

PART VI: 1816-1825

The decade which followed the War of 1812 was one of peace and progress. The Baptists at Ash Swamp organized a church of 13 members in September 1816 and erected their first meetinghouse near the present Hurricane Road corner. It was dedicated in December of that same year after a public auction of the pews to finance the construction. This was the second religious denomination in Keene.

In the village moves to install stoves in the Congregational Church were turned down, although the building was repaired and painted. Agitation for a new bell met with more success, and one was hung in 1819. Shortly thereafter a stove was installed in the Meetinghouse, to the displeasure of some traditionalists. One citizen found the air so oppressive that he rose and left the building in a rage against the new innovation, not realizing that upon that particular occasion no fire had been kindled.

The village church boasted the only bell in Keene until 1828, when Baptists, in cooperation with the town, purchased a Revere bell weighing 777 pounds and tuned to the musical tone C sharp. Curfew was then sounded by both bells at nine o'clock and a time signal was rung at noon. Due to their use as a public signal the church bells of many New England towns were commonly property of the town. The bell in West Keene was rung so frequently by mischievous boys that fire companies in the village were instructed to ignore its ringing unless it was continuous for at least five minutes.

Another use to which church bells were put was to make public announcement of death. Three quick strokes told of a man's death and four of a woman's. These were followed by tolled strokes equal to the number of years of age at death. When the town was smaller and most of its sick and older inhabitants were known to all, this grim signal could usually identify the particular person lost to the community.

A private school education, as well as evening classes, was offered for two years by Thomas Hardy, beginning in 1816. He later left Keene to take charge of the Chesterfield Academy. Nathaniel Sprague also operated a private school, and about this same time Lovisa Witt of Chesterfield began a long career as a teacher in Keene and surrounding towns. Miss Fiske's Female Seminary was already firmly established and growing in renown. The town appropriation

for schools in 1818 was \$1,000, its highest figure for educational purposes, and remained unchanged for some years.

Timothy K. Ames conducted a dancing school late in 1818. Dancing was still frowned upon in some quarters and continued under certain disfavor for years to come, though liberal influences were making it more and more acceptable. One of the early productions of John Prentiss' printing press had been *The Dancing Instructor, Containing a Collection of the Newest Cotillions and Country Dances*, not to be mistaken for the now-popular square dance, but simply a common misspelling of the French term *contre danse*.

Pastimes popular among men and boys included an early form of bowling. There were several alleys in town, and rooms for billiards, although billiard tables had once been outlawed in the state. Wrestling was popular, champions traveling from town to town for matches. A ball field where boys played a form of early baseball called "one old cat," which was played with only one base, was located near the Meetinghouse on the Common. Nearby was a favorite spot where marbles were played by the smaller boys. Girls took their recreation indoors as a rule and spent their time learning the domestic arts necessary for their future as wives and mothers. Almost every girl worked a sampler to illustrate her skill in various needlework stitches, not so much for decorative achievement as for the many sewing tasks required of all housewives. Those favored with expert training under Miss Fiske's direction might learn some of the more artistic needlework crafts, as well as the making of wax flowers and feather pictures, but these were arts most women had little time for in their busy lives.

Among the older boys and men the martial spirit of the late war remained high, and no greater pleasure was sought than to join one of the military companies to drill and parade in colorful uniforms. During September 1816 the Keene Light Infantry, equipped for active service, marched to Surry for an encampment near the meetinghouse of that village. Some of the Surry militia attempted to surprise the Keene unit in the dead of night; however, a sentry challenged their approach and gave the alarm. In three minutes the whole camp was ready for action. The drummer, a veteran of the Battle of Tippecanoe, said of the incident, "It seemed so much like old times, and was so handsomely performed, that I could not sleep again that night for pleasure." The following day was devoted to military exercises and drill by the crack unit, one of the best in the state, and a visit to the camp by the Ashuelot Cavalry from Keene. A similar encampment

was made in 1824 at Chesterfield in company with other military organizations of the area. The annual muster was a major event; one held in Keene during October 1819 included an infantry company from West Keene and an artillery company composed of boys 12 to 15 years of age. The Keene Light Infantry Armory was located in a field off present Court Street, giving the name to a street later opened in that section.

The new pastor, Rev. David Oliphant, did not prove satisfactory to those who were inclined toward a more liberal view of religion. The established church had failed to meet with the approval of the Baptists and they had withdrawn to their own church in Ash Swamp. There Rev. Charles Cummings of Sullivan organized the congregation, assisted by lay preachers until 1819, when Forris Moore was ordained over the church. In the village those equally dissatisfied but not convinced of another mode of baptism were influential in town action to dismiss Rev. Oliphant. The minister, however, refused to deal with the committee appointed to "wait upon" him except by written communication, and a lively controversy ensued. The church organization of between 400 and 500 members backed the minister in opposition to the town. The outcome of several long reports of contending committees was that Rev. Oliphant acceded to the request of the town and was dismissed in December 1817. The village remained without a minister while it heard candidates and visiting clergy for several months. Finally in March 1818 Rev. Zedekiah Smith Barstow preached as a candidate and gave so much satisfaction that he was extended a call to settle over the church in May at a salary of \$600, soon raised to \$700. Rev. Barstow was ordained before an assembly of nearly 2,000 people on July 1, 1818, beginning a 50-year pastorate. He was the last minister to be settled by vote of the town. The First Congregational Society was incorporated in 1823 under Rev. Barstow, who soon became a leading influence in the life of the community. He made his home in the old Wyman Tavern, fitted up for use as a parsonage, to which he brought his bride in August 1818. Here he raised his family, celebrated his golden wedding, and died in 1873 on the 55th anniversary of his first appearance in the Keene pulpit.

The original proprietors' organization that settled Keene had continued to exist over the years; their last clerk was John Wood, elected in January 1820 and holding office until his death in 1856.

The first New Hampshire gazetteer published at Exeter in 1817 described Keene as "a very handsome village of about 60 dwelling

houses, a meetinghouse, bank, court house, gaol and several stores, etc." In statistical tables Keene was listed as having an 1810 population of 1,646 human inhabitants and, in 1812, 210 horses over four years of age, 261 oxen over four years old, 608 cattle between two and four years, and 577 cows over that age limit, as well as 108 acres of orchard land.



*Hepplewhite bow front chest of drawers, by
Eliphalet Briggs of Keene-1810*

Eliphalet Briggs had established his cabinetmaking business on Prison Street, near the Center District School which had been built in 1793 on the site of a former schoolhouse, just above the Common. New business firms were begun at several points around the fast-developing Square. When Samuel A. Gerould arrived in 1819, there were such stores as that of A. & T. Hall, dealing in dry goods, groceries, drugs, and medicines; Appleton & Elliot, carrying a line of hardware and also selling the products of their window glass business; William Lamson, who sold fancy goods, groceries, and crockery, and whose reported local sale of rum was 60 hogsheads a year in addition to brandies, gin, and wine in proportion; Justus Perry, a general merchant, also owner of the bottle manufactory; Lynds Wheelock, who

offered dry goods, groceries, and crockery; and Dan Hough, who specialized in drugs and medicines, along with groceries and dry goods. Gerould purchased a recently-closed store and began what was to be one of Keene's longest business careers.

The development of a business district surrounding the Meetinghouse, where Central Square was beginning to take form, was not the result of any prearranged plan. Locating the Meetinghouse at the corner of roads north and west had seemed a logical move in 1786. With the turnpike coming into Keene nearby and a road laid out to the east, a natural center was created which could hardly have been more regular if planned from the start. When within a few years the church itself was moved back to create an open space in front of it, the prospect of the village with its long wide Main Street and Common was fully developed and became its most striking feature.

Salma Hale was elected to Congress in 1816 but declined reelection in 1818, and Joseph Buffum, the postmaster, succeeded him. Some of the most famous lawyers in northern New England visited Keene for sessions of court, including Daniel Webster and a future President of the United States, Franklin Pierce, as well as other men whose stimulating personalities added lustre to local social events.

Ithamar Chase, who came to Keene in 1815 to operate the tavern of his father-in-law, Alexander Ralston, died in 1817. The Episcopal burial service read for him was perhaps the first service of that church in Keene and left a deep impression. Chase's son, Salmon Portland Chase, later governor of Ohio, U.S. Senator, Secretary of the Treasury under Lincoln, and Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, grew up in Keene, where he attended the district school and was tutored by Rev. Barstow, who later described him as "a rather raw and uncouth lad, but very talented and an apt scholar." After his father's death Salmon Chase was placed under the care of his uncle, Philander Chase, the first bishop of Ohio. Later he returned to Keene, walking the whole distance from Troy, N. Y. It was young Chase who, on November 24, 1819, discovered the body of Oliver Goodale, aged about 43, face down in a shallow ditch at the side of the road on what is now Water Street. The coroner's jury rendered a verdict of death by plunging into the ditch (which was filled with about three inches of water) while the victim was in a state of intoxication. The impression on the boy was great; "a lesson I never forgot," he described it later. Rev. Barstow preached a temperance sermon inspired by the event, but it was still some years before an organized temperance movement was formed in Keene, led in large measure by

the minister, who also helped discourage drinking at funerals, a custom of long standing.

In addition to the mail stage traffic through Keene were teams hauling freight along the turnpike and droves of cattle and sheep bound for market. A cattle drive headed for Boston was not unusual in the days before the railroad. Some of the baggage wagons weighed upwards of 2,000 pounds and were pulled by from four to eight horses. Proposals were advanced to rebuild a section of the turnpike to avoid some of the steep hills. A route between Bellows Falls and Keene (later used by the railroad) was opposed on grounds that it would be of but little benefit to the towns along the way and that such a project would prove too expensive. Held up since 1813, a committee survey in 1816 laid out a road and reported on their work in 1817. Despite continued opposition the new highway was approved, although not completely built until 1833. It was first called the "County Road," later the "Summit Road." The Third New Hampshire Turnpike did not live up to the expectations of its promoters and was made a free highway in 1820, when the toll gates were removed, and the town accepted maintenance of the section within its borders. Labor was cheap; six cents an hour was paid to crews working on town roads in the period.

The slavery question, which was beginning to claim the attention of the nation, was brought into sharper focus by proposals to admit Missouri to the Union as a slave state. In Keene, as elsewhere in the North, opposition was voiced through public meetings. On December 21, 1819, delegates from Cheshire County towns met in the Court House to voice their disapproval of a further extension of slavery.

Several societies had been organized in the village, including the Ladies' Reading Circle formed in July 1815. This organization took an active interest in schools, and by 1825 had also voted funds to aid Indians, Greek refugees, and local charity work. It was called the Charitable and Reading Society in 1817, and was incorporated in 1882 as the Ladies' Charitable Society, the oldest women's group in the community. A Young Mechanics' Association was formed in 1816; also a Female Cent Society, a branch of the state organization. The Cheshire County Agricultural Society was organized in 1816, covering the territory that is now Cheshire and Sullivan Counties. Its first cattle show was held in Charlestown in 1818; the third was held in Keene in 1820, on grounds through which the present Emerald Street runs. There was a parade with a band, exhibits of manufacturers and fancy goods, as well as livestock, and a banquet serving 130 persons. In 1819 the Society awarded \$356 in prizes. The Hot Tongs Society was formed in

1816, probably a social group for convivial spirits. The Cheshire County Bible Society also had its beginnings under Rev. David Oliphant in 1816, and was later headed by Rev. Barstow for many years.

The Keene Musical Society was another organization of the period; its concerts included Handel's "Messiah" in 1821. A debating club, the Keene Forensic Society and Lyceum, was established in 1829 by 81 citizens to hold discussions on national, religious, economic, natural history, and moral questions. Interest in phrenology, study of the skull and head contours with readings of character from features of the human cranium, enjoyed a vogue about 1825, when Professor L. N. Fowler lectured and gave readings in the village. The Medical Society of Cheshire County was formed by physicians, with Dr. Amos Twitchell as president and librarian. Annual meetings were held in Keene.

Measures to control the sale of liquor and to suppress intemperance, "the principal cause of pauperism," as the town warrant described it, were introduced in 1820. The selectmen gave notice that names of ". . . those persons who are in the habit of drinking and tipping to excess" would be posted as state laws directed. **In** 1827 there was a temperance group, the Association of Keene for Discouraging the Use of Ardent Spirits, which, under the strong leadership of Rev. Barstow, made valiant efforts to control the tradition of excessive drinking common since colonial days.

The census of 1820 gave Keene's population as 1,895, a gain of 249 in 10 years, despite the loss of 75 or more set off with Roxbury in 1812. Still at this time Chesterfield, Westmoreland, Walpole, and Rindge exceeded Keene in population. Although artisans and mechanics of varied crafts were beginning to create an industrial economy, agriculture remained the town's chief occupation.

The idea of making the Ashuelot River a connecting link to the Connecticut had been discussed for many years, ever since river commerce had become profitable and popular. Efforts in the local area culminated in 1819, when temporary locks were constructed around the falls at two places between Keene and Winchester, the river bed deepened, and its course somewhat straightened. Lewis Page received authorization from the state legislature to complete this work, take tolls, and conduct navigation on the Ashuelot. Freight charges were not to exceed 50 cents per ton for the full 17 miles from the Faulkner and Colony mills to Winchester. With the aid of subscriptions Page built a boat 60 feet long and from 15 to 20 tons burden, named it the "Enterprise," and on Friday, November 19, 1819, opened navigation on the Ashuelot. Decorated with banners and loaded with passengers on its

maiden voyage, the boat was greeted in Keene by a large crowd of people, firing of cannon, and ringing of the church bell. Although the ambitious scheme failed to realize the hopes of its sponsors and was soon abandoned, improvement of the river for navigation continued to be a concern for several years. There was even a study made of the stream with the object of creating a connecting link between the Connecticut and Merrimack Rivers. Freighting to and from the Middlesex Canal in Massachusetts and between Boston and the north brought a constant flow of travelers through town, adding to the trade of the local taverns, and giving rise to dreams of commercial development and improved inland transport. The "Enterprise," perhaps the same boat that sailed to Keene up the Ashuelot, (now supplied with a steam engine) was used on the Connecticut after 1826. However, river transport enjoyed only a short period of success and was replaced within a few years by the railroad and improved highways.

In 1785 there had been but four buildings from the present railroad tracks to the head of the Square. **In** 1805 there were 16. By 1825 there were nearly 25 buildings in the same area, most of them built of unpainted wood, with several of brick construction beginning to appear. Within a few years a native of Keene, George Washington Snow, born in 1797, made a significant contribution to American architecture with the "balloon frame," first used by him in Chicago in 1833, and soon widely employed in all parts of the country.

The area north and east of the business district was open land, fields and pastures. The increased danger from fire prompted the appointment of additional fire wards and the adoption of regulations for better protection. The annual meeting in 1817 selected 10 as fire wards, whose insignia of office was a staff five feet long, painted red, and topped with a brass "spire." These officials had power to inspect buildings and to take command during fires. Additional regulations, adopted in 1828, specified the number of leather buckets, ladders, and other equipment to be kept by each household—every house with three fireplaces was to be provided with two leather buckets; every house with six fireplaces with three buckets; houses with eight fireplaces, four buckets; and those with more than eight fireplaces, six buckets. **In** addition, all households were required to have at least one ladder.

Some of the services of the fire wards were put to the test on May 27, 1822, when the large three-story George Sparhawk Tavern, the old Chandler House at the corner of Roxbury Street, burned. A single town fire engine, aided by a smaller one from the window glass factory,

could do little more than save some of the neighboring stores. The cistern, or town well, on the Common was soon drained, and bucket lines were formed from Beaver Brook. The roof of the Meetinghouse caught fire at one point, but the flames were soon extinguished. Payment of damages to the hotel building is the first recorded instance of fire insurance protection in Keene. In a short time the Cheshire County Fire Insurance Company of Walpole, incorporated in 1825, was doing a good business along this line.

The disaster inspired Keene citizens to begin subscription for a second and larger fire engine. The Engine Company was reorganized as the Keene Fire Society in 1822, and a second fire club, the Fire Fencibles, was organized in 1825. Other forms of protection were established when, in 1825, the first six police officers in the town's history were appointed.

Foundations for another hotel 52 x 56 feet in size were laid on the site of the earlier Chandler House, and the brick Phoenix Hotel, three stories high, "large, commodious and elegant," rose from the ashes, opened in December 1822, and was called "an ornament to our village." It contained, in addition to 18 sleeping rooms and the bar, an assembly hall, a large dining room, and handsome porticoes on the west and south. A horse watering trough was located in front of the hotel.



Phoenix Hotel. Opened 1822; burned 1836.

This became a lively stage stop and a center of activity in the village. At the rear of the hotel Keene's first hay scales were erected, a giant steelyard balance device. The post office was near the hotel, and daily mail service north and south through Keene was established in April 1825.

The major rivals of the new Phoenix Hotel were the old Ralston Tavern (called the Keene Hotel in 1822), the Sun Tavern on the Third New Hampshire Turnpike (now Court Street), and the Eagle Hotel on old Federal Row further down Main Street. The last had been operated as a tavern as early as 1806 and eventually purchased in 1823 by Stephen Harrington, who called it Harrington's Coffee House; it was newly fitted out in 1826 and renamed in honor of the high patriotic feeling at the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. The sign hung out at the hotel depicted on one side the building itself and on the other a fine view of Main Street, the work of a painter named Charles Ingalls. In addition, a golden eagle was carved about 1827 by Amos Holbrook to perch high on a post in front of the building. This historic antique was sold in 1883 for \$102.50. It was preserved and used on the temporary wooden monument erected to honor World War I soldiers and sailors, and later found a home in the gymnasium of Keene Junior High School on Washington Street. It is now a part of the collection of the Historical Society of Cheshire County.

Colonel Harrington was a noted host and his hotel did a brisk business, especially when the stage arrived. The innkeeper set a good table and kept his bar well supplied, with irons always hot for making flip, a popular drink consisting of rum and beer mixed together and stirred with a hot poker. Dances and parties were frequently held in one or another of the hotel halls, and from 1815 on, Saturday auctions were held at Salem Sumner's tavern (later the site of the Cheshire House). After the tavern burned in 1822, the auctions moved to the street, where they became a tradition. Participants in civic celebrations usually gathered at a hotel for dinner and toasts following parades, orations, and military displays. Visitors included artists, peddlers, and such individuals as D. Cass, the first surgeon dentist to advertise in Keene, during February 1816, and John Lyscom, who gave public notice of similar service in 1817.

The town's first theatrical performance by a professional company was advertised in May 1821 at a local hotel, where the tragedy, "Douglass, or the Noble Shepherd," was offered for one week, admission 50 cents, children half-price. Also on the bill was a two-act farce, "The Village Lawyer." The first animal show to exhibit in Keene and

featuring the largest menagerie in the country, showed lions, tigers, buffalo, elk, llamas, and other curiosities at the rear of Wadley's Tavern (formerly called Ralston's Tavern) in 1822, and appeared again the following year. Another attraction at this time was Sally Marietta Snow, a 10-year-old dwarf, weighing only 16 pounds, whose songs and pieces were performed in the Court House in 1819. Keene played host to Navy Commodore William Bainbridge and his party on April 30, 1819, with a large banquet, a walking tour of the village, and evening receptions.

The new minister, Rev. Barstow, took a special interest in educational matters, and in 1819 was chosen to head the board of five "visitors and inspectors of schools." The "visitors," long in charge of school matters, were also charged in 1824 with examining candidates for teaching positions, although there were no educational requirements for teachers for many years.

The town voted \$50 in 1820 for singing instruction in both the Congregational and Baptist religious societies. The principal hymnal in use was Isaac Watts' transcriptions of Psalms, and John Prentiss had issued an edition, as well as other music. His press had begun publication of school texts, including a history written by his brother Charles, readers, and the famed Adams' arithmetic books. Religious publications ranged from conventional sermons to doctrines of the Baptists and Universalists, and he issued a wide variety of other books, pamphlets, reports, and reprints of classic literary compositions.

A new court house of brick was erected in 1824 (the north half of which is now part of Bullard and Shedd's drugstore on Central Square). The Town Hall was also located in the building. The older wooden court house, formerly the meetinghouse, was moved to make way for the new construction. It became a double dwelling house and was later divided, one part serving commercial purposes on Railroad Square until it was torn down in 1959. The other half became the dwelling now at No. 26 Maple Street.

At this time the west side of Central Square was established, and the bounds of that area took their present lines. Proposals to move the Meetinghouse from the Common and dispense with the horse sheds were considered as early as 1820, but were not acted upon for several years.

In 1823 George Tilden, who began his apprenticeship as a book-binder under John Prentiss in 1817, established a partnership with Prentiss in the book and stationery business. The next year they opened a circulating library of 200 volumes. This firm, G. H. Tilden &

Co., still remains in business, the oldest retail store in Keene. Placing boys to learn a trade with established craftsmen was a common system of education and formed the principal training available to young men. At the age of 14 a boy was bound to a merchant or artisan to serve a term of seven years and learn the trade. The lad worked without pay, but his master had to provide his support, housing, and meals, and give him full knowledge of the particular craft. As one of the major tasks of an apprentice the boy was expected to make himself a set of tools of the trade, and manufacture a complete product, his "masterpiece," which fitted him to become a craftsman in his own right. Most shops had several boys learning the trade and assisting in the various hand operations to turn out a completed shoe, harness, wheel, chair, or clock. Sometimes dissatisfied apprentice boys ran away and were advertised for in the local newspaper. More frequently, however, the boys served out their time to become journeymen, and finally masters with shops and apprentices of their own.



Early Keene-made Hepplewhite bow front chest of drawers

In 1823 Abijah Wilder Jr. began a furniture and sleighmaking business on the east side of the present Court Street, competing with Eliphalet and John Briggs, who made a wide variety of furniture, and cases for the clocks manufactured by Luther Smith. James Wells re-

sumed his hat business, Collins Jaquith established a shoemaking shop, and A. and H. Walker opened a second bookshop, bindery, and circulating library. The Faulkner and Colony mills burned in 1825 but were soon rebuilt in brick and made larger than before. Also in 1825 John Prentiss erected a brick block on the west side of the present Central Square, which still stands as No. 45 Central Square. When this building was renovated in 1947, it was the last block in Keene with a sidewalk canopy, once a common feature of nearly all local business blocks. Samuel A. Gerould also erected a brick block, separated from the Prentiss building by a passage 11 feet wide and from the first brick Court House by an eight-foot passage. Another brick building was built by William Lamson in 1827 on the corner of Roxbury Street, opposite the Phoenix Hotel. It contained an auditorium called the "Music Hall."

The first flour offered for sale in Keene general stores was advertised in 1822. Formerly farmers had raised their own grains which they carried to mills to be ground, and townfolk had journeyed to the mills to purchase meal and flour directly.

The controversy over religious matters was not wholly solved by the separation of the Baptists. The Congregational pastor showed himself to be a strong leader of the traditional mode. Those who had Unitarian leanings waited to see if Rev. Barstow might not share their liberal ideas, but finding that he did not, they organized the Keene Congregational Society (Unitarian) of 71 members on March 18, 1824. The group met in the Town Hall, Colonel Harrington's hotel, and the Masonic Hall, but claimed a right to the Meetinghouse on their proportion of Sundays. This request was granted, the village church to be theirs five Sundays, the selectmen to determine which dates. Later the number of Sundays was increased to 13, and Rev. Barstow's salary was adjusted by the town in proportion to the loss of tax revenue for his support. After 1828, when the town gave up its rights to the church, bell, and land, the pastor was paid by his church society alone. Although there continued to be agitation over rights to the church, the new denomination heard Rev. Thomas Russell Sullivan as a candidate for their ministry in June and chose him to be their first pastor.