



Artist's version of Keene's early fort. Finished in 1738, and situated on a small eminence near what is now 300 Main Street, it was burned by marauding Indians in 1747

A Narrative of Keene, New Hampshire

1732-1967

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PART I: 1732-1748

An untamed wilderness, virgin forests, treacherous streams, impenetrable underbrush, and unexplored swampland covered nearly all western New Hampshire and Massachusetts in the early 18th century. His Majesty's then loyal subjects hugged the barren New England coast where they had carved out settlements a century before. Few braved the dangers further inland until Indian hostilities somewhat abated with the end of King Philip's War. It was not an entirely unknown territory, however. Mt. Monadnock was a recognized landmark and navigational aid to ships approaching the New England coast, and as early as 1704 and 1706 parties, scouting reported Indian activities, had traveled to its base. Part of this wilderness fell within the 1622 royal grant to Captain John Mason. It passed under Massachusetts control in 1641, but remained vast frontierland to which little serious attention was paid before expansion from Massachusetts began to write its history.

The greater part of western New Hampshire and the Connecticut River Valley was populated only by wild animals and roving bands of Indians. The region was the subject of a boundary dispute between the provinces of New Hampshire and Massachusetts Bay, a contest which was not resolved until 1740. Notwithstanding the dangers and uncertain conditions, Massachusetts approved settlements in the disputed territory, and in this regard Governor Jonathan Belcher recommended "to take a proper care for settling the ungranted lands" in a speech to the Massachusetts legislature on June 1, 1732. In answer to this hint the legislature voted on June 20 to open seven townships, including two on the Ashuelot River above Northfield, Mass., each tract to be six miles square. The four new townships finally authorized under an act of July 3, 1732, became Lebanon, Maine;

Athol, Mass.; Swanzey and Keene, N. H. The vote was consented to and approved by the royal governor on April 20, 1733, and surveys were authorized. Independent grants at about the same time opened the townships of Winchester, Chesterfield, and Rindge. Hinsdale had been given a grant somewhat earlier, and, as a part of Northfield, was already the site of a fort..

The first station of the surveying team, which traveled into the wilderness to map out the township, has by tradition become known as the "Statia," off the end of Silent Way on the Swanzey line, and was marked by a granite stone in 1902.

A plan was drawn up by Nathaniel Dwight and his party in the fall of 1733. Though not exactly what the authorities had requested,



the surveyors considered it the most suitable plan for building in the low-lying area. There was to be a series of 54 small house lots of eight acres each, lying 27 on either side of a principal road or street. Other common lands were laid out upon the plain on the Swanzey line. Persons interested in becoming settlers were notified to meet at Concord, Mass., on June 26, 1734, where upon posting a bond of five pounds and agreeing to certain conditions of settlement (the actual occupancy of the tract, erection of a meetinghouse, and clearing of the land) they were permitted to draw lots for property in the new township. No charter was ever granted by Massachusetts, and the 63 original

grantees became sole owners of the land, their title to the territory resting in the acts passed by the Massachusetts legislature in opening the area to settlement on July 3, 1732, and April 20, 1733.

A meeting of the proprietors was held at Ephraim Jones's tavern in Concord on June 27, 1734, at which the organization of Upper Ashuelot, as the town soon became known, was made under Captain Samuel Sady, who was chosen moderator. The proprietors adjourned to meet again at their new home in the wilderness on September 18. Six of their number, Captain Samuel Sady, Jeremiah Hall, Elisha Root, Nathaniel Rockwood, Josiah Fisher, and William Puffer, with Daniel Hoar Jr. representing his father, and Seth Heaton representing Isaac Heaton, came to the new town the following fall to hold the adjourned meeting and open the settlement. None of them had previously visited the place, and they were guided by Deacon Ebenezer Alexander of Northfield. The party arrived late in the evening of September 18. To fulfill the time requirement made the previous June, they opened a general meeting of the proprietors as soon as they had passed the line into the town and then immediately adjourned to the next day. Blackened roots of a stump at the "Statia," where tradition said the party built their campfire, were still to be seen in the 1880's.

There were no roads opened through the forests and few trails. The route followed during most of the early history of Keene was an old Indian trail and the "Bay Path" from Boston to Springfield through Concord, Worcester, Brookfield, Belchertown, Hadley, Hatfield, Deerfield, Northfield, and Hinsdale. The last 20 miles of the way were marked simply by blazed trees. Travel, except on horseback or on foot, was impossible, and for some 50 years no wagon lighter than an ox cart could pass through the wilderness.

Upper Ashuelot was the extreme northern point of the frontier in the Connecticut River Valley; the nearest neighboring community was Northfield 20 miles away. New Hampshire settlements to the east were almost beyond communication, nor did New Hampshire authorities acknowledge their western neighbors for many years. The river was a vital link to Canada, and along it traveled friend and foe alike, regulated to some extent by a series of forts established by Massachusetts to protect her western frontier. Forts or blockhouses erected partly at the expense of the province afforded what protection the settlers could expect, but the line of fortifications was weak and the troops in the area few in number. Those who chose to make Upper Ashuelot their home did so in full knowledge of the great risks

involved. Indian raids were not uncommon, the nearest and worst having taken place at Bloody Brook, South Deerfield, in 1675, where colonial forces were massacred, and at Deerfield itself in 1704, when 47 of the town's inhabitants were killed and 112 taken into captivity.

The refuge nearest the township was Fort Dummer, established in 1724 near Brattleboro. Built of logs, as were all the pioneer buildings, the fort measured about 120 x 120 feet with strong bastions or blockhouses at the corners and was surrounded by a stockade. It was attacked by Indians soon after its completion, but became a trading and missionary post in more peaceful times.

When permanent settlement was finally made at Upper Ashuelot in 1736, the region had experienced a period of some 10 years of peace. Roving bands of Indians were commonplace, threading their way in single file over trails they alone could recognize. The Schaghticoke tribe which once inhabited the area had long since moved to the Hudson River, and the Squawkheags who followed them in the region had been nearly destroyed by the Mohawks in brutal Indian warfare before 1670. The dreaded King Philip assembled his forces in the region during earlier Indian wars but few Indians had remained afterwards, although some of the former Indian residents knew the territory and were able to lead hunting and war parties through the forests and swamps.

Among the first considerations of the settlers who assembled in Upper Ashuelot in the fall of 1735 were roads to neighboring townships, the establishment of a sawmill (erected by John Corbet and Jesse Root on Beaver Brook in July 1736) and a gristmill, as well as plans for their proposed meetinghouse. At least one log house was erected in the summer of 1736, that of Nathan Blake near the corner of what was later called Main and Winchester Streets, where proprietors' meetings were held. At one of these meetings, on September 30, 1736, the settlers passed a resolution which has had a lasting effect on Keene: "Forasmuch as the Town Street is judged to be too narrow Conveniently to accomidate the Propriators," it was voted to double its width to eight rods, each lot on the west side giving up space at the front and making it up at the rear. By this move the unusual width of Main Street was established from its lower end near No. 441 to the railroad crossing, the original center of settlement, and a lasting character was given to Keene.

No settler had passed a winter in the new township until Nathan Blake, Seth Heaton, and William Smeed made preparations to do so in 1736. Grass was gathered to feed the oxen and horses they had

brought with them that summer. The men spent the early part of the winter drawing logs to the sawmill on Beaver Brook, but by early February their supplies were exhausted, and Heaton was sent to Northfield for meal. None of the few families at Winchester were able to assist their neighbors, and before Heaton could return a snow storm blocked his way into the forest. Nevertheless, he prepared to begin his journey despite warnings "that he might as well expect to die in Northfield and rise again in Upper Ashuelot, as-ride thither on horseback." Blake and Smeed, hearing nothing from their messenger, were forced to abandon the town and travel back to Massachusetts on snowshoes. Anxious for his oxen, Blake returned early the following spring to find his stock overjoyed to meet their master again.

A good number of settlers traveled to Upper Ashuelot in the spring of 1737 bringing their families, so that perhaps 40 proprietors were on their lands with cattle, horses, and other domestic animals, as well as some household goods that could be brought on horseback or in rude "horse-barrows" made by attaching poles to either side of the saddle, the butt ends dragging on the ground. Among the first meetings held on the site assigned the meetinghouse was one to call a minister, one of the conditions of their settlement. Plans for their meetinghouse, 40 feet long, 20 feet stud, and 35 feet wide, finished "decently, as becomes such a house" were also considered. Jacob Bacon accepted their call to the church, which was organized with



19 members on October 18, 1738. The churches of Wrentham, Sunderland, Northfield, and Medway, Mass., were represented at Rev. Bacon's ordination held that same day. The pastor's salary was 130 pounds plus his firewood. Keene's first meetinghouse was begun at the lower end of Main Street near the present No. 441, with a cemetery nearby. Between September 1741 and July 1742 the unfinished church was moved up to a small hill on the street near the corner of the present Davis Street. Inside the church, the men occupied seats on one side and the women places on the other, as was the Puritan custom.

A pound to house stray livestock was established, as well as a training ground near the meetinghouse for drill and public use. The town was soon visited by its first epidemic, a throat distemper, which swept the community in 1744 and 1745 and a number of inhabitants died. The first doctor on record in the town was Jeremiah Hall, an original settler; the second was Obadiah Blake, who came from Wrentham, Mass., about 1740, and served a wide area of New Hampshire and Vermont.

In addition to the necessary saw and gristmills, the proprietors were anxious to have a blacksmith in town, and took measures to procure equipment and offer inducements for so important a pioneer craftsman. The first joiners, who built everything from furniture to coffins, were Joseph Green (about 1740) and Aaron Chapin, a native of Enfield, Conn., who moved to Upper Ashuelot around this time. A road to the sawmill on Beaver Brook was laid out in 1738, and soon an early road to Lower Ashuelot (Swanzey) was opened, as well as one west to Ash Swamp, as West Keene was then known. Among other early roads were the present Baker and Beaver Streets.

On January 7, 1740, it was voted by the proprietors "to make such grant or grants of land to such person or persons as they shall think deserve the same, for hazarding their lives and estates by living here to bring forward the settling of the place." The wilderness grant had become an established community.

The settlers had not previously taken much action in protecting themselves from the Indians, although a fort was built in 1738 on Main Street (approximately opposite the Elliot Community Hospital where a marker stands) and additional fortifications were authorized in 1737 and 1740. The fort measured about 90 feet square and was built of hewn logs. It contained barracks and loop holes for firing at the enemy and two watch towers, one on the southeast and the other on the western side. The stronghold was enclosed by pickets.

In 1738 there occurred the highest water known to the town-

ship, Andrews' flood, called after John Andrews, a settler who had arrived a short time earlier. Andrews had sent Ephraim Dorman and Joseph Ellis with a team of eight oxen and a horse to bring his furniture from Boxford, Mass. When they passed through Swanzey it rained hard and they did not reach the station until night. As it grew darker the rain continued and the water covered the meadows. The men, fearful of being drowned, unyoked the oxen, chained the cart to a tree, and hastened on to the settlement a mile distant. After daylight came, a boat was sent off to search for the cattle and furniture. As the boat passed Bullard's Island a cry for help was heard. This was from Mark Ferry, somewhat of an eccentric, who had left the noise and bustle of town life for the more isolated surroundings of a riverside cave. The water had forced him to seek refuge on a stump, where he sat with a calf in his arms. One of the boatmen called that they would be back after attending to the oxen. They found the cart afloat, and hearing the sound of bells, were guided to several little hillocks where the cattle were located, some with only their heads above water. After guiding the oxen to high land the boatmen, hearing cries for help in the vicinity of Swanzey, proceeded to Crissen's house, where they carried an entire family to safety. On their way home they took Ferry and his calf into the boat. Hermit Ferry was again rescued by his neighbors after the Indian raid of April 23, 1746; this time he was found sitting peacefully up in a tree.

In 1740 came the royal decree from London regarding the long disputed New Hampshire-Massachusetts boundary and the establishment of New Hampshire as an independent province, with Benning Wentworth as governor. Although the exact location of the line continued in question for many years, the fact that Upper Ashuelot was New Hampshire territory and not part of the Bay Colony came as a shock to the Massachusetts-born citizens of the new town. The disgruntled inhabitants, like those of several other towns in the contested area, addressed a humble petition to the King asking that their town be included within the borders of Massachusetts, but to no avail. The Massachusetts legislature authorized the opening of an area in Berkshire County known as "Ashuelot Equivalent" to compensate some of her citizens who had lost property in the boundary decision. This was incorporated as the town of Dalton in 1784.

Upper Ashuelot need not have feared a new authority, as it was several years before New Hampshire paid any attention, official or otherwise, to the Connecticut River settlements under its jurisdiction, and the village was for some time virtually a miniature republic inde-

pendent of greater authority than itself. Perhaps New Hampshire officials felt these western towns were authorized by Massachusetts and she could take care of them. Since they were more important to the Massachusetts frontier than to New Hampshire's, that is just what happened. Such protection as was afforded to Upper Ashuelot and her neighbors continued to come mainly from Massachusetts throughout the forthcoming French and Indian War.

A declaration of war between France and England was proclaimed in 1745 to the dismay of all frontier posts. The hardships and privations of pioneer life were already great, and now in addition to those constant dangers, the settlers were faced with the fear of massacre or capture at the hands of the French and their more-dreaded Indian allies, as bounties were offered on both sides for captives and scalps.

Although the land was the settlers' chief support, farm work had to be abandoned, and fortifications were strengthened. The pioneers dared go only short distances from their forts without guards, and the necessary work was carried on by squads of men always armed and watchful. The call for troops by British authorities further drained the manpower resources of the settlements. A convention of delegates from the region was held at Fort Dummer at which requests for more protection were sent to Massachusetts and answered by repairs to that fort, plus a small force sent to the frontier. Also authorization was given for additional Connecticut River forts, numbered one to four and located from Chesterfield to Charlestown.

The first hostile activity near Upper Ashuelot was an attack upon the settlement at Lower Ashuelot (Swanzy) and one at Putney, Vt. The horrors of war struck close to home on July 10, 1745, when Deacon Josiah Fisher, while driving his cow to pasture, was killed and scalped by an Indian. The tragedy occurred a short distance from the settlement on the road to Ash Swamp. A marker commemorates the event which took place near the corner of what is now Lamson and Federal Streets.

Except for a few raids in neighboring areas, all was quiet at Upper Ashuelot for some time, although the calm only increased the dread of the inhabitants. A party of soldiers passing through town in early 1746 fired a volley as a signal, frightening all, who then hastened for the protection of the fort. For several days extra guards were posted, and suspicion of Indian war parties was widespread.

Early in the morning of April 23, 1746, Ephraim Dorman left the fort in search of his cow. He went northward along the edge of

what was then a dense swamp, and looking by chance into the underbrush, he saw several Indians evidently lying in wait to attack when the men might leave the fort for the fields. Dorman immediately gave the alarm, crying "Indians, Indians" as he ran. Two savages lying in hiding between him and the fort rose up and aimed rifles at him, but neither hit him. Throwing away their guns, the two advanced toward Dorman. He knocked one down and wrestled with the other, tearing off the Indian's blanket. The savage slipped from his grasp, and Dorman ran toward the fort, which he reached in safety.

When the alarm was given most of the inhabitants were still inside, though several had left the stockade to care for their cattle. Word was given by Captain Simms to assist those outside in reaching safety. All within hearing ran for the fort as the cries of the Indians split the morning air. Working in her barn, Mrs. Daniel McKenney heard the alarm and hurried toward the fort as fast as her age and corpulence would permit. Within a few rods of the gate she was overtaken and stabbed in the back by an Indian. She continued walking at the same steady pace; almost within reach of safety, she fell dead. John Bullard ran from his barn down the street but received a shot in the back as he reached the fort. He was carried in and died a few hours later.

Mrs. Isaac Clark ran from her barn when an Indian appeared, evidently intent upon making her his prisoner. The colonial dame gathered her skirts up about her waist and raced the Indian for the fort. Encouraged by the cheers of her friends, she outran her pursuer to safety. Nathan Blake at his homestead was determined to save his cattle, and waited a few precious moments to throw open the barn door for their escape. Presuming his retreat cut off, Blake went out a back way, intending to place himself in ambush at the only place where the river could be crossed. He had gone but a few steps, however, when he was hailed by a party of Indians who were concealed between him and the street. Seeing several guns aimed at him, he was forced to give himself up. With his arms bound he was led away, a captive.

The number in the war party was presumed to have been about 100, and as they approached the fort from all sides, they fired at those within. The reports of gunfire were heard at the fort in Swanzey, and messengers were sent to Winchester and southward with news of the attack. Colonel John Stoddard at Northfield reported the action to Connecticut's Governor Roger Wolcott on April 24, 1746: "Yester Evening I had an account that Upper Ashuelot was beset by the Enemy, Capt. Field writes me that the People at lower Ashuelot heard

the Guns firing at the Upper Town for three quarters of an Hour, they sent some men to the Top of a Mountain from whence they had a good Prospect though at about three Miles distance. They saw divers Houses in aflame, and Judged that the Meeting House, Mr. Bacon's, and others were on fire but the smoak was so great that they could not well distinguish. The Guns continued playing. I have sent near two Hundred men to their relief."

In a little more than 48 hours from the time the alarm was sent from Swanzey, Colonel Pomeroy, with about 400 men, arrived at Upper Ashuelot, much to the joy of the embattled settlers gathered within the walls of their stockade and firing whenever an Indian showed himself. One settler living near Beaver Brook had taken refuge in his well, where he remained for two days in safety. The savages lingered in the vicinity, where scouting parties found evidences of their camps, and cattle they had killed.

The raid on Upper Ashuelot was reported, probably by Rev. Jacob Bacon, in the *Boston Gazette* of April 29, 1746: "Upper Ashuelot, April 23, 1746. This morning an army of our northern enemy beset us and fell upon some as they were going a small distance from the fort, fired upon them, and followed them up even to the very walls, though faced and fired upon by some who were at the gate and plied so warmly, both by soldiers and inhabitants that they soon bore off. They shot John Bullard, who in a few hours expired, and killed an aged woman, the wife of Daniel McKenney, and Nathan Blake, one of our inhabitants, being out, is not since heard of, who we suppose to be taken or killed. They killed several of our creatures, and fired six of our houses and one barn in which (for want of room in the fort) there was considerable of treasure and provisions; and we being but few, and our enemy so numerous, and so far distant from any help, the time appears exceedingly gloomy and depressing."

Raids took place at other settlements, at Hopkinton, where eight were taken captive, at Fort Number 4 (Charlestown), and at Contoocook, as well as at Hinsdale and Winchester. Two were taken captive at Swanzey and carried to Canada, but like Blake, they later returned to their homes.

The activity of the Indians brought some colonial troops into the area but did little to allay the fears of the settlers. Protection being difficult and farming impossible in the face of Indian raids, the settlers passed a second unhappy winter, and decided they had little choice but to abandon their village, which was done in April 1747. The Rev. Jacob Bacon was released from his pastorate and, with most of the

others, returned to Massachusetts. They took what goods they were able to carry with them. Upper Ashuelot was placed at the mercy of the Indians, who soon burned 27 of its 31 houses, the fort, and the partly-finished meetinghouse. Also abandoned were the settlements at Swanzey, Winchester, and Hinsdale, which were also put to the torch and the livestock of the settlers slaughtered. Several men joined the force at Fort Dummer to remain in the area and combat the Indians as best they could, while the women and children traveled back to Massachusetts.

"The worthy Mr. Bacon," who after his return to the Bay Colony became minister at Plymouth, retained an interest in Upper Ashuelot, and upon hearing a few years later that the settlement had been reopened, wrote to New Hampshire officials seeking to establish his claim in the township as its first settled minister and the second in what was to become Cheshire County.

"Although I am now at Plymouth," he addressed himself to Mesech Weare in February 1753, "yet was once settled in the western frontier, at a place called Upper Ashuelot, where I was from October 1737, to April 1747, wading through all the difficulties which commonly attend an infant plantation, even from the very first; together with the additional difficulties of an Indian war, and of being cut off from the protection of our mother government, and so finally denied the protection of any; by which means, being reduced to a small number, were all (tho' with great reluctance) obliged to quit our habitations, to come off and leave what we had done and laid out for so many years, and which indeed to me, with many others, it was all except a few clothes, and what could be carried upon an horse." Rev. Bacon had lost to the Indians' torch "all my buildings, which were burnt by the enemy, as a dwelling-house, though finished but in part, yet materials provided for the rest were consumed with it, and a barn of 42 and 30 feet, well finished." He begged for his due by way of pay and support as the settlement's first minister although even while living in the town "some of the proprietors and claimers to an interest in that township, took advantage of our weak and broken state, and refused to be, or pay their proportionable part toward my support, and that for many years, some more and some less, and which I never did or could obtain." His complaint to Portsmouth in 1742 was answered by a proclamation from the governor calling upon the people to comply with their obligations toward their pastor, but which evidently was not wholly successful.

Nathan Blake's captivity was somewhat typical of that dreaded

pioneer fate not uncommon in colonial times. When Blake was being conducted by his captors out of the settlement the Indian in charge of him stooped to drink at a spring located near the present West Surry Road, a short distance from what later became the Ellis homestead. His hands not then being bound, for a moment Blake considered beating out his captor's brains with a rock which lay nearby, and he prayed for direction. His next thought was that he would always regret killing even an enemy in that situation, and he refrained.

After reaching Canada, Blake, with another prisoner, was made to run the gauntlet at Montreal. His companion was beaten unmercifully, but Blake exhibited such patience and fortitude that he won a measure of respect from the Indians. Because of his athletic abilities, he was frequently put to trials in which he was successful against every antagonist.

Blake was sent to Quebec and from there to an Indian village several miles to the north, where he gained such acceptance that upon the death of one of their chiefs he was dressed in Indian costume and offered the chief's authority and privileges, as well as his widow. However, the tribe soon split into factions, his friends and his enemies; many became envious of his success. A celebrated runner was brought from a distant village to humble Blake, or so his jealous enemies hoped. Upon being advised by a visiting Frenchman to permit the Indian to win or risk being killed on the spot, Blake allowed the savage to overtake and pass him in the last lap of the contest.

Despite his security and position among the Indians, Blake could not forget his wife and friends in Upper Ashuelot, and after considerable discussion it was agreed that, if he would build the Indians a house such as the English had, he would be permitted to return to Quebec, where he felt he had a better chance of obtaining his freedom. With such crude tools as the Indians supplied, the house was constructed and soon Blake was off for Quebec, where he gave himself up to French officials. Not long afterwards, however, his Indian wife appeared and demanded that he return to the village and life among the Indians. Blake declared to her that if forced to such a course he was determined on the way back to overturn the canoe and drown her, whereupon he was left alone.

The French commander gave Blake his choice of passing the winter as a laborer on a farm near the city or being confined in jail. His choice of the latter alternative proved to be a wise one, as he was provided with food and a comfortable room.

Meanwhile in October 1747 Captain Alexander of Northfield,

who had earlier acted as guide for the first band of settlers to Upper Ashuelot, shot and wounded a young French officer discovered by his scouting party. Left for dead, the officer managed to make his way to Northfield, where it was discovered that he was the son of a wealthy Canadian. He was treated with courtesy and kindness, and negotiations for an exchange of prisoners were begun. It was decided that Nathan Blake would be one of those freed in return for the Frenchman. Mrs. Blake, not trusting the diplomacy of the affair, provided funds to purchase her husband's freedom. A party under John Hawks journeyed through deep snow and wild forests to Montreal, where Blake and another colonist were released in April 1748. Before leaving Canada for New England the British party was richly entertained in the home of the wealthy French family whose relative was part of the price for Blake's freedom.

The trip toward New Hampshire was a hasty one, lest a chance encounter with an Indian band might undo all the work of the negotiations. Nathan Blake returned safely to his family, and to Upper Ashuelot in 1749, where he began life again in the community he had helped to establish. He lived to the age of 99, and was buried in the Washington Street Cemetery, mourned by many, among them Mary, his second wife, "a fascinating widow" whom he had married when he was 94 years of age.

A force of over 60 soldiers was assigned to the two abandoned Ashuelot townships. Indians and French continued to menace the Connecticut River Valley, and Massachusetts and New Hampshire found it necessary to send additional soldiers to protect the frontier, but the task was not an easy one in so vast a wilderness.