

WOLFEBORO, NH, FROM SETTLEMENT INTO THE 20TH CENTURY Oct. 27, 2017

(Compiled by Gene Denu, Wolfeboro Historical Society, Director/Archivist)

This is a greatly condensed version of Wolfeboro History, taken from the writings of noted historian Q. David Bowers and others. For more detailed information, contact the Wolfeboro Historical Society. Primary references include the booklet “Nothing Finer – to Commemorate Wolfeboro’s 250th Anniversary, 1759-2009”; “The History of Wolfeboro, NH, 1770-1994”, by Q. David Bowers; and “History of the Town of Wolfeborough, NH” by B. J. Parker, 1901.

Wolfeborough was named and mapped and the first permanent settlers arrived in 1767 or 1768. Population increased slowly, with counts of 165 in 1773, 941 in 1800, 2038 in 1850, 2390 in 1900, 2581 in 1950, and 6083 in 2000.

The settlers had to be a hardy lot, as the land consisted mostly of original growth forest. The establishment of a homestead began with clearing the land for housing and agriculture. Houses were small at first, usually built with green lumber from the site. Rooms were added as time permitted and the need to house larger families evolved. This resulted in the familiar rambling farmhouse structure, many still standing today. The first industry was agriculture, needed for subsistence. Clearing fields required stump removal and rock removal. The rocks were stacked to define boundary lines and create pens for farm animals. As important as the house were barns, root cellars and the outhouse.

Winters were harsh. Houses were dimly lit and often cold. Families made their own clothes. Most settlers went barefoot in summer. Shoes were worn in other seasons, handmade locally or by travelling shoemakers. Leather was often supplied by the homesteader. Transportation was limited to walking or horsepower (by real horses). Most farms had horses, wagons and a carriage. In town areas, people relied on walking, liveries (rent-a-horse or hire a carriage), and later, stage coaches. Some liveries provided a driver and buggy, used for group outings or school children. Early roads were crude paths, heavily affected by rain and snow. The difficulty in travelling a few miles led to the development of several self-sufficient communities.

These communities would typically have a general store, a blacksmith shop, a tavern (providing meals and accommodations for travelers), and various small shops. There was East Wolfeboro (Cotton Valley), North Wolfeboro (Dimon’s Corner) and South Wolfeboro (by Rust Pond), each with their own Post Office. Goose Corner was an early community near Tuftonboro (junction of North Main St. & Waumbek Rd.). Center Wolfeboro was at the junction of Center St. (Rt. 28) & Gov. Wentworth Hwy. (Rt. 109) and was the location of the first Town Meeting House. The Meeting House also functioned as a church, presided over by the first designated Town Minister in 1792. The Town Meetings were held in Brewster Memorial Hall (the present Town Hall) after it was built in 1890. Wolfeboro Falls and downtown Wolfeboro were business centers as they are today. Water power from the Smith River (Wolfeboro Falls) and Mink Brook (South Wolfeboro) enabled early sawmills and grist mills. East Wolfeboro had a sawmill in 1878, driven by an early gasoline engine.

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John Wentworth was appointed by King George II, in 1766, as the Colonial Governor of New Hampshire. He planned and built a farm and mansion on the north shore of Smith's Pond, now Lake Wentworth. He occupied the mansion seasonally from 1770-1775, thus leading to the Wolfeboro motto as "The Oldest Summer Resort in America". The mansion was completed in 1773. Gov. Wentworth intended to make the mansion the Governor's Palace and Wolfeboro the capitol of the colony, but was forced into exile by the American Revolution. He was one of the few British colonial officials admired by the settlers for his advances in agriculture, education (Dartmouth College was established during his tenure) and road building (Portsmouth to Wolfeboro to Hanover and others). The mansion burned down in 1820; the location is a State Historical Site.

Business and industry gradually expanded from large farms to include blacksmiths, shoemaking, furniture shops, saw and grist mills, taverns and hotels, banking, shipbuilding, tanneries, brickmaking and many others. Several large farms produced dairy and poultry products. A large blanket factory began in South Wolfeboro in 1861. The John Taber clay pipe factories in Wolfeboro and South Wolfeboro in the 1850's shipped pipes as far as England. Shoe manufacture began in Wolfeboro in 1873 and a four story shoe factory was built on Lehner Street in 1883. Mills at Wolfeboro Falls were prominent from the 1770's into the 1970s, producing lumber, building products, excelsior, tool handles and automobile repair tools.

Shipping of goods into and out of town changed with the times. Originally, the only method was wagons pulled by teams of horses or oxen. Then, shipping across Lake Winnepesaukee became a viable option, at first by small sail-rigged freight boats. In the early 1800's, horseboats were used, an unusual design with one or two horses walking on a treadmill to turn outboard paddle wheels. In the winter, oxen teams would be used to haul goods across the ice to Alton. The steamboat era began in 1838 and greatly improved the movement of goods. Steamboats could transport large loads of passengers or merchandise and operated into the early 1900's.

The railroad came to Wolfeboro in 1872, when the Eastern Railroad (later a branch of the Boston and Maine Railroad) completed a spur line from Sanbornville. In town, the tracks ran down the center of Railroad Avenue directly to the depot station on the town docks (now a restaurant). Passengers could connect easily to the steamship Mount Washington, which the railroad owned, and thus had good access to several ports around the lake. The railroad was instrumental, not only in improving movement of goods to and from Wolfeboro industries, but also in promoting Wolfeboro as a major tourist destination. The first large hotel in Wolfeboro, later known as the Sheraton House, opened in downtown 1795. The elegant Pavilion Hotel opened at Pickering's Corner in 1850. Then, the railroad's arrival led to a surge in accommodations (hotels, resorts, cabin colonies, summer cottages, children's camps) that lasted well into the late 20th century. The railroad era of influence was strong into the 1920's, when the growing popularity of the automobile started a gradual decline in railroad activity.

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Schooling began at the elementary level in 1790; four districts were established. Early schooling was done in private homes. The districts gradually expanded to 18 in the late 1800's; most were one-room schoolhouses. Most of these were phased out in the 1920's, following the opening of the centrally located Carpenter School in 1925. Secondary level (high school) education began with the Wolfeborough-Tuftonboro Academy, opened in 1821. With several name changes, this continued as the district high school until the Kingswood Regional High School opened in 1964. The original school, greatly expanded by this time, became Brewster Academy, a private school.

Wolfeboro has a wide range of attractions to draw visitors and residents. The beauty of the numerous lakes and mountains is notable, and there are extensive possibilities for 4-season activity. Individual and team endeavors were always part of the town's history. Many events were held involving the community, in later years ranging from fishing contests and regattas to iceboat races and auto exhibitions. Museums feature a multitude of historic information. Even in the early days, community activities included lectures, debates, dances, concerts and seasonal activities such as parades, circuses, vaudeville shows, carnivals, summer stock theater and Old Home Week celebrations. Many social and fraternal societies were formed. This range of opportunities led to many summer homes built around the lakes and ponds in the Township.

Here's a few other interesting "first" dates for local activities:

1770 – Sawmill & Grist Mill. On the Smith River at Wolfeboro Falls.

1772 – Town Constable elected.

1804 – Library. Called Republican Social Library.

1820 – Post Office. In downtown area, but horseback deliveries from Dover & other locations were believed to have occurred earlier.

1834 – Wolfeborough Bank established.

1850's – Newspapers began. Granite State News later began 1860. Earlier, communities would gather weekly in a home where the "reporter" would read a handwritten paper. Different "reporter" each week. Basically a local gossip session, but also included poems or short stories from other sources, at the whim of the "reporter".

1862 – Volunteer Fire Department. In South Wolfeboro; central town precinct formed 1866. Hand operated pump engines and hose carriages were used. Phase-out of hand equipment began in the mid-1920's when motorized equipment was introduced.

1872 – Telegraphic Service. Arrived with the Railroad.

1887 – Telephone Line. Began with one limited connection, then expanded in 1896.

1890 – Water Precinct. Hydrants/buildings serviced from Beach Pond in northwest Wolfeboro.

1897 – Horseless Carriage arrives.

1897 – Electric Generator. Provides service to street lights and buildings.

1907 – Hospital, 12 beds. Replaced by Huggins Hospital, 1924.

1910 – Airship seen over Wolfeboro.