The Broad Sweep of Buxton’s Brief History

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The human and archaeological history of Buxton is brief in historic terms. The Laurentide Ice Sheet covered all of Maine 12,000 years ago with a mile thick sheet of ice. Glacial action bulldozed evidence of plant and animal history into the Gulf of Maine. As the ice sheet receded, it left only gravels, sand, clay and a few fossils in bedrock. However, plants and animals soon started to recolonize the land. Humans reached North America only about 20,000 years ago. The first people to come here followed herds of caribou about 5,000 years ago. The earliest evidence of those humans in Maine has been found in Bar Mills at an archaeological dig funded through federal requirements for the licensing of the Bar Mills hydroelectric dam. Another dig for the transmission line reconstruction on the Hollis side of Bar Mills has found evidence of early people on the river banks from 1,380 years ago based on radiocarbon dating and their pottery. Remains show that these early peoples ate fish, turtle, beaver, deer and an unidentified rodent.

All the distinctive periods of pre-colonial civilization have been found at various sites along the Saco River. By the 1600s, the Pequawket band of the Abenaki had an established life style of summering on the coast, planting and harvesting corn, squash and beans along the Saco River in spring and fall, and spending the winter hunting around Fryeburg (Pequawket Town). Today the evidence of these first people is some archaeological materials, the Indian Cellar food storage area now under water on the Saco River, the Indian corn grindstone in Hollis Center, the Gibeon Bradbury arrowhead collection, and a few names such as Saco and Pequawket.

The colonial period here starts with brief interactions with European fishermen and a series of devastating epidemics of smallpox and influenza among the first Americans. There were in New England major smallpox epidemics in 1631, 1633, 1639, 1649, 1670, 1677, 1679, 1691, 1729 and 1733. These long pandemics reduced the population by as much as 75%. In 1620 the Pilgrims founded the Plymouth colony at a deserted village which had cleared fields.

Relations between the First Americans and European colonists were initially cooperative in New England as the few colonial settlers clung to small coastal sites. However, conflict developed due to the global French and British wars, proselytizing by Puritans, trade goods disputes, rum trading and vastly different concepts of land ownership by each culture.

Buxton town history starts with King Philip’s War in 1695. Increasing Massachusett colonial settler populations were encroaching on the Abenaki tribes. The Wampanoag Sachem, King Philip, also called Metacomet, resisted Christianity and encroachment. After the murder of a Christian Indian and a quick hanging of the probable Indian perpetrators by the Plymouth Colony, Philip and other tribes, including the Narragansets, went to war. They nearly pushed the Massachusetts colonists back to their ocean side towns. As a percentage of population, it was one of the bloodiest wars in American history with great losses on both sides and the outcome uncertain. In 1696 King Philip was defeated and killed at Miery Swamp, ending most of the conflict in Massachusetts. His wife, a son, and other captives were sold into slavery in the West Indies. Fighting in Maine continued sporadically. The two peace Treaties of Casco (Bay) were signed in 1678 and 1703, but failed due to continued colonial settlement and French instigated warfare to protect Quebec. The Massachusetts government paid £40 around this time for scalps.

During the war, the colonial militia was mustered on Dedham Plain with a promise of land grants if they fought well. The Massachusetts legislature did not get around to the land grants for seven townships until 1728. The future Buxton was granted to 120 veterans or their children or grandchildren in 1730. They and later grant purchasers became the Proprietors of Narraganset Township No. 1, now Buxton, with Newburyport as their initial meeting place. Gorham was Narraganset Township No. 7.

The first survey for the town was done in 1733, but there was only sporadic settlement on this wild frontier as the French and Indian Wars continued. At times there were forts erected at Joy Valley Road, Pleasant Point, a site a quarter mile below Union Falls in Dayton, Fort Hill in Gorham and at Standish Corner (now Routes 25 and 35), but Buxton was abandoned for many years during the conflict.

The capture of Quebec City in 1759 by the British was the event that allowed permanent settlement of Buxton. First Americans retreated to Canada where the bands mixed and many tribal identities were lost. Buxton became the scene of a land rush with the Proprietors distributing more lots. We still have Daniel Dennett’s map which shows all the initial lots in town with their early owners as of 1800.

The role of the Narraganset Proprietors was to distribute the land, build roads, support the Congregational Church, and establish schools. They also contested the boundary with Scarborough for many years until the Massachusetts legislature ruled in Scarborough’s favor. As the land and boundary issues were settled, the Proprietors transitioned their functions to the town selectmen from Buxton’s incorporation in 1772 to 1811 when they disbanded.

As settlers came to Buxton they built log cabins. As late as the 1790s, when stylish Federal houses were being built, about a third of Buxton houses were still log cabins. Log cabins used up to 40 cords of wood a year in inefficient fireplaces, but there was plenty of timber to be cleared for the fields needed to raise the traditional British crops of wheat, barley and flax (for oil and linen cloth) plus hay. Besides subsistence farming, timber went to small seasonal sawmills on brooks like the Little River at Groveville Road, Bog Mills Brook at the outlet of Bonny Eagle Pond, and Stackpole Brook off Simpson Road.

Sheep and cattle were also important to subsistence agriculture. The need to protect the animals and their winter hay led to a major architectural change. Settlers had initially built English barns which were used for threshing and grain storage. They were replaced by the New England barn which was universal in the area until dairy barns were built after the 1880s. The New England barns were rebuilt using the posts and beams from English barns or built new with the same framing technology, but with the barn door on the gable end. The barn could be extended as the farm grew by adding bays to the end. The off center main barn door was unique. The narrow side of the barn was for the animals. The wide side was proportioned to store enough hay to feed the animals for the winter.

Buxton’s industry around 1795 moved to the Saco River for more sawmill and gristmill power. The sawmills produced boards and shingles needed for housing, plus needed cash income. Local sawmill villages arose at Union Falls, Salmon Falls, Bar Mills, West Buxton, and Bonny Eagle. These vibrant village communities with stores, churches, schools, and blacksmith shops flourished for many years, but all of them declined for several reasons.

Union Falls was initially known as Hopkinson’s Mills, with the first mill there in 1806. It was the first to decline due to being nearest Biddeford and Saco. Water rights were purchased in 1856 and a new dam was built by the Biddeford and Saco Water Company to regulate water for sawing downriver. This took away useful water times from the Union Falls mills. With the loss of the mills by 1888, the last store closed in 1890. In the 1936 flood, the last Clark Water Power dam washed away. Finally, in 1948, the Frank Skelton Dam was completed. It created a large reservoir extending to Bar Mills and Hollis Center. The power station now provides the most power output of the Saco River hydroelectric stations. The village and the spectacular Salmon Falls gorge disappeared beneath the waters.

Salmon Falls was the site of the first area bridge over the Saco. Its sawmills were very active until the last of the old growth forest along the Saco River was cut by 1871. J.O.A. Harmon was the last mill manager for Salmon Falls. He also managed Bar Mills sawmills until he retired from the sawmill business in 1873. By 1879 the sawmill buildings were gone and the stores were closing. The dam was lost in later floods. Fortunately, the high land around the falls allowed the housing to survive. The village homes now comprise the Salmon Falls East and West Historic Districts on the Buxton and Hollis sides of the Saco River.

Bar Mills had sawmills longer than Salmon Falls. The early Woodman and Usher mill sites were last operated by Charles McKenney. He sold water rights to the White Mountain Pulp Company in 1905, but converted his operations to a steam powered sawmill on the Hollis side of the village. There was also another steam powered mill just above the village on the Buxton side at Nason Road.

The pulp mill only lasted a few years. Bar Mills village survived by diversifying first to furniture manufacturing by the Bradburys in 1868, the Shepard brothers in 1881, and then in 1900 to leatherboard, a heavy paper board product with many uses. Rogers Fibre used Bar Mills leatherboard at its shoe factories for shoe liners, but mostly sold it wholesale for many applications ranging from suitcases to car dashboard liners. It provided good employment for the area as it was a niche product without large mill competition. It remained in operation providing three shift employment throughout the 1930s depression. Leatherboard was ahead of its time as a sustainable product. The key materials were recycled newspapers and rags. The mill closed in 1980, ending an era of industry at Bar Mills.

West Buxton village also survived by diversification from sawmills. The George and A.K.P. Lord sawmills did not go away entirely until construction for the hydroelectric facility in 1906, but diversification had started by the 1840s with wool carding by Aaron Clark and others. Carding led to full integrated woolen mill operations with large mills on both sides of the river. West Buxton produced more woolen products than Biddeford and Saco where cotton mills prevailed. The wool industry at West Buxton also competed by producing niche products such as worsted wool, flannels, and cashmere. The mills survived the conversion from water power to electric motors after the water rights were sold by Frank Hargreaves to the Portland Electric Company which ran electric streetcars in Portland. The mills did not survive fire and floods though. The Hollis side mill washed down river in the 1936 flood and the Buxton side mill burned in 1939. Ironically, West Buxton is still a large industrial site as the federal government measures industrial output by value of product. The upper and lower hydroelectric stations efficiently produce energy from the river, but with very few people compared to the bustling old mill village.

Bonny Eagle village did not diversify its sawmill operations. The village was spread out among Hollis, Standish, and Buxton. It had stores, a school, an inn, and a post office, but no concentrated downtown. The sawmill business of Abijah Usher, John Lane and M.M. Came gradually declined until the flood of 1895 took out the last log and stone cribwork dam. It was not replaced until the current hydroelectric power development was built in 1910. The few operators needed to run the power station have been replaced now with modern controls and computers.

The villages of Groveville and Chicopee were not based on industry, but had their heyday as community centers with stores, churches, and volunteer fire departments. After the Watson School building closed in Chicopee, the building was used as a community center. In Groveville, the upstairs hall of the old Red & White store at Turkey Lane and Groveville Road was a dance hall and community space. Villages made communities.

The coming of the railroad from Portland to Bar Mills in 1855 and then over the river in 1868 to Hollis, Alfred, and Rochester N.H. was a game changer for the area economy. Better transportation allowed access to a wider world and consumer items. Less expensive western grains and cloth came by railroad. Subsistence local agricultural products like wheat and flax were replaced by more marketable farm items like cattle, sheep, apples, and milk. Iron hardware products were easily available by rail. Blacksmith work shifted to more repair work, eventually transitioning to car repair.

The largest employer in Buxton around 1860 was the Hanson Coat Shop with about 1,200 employees across several towns. Fabric came on the railroad to the depot at Buxton Center and left from there as finished coats. Pattern pieces were cut at the Elden store building and delivered by wagon to local seamstresses who did piecework sewing in their homes.

Another important railroad supported industry was the Page Box Shop off Depot Street in Bar Mills. Like the Hollis side pulp mill, it did enough business to have its own railroad siding. From 1892 to 1925 it used local lumber to build wooden boxes that were shipped flat on the railroad for later assembly. By 1909, it was also producing an innovative new product; cardboard boxes.

The railroad gave farm people new opportunities to shop with the Sears Roebuck and other catalogs. Their purchases conveniently arrived at the railroad depot. Special trains ran to Portland for fall shopping. These big retail changes parallel our current experience with internet shopping. The advent of the railroad and then the telephone with Saco River Telephone & Telegraph in 1889 made the world smaller and Buxton richer. Today the internet, social media, cell phones and email provide instant communications with Federal Express, United Parcel Service, and others conveniently delivering consumer goods to our doors.

Even our distinctive wood clapboard houses were affected by the ease of railroad transportation. Due to available paint technology, houses from the early 1800s had been painted mostly with earth tones. Barns were painted with the least expensive earth tone, red oxide barn red. That changed for houses with the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair. Railroads made for easy access to the fair. Many people from Buxton and all over New England attended the Great White Fair. The fair’s unifying architecture and color scheme was Greek Revival buildings in whitewash. It so impressed fair goers that Colonial houses were modified to Greek Revival styles. New England house and church colors were locked into white for over a 100 years.

Railroad passenger service ran here until 1932 with feeder services from stagecoaches and a steamboat connection between Bar Mills and West Buxton. Roads out of town had not existed until about 1795. By 1932 the roads were better, but gravel at best and many were just mud in the spring. In spite of that, the automobile displaced railroad passenger service due to its greater convenience. By 1961, due to mill closings in Sanford, the local railroad line in Buxton also shut down for lack of freight. The rails and Saco River Bridge were removed for scrap. Today we only have the 1868 granite bridge piers in the river, the former Bar Mills Depot that was moved to Main Street as the Congregational Church Parish House in 1911 and some visible sections of raised grade to remind us of the railroad and the big changes that it brought.

The cultural fabric of Buxton was for many years defined by its churches, civic associations and theaters. The original Congregational Church at Tory Hill was the center of town life with its meeting house near the Garland Tavern. By 1800, the Baptist Society was organized with Methodists being established soon after. The Congregationalists added the North Congregational Church in 1821 and built the current church building at Tory Hill in 1822. Buxton was part of the second Great Awakening revival. A few people left with the Mormons. The Free Will Baptists built in West Buxton and Groveville. Later, Universalist Churches were established at Scarborough Corner and Bar Mills with more Baptists in Bar Mills. The surviving churches plus the later Living Waters Christians, Buddhists and Druids continue to enrich our community.

Civic associations also helped defined our community life for over a 100 years from the mid-1800s to the late 1900s. Some of them at West Buxton were the Masons, Eastern Star, Odd Fellows, Rebeccas, West Buxton Fire Department Auxiliary, Library Association, magazine club, Saco River Civic Association, and the West Buxton Social Club. At Buxton Center were the Knights of Pythias, Pythian Sisters, Grange, Masons and the Sugar Camp Association. The Buxon-Hollis Historical Society was established in 1970 at Elden’s Store. Bar Mills had the Grange, the Dorcas Society of Hollis and Buxton, Women’s Magazine League, Berry Library, the Redmen, the Redmen women’s Degree of Pocahontas, and the Buxton and Hollis Agricultural Society. The Grand Army of the Republic was at Bonny Eagle and the Hollis Lions club, founded in 1951, was nearby in Hollis.

Entertainment in Buxton was meager in colonial Buxton. It was limited to singing in church, family home reading, and parlor activities. As the community grew and roads improved, public entertainment centered around civic groups. By the late 1800s, the three largest river villages, Bar Mills, West Buxton, and Bonny Eagle, all had halls for traveling entertainers and local productions. Local bands were also featured. In later years, movies were shown. Bar Mills had the Saco River Grange, now the Saco River Theater, the American Legion Hall, the Red Men’s Hall, and Sanderson’s Hall. West Buxton had the Odd Fellows Hall, Moderation Center, and the West Buxton Social Club which met at private homes. Bonny Eagle had the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) Hall. Families had home entertainment centers consisting of reed pump organs or pianos to make their own music. This started changing around 1925 with the coming of radio, again about 1950 with television and now the internet. Much of our entertainment has moved from very local and personal to the more remote and detached.

Education has been a cornerstone of Buxton from the start of settlement. The first schoolmaster came to town in 1761. Massachusetts required that towns have schools which were first held in homes. By 1800, there were two permanent grammar schools, South Grammar on Old Orchard Road at Tory Hill and North Grammar on Long Plains Road at Buxton Center. As the town grew it had seventeen school districts, all with one room schools and local control. A district agent maintained the building, bought firewood and hired teachers. Due to lack of transportation, the schools were all within walking distance of the pupils. In 1888, Maine required towns to have a high school. The first one in Buxton was a one room high school over the North Grammar School. The first consolidated school was the Bar Mills Grammar School, built in 1912, now the home of the Buxton-Hollis Historical Society. By 1913 a similar building was built for Buxton High School, later the Samuel D. Hanson School at Buxton Center.

After World War II, better roads, school buses and more students led to the closing of one room schools and construction of the Jack Memorial School, the Eliza Libby School and the Frank Jewett School. The 1957 Sinclair Act allowed for creation of School Administrative District 6, which soon after led to construction of the first Bonny Eagle High School in 1961. It now serves as the Middle School.

The story line of Buxton has changed from a primeval forest, to wild frontier, isolated rural farming, local industries, and then a long shift after World War II to a suburban population. We use better transportation to get to work and schools. We use better communications for remote work, shopping, and entertainment. Our energy comes from remotely sourced oil, propane or electricity instead of local wood. The U.S. Census counts below show our population increasing from 1790 with more fields and farms until the Civil War exposed soldiers to a wider world. Many families went West for better soils to farm. In Buxton, local farming and industries changed, immigrants came to town, villages waxed and waned, but the population did not recover until after World War II. Our forests and fields are gradually being converted to suburban house lots without village centers. Our village centered history has been partially replaced by virtual activities.

Today we have new challenges in energy, transportation, communication, education and the environment. These challenges also contain opportunities. Buxton has more people, better educated people and is materially richer than we have ever been before. It is our responsibility to create new concepts of villages to make our community.

The full history of Buxton’s people needs many books to cover it all. If you are interested in finding out more, check the Buxton-Hollis Historical Society web site for books, genealogies, historic buildings, videos and other resources at; [www.buxtonhollishistorical.org/onlineresources.html](http://www.buxtonhollishistorical.org/onlineresources.html) Also the BHHS museum at 100 Main Street in Bar Mills has extensive exhibits on our river villages.