams and sluices. On the Connecticut River a busy commerce traveled by boat; a canal with locks was constructed at Bellows Falls. River transport was popular and profitable until railroads and improved roads put an end to this slower mode of transportation.

Keene's second newspaper, also published by James D. Griffith, was called *The Cheshire Advertiser*. It was issued from January 5, 1792, until toward the end of the year, when Griffith left Keene. He was succeeded by the firm of Henry Blake and Co. which began publication of *The Columbian Informer or Cheshire Journal* on April 4, 1793. Henry Blake's death in March 1795 cut short the life of this printing firm, which had made of Keene "that busy center for the

production of chapbooks." The business was purchased by Cornelius Sturtevant Jr., a journeyman printer who had learned his craft as an apprentice in the Keene printing office, and he began publication of a weekly, *The Rising Sun*, on August 11, 1795. His firm also produced pamphlets, orations, sermons, and the only foreign language book known from a Keene press, *Elegia de Originale Peccato*, printed in 1795

Several neighboring towns were rivals for first place in Cheshire County during these years. Westmoreland, Chesterfield, Richmond, and especially Walpole enjoyed a larger population and property valuation, and bid fair to outshine Keene in position as well as wealth. It may have been partly to outflank her neighbors that Keene acquired a larger church bell weighing 1,000 pounds in 1794 and began subscription for a town clock, proposed earlier but not possible until a craftsman had set up clockmaking as a local industry. Luther Smith agreed to build and maintain a tower clock for 10 years for the sum of 36 pounds. This was accepted and the first town clock, with a single dial facing south, was installed that year in the new meetinghouse.

On his way to study law in Charlestown Joseph Dennie, who later attained fame as editor of the Walpole weekly newspaper and writer of merit, had his first view of Keene in December 1790. He wrote "Keene is a populous village, situated in a valley surrounded on all sides by lofty hills. The houses are built in two rows, so as to form a street, which extends for one half a mile at the end of which, a very handsome parish church agreeably [sic] terminates the view. Much business is done in Keene, there are several stores and shops for merchants and tradesmen, three lawyers' offices, and a printer's press whence a Hampshire Gazette is weekly issued."

Mail arrived in Keene by postriders, and proposals for establishment of a stage line were considered in 1792, but the plan was not carried out. From two-week delivery, mail service improved to weekly delivery by 1795, when Captain Asa Bullard was appointed the first postmaster under the new United States Government, with the office at his "coffee house" on what is now the south corner of Main and Dunbar Streets. For many years post office business was conducted at different spots wherever the postmaster happened to operate a tavern or store. Leaving Boston on Wednesday morning, the rider arrived in Keene Thursday and traveled on to Charlestown the next day. Passing through Keene again on Saturday morning, he delivered mail to Boston on Monday morning. Except when snow permitted the use of a rough sleigh, all mail service and most travel were

still on horseback.

The Prison Street Cemetery ground was opened in 1795, after which the old lower Main Street graveyard was all but abandoned.

Among colonial customs which were fast falling out of use was that of "warning out" newly-arrived persons in the community. New-comers were served with a warning to move on, partly as a defensive measure by the original proprietors and also as a means of avoiding public support should the new arrivals fall on hard times and apply for aid. Frequently, however, such persons were later valuable and even important citizens despite their strange reception.

A certain Monsieur Bellerieve offered to teach a private school entirely in French in 1796, but his career was a short one, as he soon ran into debt and absconded, leaving an unpaid lodging bill among other obligations. Rachel Bill's private school of 31 pupils was probably typical in size of such institutons in Keene. A fife and drum music school was held during 1796, and a dancing school enjoyed success during the winter of 1798-99. Another, under Dana Parks, was conducted in November 1807 and the first evening classes in town were held during the autumn of 1802 at Wells' Hall, formerly Bullard's Coffee House. The town appropriated \$500 for schools in 1797. Private education was offered by Phineas Cooke in 1809, and a Mr. Durand, who taught French and also offered fencing and sword exercise instruction. Durand was accused of being a French spy by the Walpole weekly, *The Farmer's Museum*, and he soon disappeared from the local scene, although just what spying activities he could have engaged in were never made clear.

Proposals for a new court house were considered in 1795. Alexander Ralston, the wealthiest man in town, made an attempt to have the new building located on Main Street opposite Federal Row and his tavern, but it was finally decided to build it near the location of the older one. Property was purchased bordering Major Richardson's open land on the unoccupied west side of the present Central Square, and the town provided the site for as long as court should be held there. Erected in 1796, the new building was also to be used for town meetings. However, certain county offices had not yet located in Keene. The registry of deeds, for example, remained in Walpole until about 1813.

Although Rev. Aaron Hall was personally liked and respected, a tax for the support of the established Congregational Society in Keene which had been required since colonial days was not universally appreciated. It was challenged in 1797 by Dr. Ziba Hall, who claimed

to be a Universalist. The selectmen supported the established church and fought Dr. Hall's suit to recover his church tax. A sharp controversy followed, but on the grounds that the Universalists were not a recognized denomination, the court ruled against Dr. Hall, and he was forced to pay the required sum, as were several pioneer Baptists a few years later. The legislature soon recognized Universalists and other religious denominations, and compulsory support of the Congregational Church ended. The minister was still paid by the town, which retained a voice in church affairs and provided the pastor's winter supply of firewood, as in colonial times. At the annual "bee" held in February 1801 to cut the Rev. Hall's wood, from the lot set aside for that purpose, local citizens delivered 40 cords to his house. It was Rev. Hall who communicated basic facts about Keene to Rev. Jeremy Belknap in September 1790 for Belknap's famous history of New Hampshire.

By 1797 the new federal monetary system had been accepted, and the sums raised by the town in that year were expressed in dollars and cents for the first time. Rev. Hall's salary was \$500, the same amount that was authorized for the schools and repair of highways. Merchants slowly adopted the new system, although pounds, shillings, and pence continued to be known for some years.

Newspaper publication in Keene was at a low ebb after 1798, when the Sturtevant firm shifted its interest to a Putney, Vt., weekly, *The Argus*. A young Boston-trained printer working at Leominster, Mass., heard of an opening in Keene and came to negotiate with the creditors of the business. John Prentiss struck a bargain with Deacon Abijah Wilder, and with the help of Daniel Newcomb, he became proprietor of the Keene printing office. With an old screw press, scant equipment, and one assistant, young Prentiss spent his 21st birthday setting type by hand for *The New Hampshire Sentinel*. The paper was issued to 75 subscribers on March 23, 1799. The total cash assets of the new venture amounted to five dollars. Within six months Prentiss had attracted 250 readers at a subscription of \$1.50 a year, which was paid in wood, butter, cheese, and grain as well as cash. **In 1802** Prentiss opened the first book store in Keene. His job printing business began with an almanac for the year 1800 and later comprised a variety of publications, including school texts and psalm books.

The winter 1799-1800 was one of the most severe on record with snow frequently two feet deep and all roads blocked for days. Yet it took only 12 days for news of the death of George Washington to arrive on December 26. Abijah Wilder Jr., then only 15 years old,

climbed to the church tower and tolled the bell all night. The following day the flag, draped in mourning, was flown at half-staff, and the bell tolled again until four o'clock in the afternoon. In January 1800 a committee met to plan the civic memorial services to be held on February 22, the national day of mourning. Citizens assembled in somber dress at 10 o'clock and marched with muffled drums to the crepe-decorated church for religious services, including an oration and vocal selections by a choral group. A company of militia and cavalry formed an honor guard, and among the mourners were members of the Rising Sun Lodge of Masons paying their respects to a brother Mason.

The Masonic organization in Keene had begun in 1784, formed under authority of the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts. Asa Dunbar was the first Master, and meetings were held in the Ralston Tavern. A New Hampshire charter for the Rising Sun Lodge was obtained in 1792, and in 1797 the first Masonic Hall was built near Federal Row on Main Street (at the corner of what is now Dunbar Street). On the ground floor of the building were business establishments, including a large shoe manufactory. This building in later years was moved to Court Street, where it is a dwelling at No. 110.

Perhaps the most celebrated among the first Masons in Keene was Thomas Smith Webb, the town's first bookbinder, who after leaving Keene in 1796 became an important official and compiler of Masonic ritual.