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NEW HAMPSHIRE'S CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

New Hampshire is a museum of its own history. What we once had, we still have, at least in part. About 10,000 people lived in New Hampshire in 1730, after a century of European settlement here. The state's population grew to over a million at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Yet things that were familiar to the people of 1730 can still be seen today, along with everything that has accumulated since.

New Hampshire's history is the history of much of the United States writ small. It is a story of initial settlement, of the clearing and cultivation of the land, of the rise of industry, of the arrival of new immigrants from many parts of the world, of the decline of small-scale farming, of the growth of tourism, of the advent of a service economy.

New Hampshire's landscape is a gift of nature, overwritten by a four-hundred-year record of immense human labor and ingenuity. What nature gave was great in beauty but meager in fruitfulness. New Hampshire has lofty mountains, but these mountains have slopes too steep and soil too thin to yield any crop but timber. New Hampshire has innumerable streams, but these streams flow too rapidly to form flood plains with rich, level land. New Hampshire has fertile soil, but this soil is so filled with glacial debris that the most permanent record of three centuries of farming is written in thousands of miles of stone walls that were built slowly as fields were cleared for plowing. New Hampshire has cool, salubrious summers, but these summers are counterbalanced by long, cold winters that drive frost three feet into the ground.

New Hampshire people took what nature gave and transformed it. Settlers in the seventeenth century began the generations-long task of subduing the forest. Writing in 1792, Jeremy Belknap, New Hampshire's first historian, described New Hampshire people as "very dextrous in the use of edge tools, and in applying mechanical powers to the elevation and removal of heavy bodies." The labor of these settlers made forest products our first great export. New Hampshire pine supplied masts for the Royal Navy and houses for the Caribbean. New Hampshire oak made ships and casks. New Hampshire people became masters of the use of wood. Whether expressed in heavily

framed buildings and timber bridges, or in furniture of the most delicate design, this skill in woodworking remains powerful today.

New Hampshire became a place of farms, part of a New England that increasingly resembled old England. By 1830, 80% of New Hampshire's land was under cultivation. New Hampshire farmers wrested a living from the rocky land, transforming its "fieldstones" into fences, using its timber to build houses, barns, and public structures, and slowly building an agrarian landscape of compact villages and dispersed farmsteads connected by an intricate network of hard-won roads.

But the northern forest does not submit permanently to the plow. It regenerates itself. Woodlands have reclaimed much of New Hampshire as farming has declined. Today, New Hampshire is 80% forested. Products from a renewed and husbanded forest still represent one of New Hampshire's great industries and exports.

New Hampshire people learned to split and shape the stone that lay everywhere in the "Granite State." Beginning in the 1780s with the glacial boulders that litter the landscape, stonecutters began to transform granite into building materials. By 1840, quarrymen had begun to penetrate solid ledges, discovering stone of many colors and grains. The most famous is Concord granite, one of the whitest in the world, with a fineness that tempts the hand of the sculptor. The state capitol was built from Concord granite in 1819; so was the Library of Congress in 1890. New Hampshire retains a powerful role in today's American granite industry.

New Hampshire learned to use the cold of its long winters. Before the advent of the railroad in the 1840s, frozen roads and snow were the allies of teamsters. It was during the winter that most of New Hampshire's produce found its way to market on horse-drawn sledges. Before the development of mechanical refrigeration in the twentieth century, the ice of New Hampshire's pure lakes was cut into thick cakes and sent by rail or ship to cool the food and drink of Boston, New York, Savannah, and even India and South Africa.

It was left to Scandinavian immigrants of the late nineteenth century to discover the greatest economic value of New Hampshire's winters. Norwegians, Swedes, and Finns introduced skiing into a land that had known only Indian snowshoes. Skiing – first Nordic and then Alpine – transformed New Hampshire's snow-covered mountain slopes into one of the first winter resort areas of the United States.

But more than any of nature's other gifts, New Hampshire came to value its water. Beginning in the 1630s with the construction of some of the first water-powered sawmills in North America, New Hampshire people learned how to harness the power of lakes and streams. By the 1820s, New Hampshire millwrights and engineers had begun to dam and control the waters of even the largest rivers. They had learned to

construct immense water wheels and systems of pulleys and belts to power spindles and looms. They had begun to build brick mills of a size that dwarfed any structures ever before seen in North America.

New Hampshire's industrial development made the state an internationally recognized center of textile production. The Amoskeag mills of Manchester grew to become the world's largest single textile manufacturing complex. The same enterprise transformed New Hampshire's people. Factory bells taught workers to labor by the clock rather than by the sun. By 1870, New Hampshire had become one of the nation's most heavily industrialized states in proportion to its population. It remains so. Industry's ever-increasing demand for labor brought wave after wave of immigrants in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, enriching and diversifying New Hampshire's once all-British population.

Mastery of the many skills needed to manufacture cloth earned New Hampshire a high reputation in engineering, in the production of foundry products, in the machine tool industry, and in power generation and transmission. The challenges of building a mechanical world disclosed a new aptitude in the New Hampshire mind. Always resourceful, pragmatic, and hard-working, the Yankee revealed an affinity for the machine and a genius for invention.

But the rise of industry was counterbalanced by the decline of farming. Tired of fighting stony soil and short growing seasons, the children of New Hampshire's farms moved west by the thousands after the Civil War, or turned to nearby cities and mills. By the late 1800s, New Hampshire witnessed the abandonment of farms on a frightening scale.

Turning a crisis into an opportunity, state government allied itself with hundreds of farmers, boarding house proprietors, and hotel operators to make New Hampshire a tourist destination. Capitalizing on the state's beautiful scenery and healthful climate, promoters conveyed an image of New Hampshire as a place of wholesome rest and recreation. "Old Home Week," introduced in 1899, enticed those who had moved elsewhere to return to New Hampshire, perhaps for just one week. Yet the memory of that single week moved many a visitor to buy an abandoned farm or build a lakeside "camp" as a place of summertime refreshment. The tourist boom that was launched in the 1890s as a remedy for farm abandonment has grown over the intervening century to represent New Hampshire's second-largest industry.

New Hampshire's cultural landscape records all this, and more. Shaped by centuries of human activity, New Hampshire's natural landscape has itself become part of the cultural landscape. All of our forest is second-growth. Some of our mountaintops are bare because of fires set in the 1700s to kill wolves or because of conflagrations kindled accidentally during logging days. Once cultivated fields, our woods are filled with

networks of stone walls. Once the reservoirs of industry, our lakes are larger and fuller because of the dams at their outlets.

The town, not the county or the state, is the basic unit of government in New Hampshire. Although New Hampshire townships are filled with dispersed farmsteads and homes, the village is the characteristic element in any township. The village may reflect eighteenth-century origins, perhaps with a common, a church, and a cluster of private dwellings and former stores or taverns. It may be a lonesome meeting house and cemetery on a hilltop, the last remnant of a community center that is all but abandoned. It may be the creation of the railroad, perhaps with brick business blocks, a depot, and a freight house. It may be a place of manufactures, with a great brick mill set next to a stream, and with a cluster of boarding houses and private homes for mill workers.

Spanning several centuries, the buildings of New Hampshire take many forms and express many styles. Most are wooden, for wood, not brick or stone, was the preferred material of the New Englander until well into the 1800s. In the earliest villages of New Hampshire, many buildings reflect the styles of the colonial era or of the early republic. But New Hampshire also has thousands of fine and substantial buildings from the Victorian era and the twentieth century. In southern New Hampshire and near interstate highways, the age of the automobile is readily apparent in the same shopping malls and vast parking lots seen everywhere in the United States.

Nearly every New Hampshire township has somewhere within it a town hall, a place where the inhabitants gather one or more times each year to express "the will of the town" in the town meeting, the purest form of democracy known in North America.

Nearly every New Hampshire village has a church, usually several. New Hampshire was a place of religious foment in the early 1800s. Several sects were founded here, including the Free-Will Baptists and the Seventh-Day Adventists. But since colonial days, each New Hampshire town had also had an established church, supported by taxation. This practice ended with passage of the "Toleration Act" in 1819. Shortly thereafter, church buildings of many sects, built by congregations that had been freed from support of the old established church, began to replace the ancient colonial meeting houses. It is thus no accident that New Hampshire villages are filled with church buildings that date from the 1820s, the 1830s, and later.

New Hampshire has always cherished education and the book. The most impressive building in many New Hampshire villages is the free public library. New Hampshire claimed the first public libraries in the United States with the establishment of a free public library in Dublin in 1822 and a fully tax-supported public library in Peterborough in 1833. In 1849, New Hampshire became the first state to authorize its towns to raise money by taxation to support such libraries. In 1891, it became the first

state to provide state assistance to any town choosing to create a public library. In 1895, it required every town to establish such a library unless the electorate voted each year not to do so.

Away from the city and the village, another New Hampshire lies hidden from the casual observer. Like the soil of an ancient civilization, the land in New Hampshire holds evidence of more than one stratum of human occupancy. The forest floor is pockmarked with half-filled cellar holes dating from the age of first settlement. Here may be traced ancient roadways flanked by stone walls that restrained long-departed herds, stone-lined wells still reflecting the sky in their water, the foundations of barns that once groaned under the weight of harvests from newly-plowed land, and broken milldams whose streams have reverted to a wild state. This, too, is part of the cultural landscape of New Hampshire, revealing itself only to the sensitive and experienced eye. In certain favored locations, that eye may also discern traces of the villages and fishing sites of a still earlier people who watched the first European ships land on the New Hampshire coast in the 1620s.

Constant change is written in New Hampshire's cultural landscape. But one image has persisted for many generations. Outsiders and inhabitants alike often regard New Hampshire as an almost mythical place of natural beauty and rectitude, a place where hard work, intelligence and character will be rewarded with happiness. It is no accident that Thoreau, imagining one place in New England that was still filled with possibility, pointed to "a New Hampshire, everlasting and unfallen."

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