Gorham History

Nomads

Long ago there were Native Americans living in the area that is now known as Gorham. They were nomads. That means they traveled during the year. They followed the animals that they hunted inland during the winter. They fished in the ocean during the summer months. They traveled in dugout canoes.

Members of the Algonquin Indians who lived in Maine included the Micmac, Penobscot, Ossipee, Pickwocket, Passamaquoddy, Maliseet, and Androscoggin.

How They Lived

At this time, Maine was covered with forests. The forests gave food and shelter for many different wild animals like turkeys, deer, caribou, moose, black bears, and beavers. Living during this time meant that the Native Americans had to live off the land. In the winter they hunted wild animals for food and pelts. In the summer they fished in the rivers and in the ocean. Pelts were used for clothing and shelter. Bones were used for tool making. They could use a clam shell and a stick to make a hoe for planting maize. They used chopped up horseshoe crabs and fish as fertilizer.

Shelter

Their shelter was round and had a cone shaped roof covered with bark shingles. They were called wigwams. The wigwams could easily be taken down, backpacked, and set up again.

How Do We Know About The Native Americans?

Scientists, known as archaeologists, have learned about early Maine people from the things that they have found here. There is no written record of the way it was long, long, ago because people back then didn’t write, but Indians have lived in Maine for at least 12,000 years.
How Gorham Got It’s Name

There was a war in Massachusetts in the 1670’s called King Phillip’s War or the Narragansett War. Captain John Shubel Gorham of Plymouth was a soldier in the Massachusetts colony. In 1675, he got paid for his military work. His payment was a piece of frontier land called Narragnsett #7. It was named for the Narragansett Indians. Our town was later named after Captain Gorham.

The First Settlers

The first permanent settlers came to Gorham in 1736. The family of Captain John Phinney bought a piece of land from Captain Gorham. Captain Phinney and his son Edmund traveled from Falmouth, now Portland, up the Presumpscot River and into the Little River in a bateau. They landed on a ledge of big rock. The stone ledge where they landed is known as Phinney Ledge or Phinney Rock. A piece of this rock is located at Phinney Park.

Captain Phinney and Edmund found an area on the southern edge of Fort Hill. This is where they built their log hut and planted crops. The first crops planted were corn, watermelon, and peas. Captain Phinney’s wife joined them. Their baby daughter Mary was the first settler’s baby born in Gorham.

The Second Settlers

Hugh and Elizabeth McLellan were the second settlers to Gorham. They came about two and a half years after Captain Phinney. They settled in the winter of 1738-1739. They had lived in Scotland and Ireland before they immigrated to America. Hugh was a ship’s carpenter. He was forced to throw his tools overboard to lighten the cargo when their ship sprang a leak in a winter storm on the Atlantic Ocean. Since he was able to repair the
severe damage to the ship, the captain gave him back his passage money. He also gave him an axe, an adze, and a saw.

The McLellans built a log cabin in Falmouth (Portland), but it burned. The family lost everything they owned except for their horse and a cow. They took what little money they had left, ten pounds, and bought their large piece of land in Gorhamtown. Land was being sold cheaply because the land owners in Massachusetts feared the Indians. Hugh spent all the money he had left to buy his 200 acre piece of land.

Hugh McLellan knew the huge white pine trees in the forests could be used for masts on the king’s ships. English surveyors looked through the woods marking every straight pine tree that measured over 36 inches in diameter. Many of these pines were over 100 feet tall and 6 feet in diameter. Landowners like McLellan could not sell the trees to the king, but they could make a lot of money by cutting them and having their team of oxen haul them to the “landing” on the coast.

The McLellan camp was made livable with four foot long shingles. They used clay from the edge of the brook to chink the logs.

Molly Sockbasin was one of the Passamaquoddy Indians who camped near the McLellans. Elizabeth McLellan and Molly often exchanged favors. Elizabeth gave Molly thread and needles in trade for fish, meat, and information on how to preserve food.

Other early settlers that moved to Gorhamtown were the Hamblens, the Moshers, the Aldens, the Irishes, the Meserves, and the Cloudmans.

**Settlers’ Life**

In Gorham’s colonial time visiting neighbors usually involved a whole day. The oxen would be hitched to a flat wagon. Chairs from the house would be placed on the wagon. The women and children would sit there during the journey. The men would drive the wagon walking alongside the oxen and guiding them. A typical visit would include the men working together in the field while the women prepared the meal. The children would play outside or collect eggs and make custard pudding. The chairs from the wagon
would be used for seating at dinner. People might visit their neighbors once a month.

**The Fort**

In 1744 a war broke out between the French and the English. The Native Americans sided with the French. The Native Americans were not happy with the white settlers that were moving in and taking over their land. A fort was built in 1744 to protect Gorham’s families from Indian attacks. The settlers needed protection because during the war Indians were often paid for bringing captured English settlers to the French in Canada. The settlers built the fort on what is now known as Fort Hill because it was the highest point of land in the area. The fort was 60 feet by 50 feet. The walls were 12 feet high.

The worst Native American attacks in Gorhamtown happened on April 19, 1746. On that day the Indians attacked the Bryants, Cloutmans, Reeds, and McLellans. In the Bryant attack, the Indians killed two Bryant children and took Mrs. Bryant captive to Canada. The Indians found Mr. Bryant and his son out plowing fields. When the boy saw the Indians, he ran into the woods and hid. He escaped without being hurt. Mr. Bryant set out for the fort, but was caught and slain.

During the time of the attacks, most families lived in the fort and worked in the fields only during the daytime. There were 97 families that lived there for 7 years. Some settlers were even attacked when they were close to the fort.

In the fall of 1750 an **epidemic** of sore throat and fever, called the black tongue, broke out among the settlers in the fort. Few people escaped the disease and many died. The graveyard just south of the fort was for the people who died from Indian attacks. On the north side of the graveyard is a large mound where people are buried who died from the epidemic.

Peace was officially agreed on in 1763.

**Gorham Village in the 1700’s**

Gorhamtown grew quickly in the late 1700’s. On October 24, 1764 it became incorporated and was officially called Gorham.
Many of its finest buildings were built. The Hugh McLellan house was built in 1773 and was the first brick house in Cumberland County. They dug the clay out of the banks of the Little River and made their own bricks. The house later became a dormitory for the University of Maine at Gorham and still stands today.

The First Parish Meeting House was built in 1798 on what is now School Street. It served as a town meeting hall. Over the years many additions were made.

**North Gorham in the 1700’s**

Some early trails through the forests of Gorham led to fishing areas along the Presumpscot River. There were lots of salmon and trout. “White Rock” was a boulder that could easily be seen by Native Americans on the trail. The rock was as big as an elephant. It was used as a landmark and a place to build campfires for cooking and resting. Years later, Captain John Sturgis did not see the usefulness of a boulder on his farm and he blew it up. He was sorry later, but White Rock is still a community within Gorham.

In 1763 Babb’s Bridge was built. It was a covered bridge that spanned the Presumpscot River. It burned in 1973 and a replica was rebuilt and it reopened in 1976. It is the oldest, as well as the shortest, covered bridge in Maine. Babb’s Bridge connects Gorham and Windham.

It is believed that one of the first schools built in Gorham was in North Gorham next to a pond. It is no longer there.

On July 31, 1767 a hurricane, actually a tornado, started at the southern end of Sebago Lake. It tore through the thick forest going east. It left a path swept clean of every growing thing. From this disaster came the name of Hurricane Road.

In 1777 a settler named Uriah Nason was bothered and annoyed by a bear on his property. He discovered the bear’s home in a heap of fallen trees. The trees were piled up from the hurricane of 1767. Uriah decided to set the trees on fire to drive the bear out from smoke and heat. The brush was dry and an uncontrollable blaze started. The fire followed the path of the hurricane and destroyed 7 homes. According to legend Uriah’s fire
frightened the bears so much that they never came back. They left North Gorham forever.

In 1788 there were bridges across the Presumpscot River at Great Falls and Gambo. Both places had busy saw mills.

**Gorham Village in the 1800’s**

The Baxter house was built before 1806. It was built where the Baxter Library is now, but then it was moved to its present site and renovated by James Phinney Baxter. Mr. Baxter was a mayor of Portland for 6 terms. His son Percival Baxter was a governor of Maine. Percival bought and left Baxter State Park to the people of the state of Maine.

Gorham’s community in the 1800’s consisted of *tanneries*, blacksmith shops, a corn canning factory, local stores, schools, and taverns. The Gorham Academy, which is now USM, was built in 1806.

In 1822 a Paul Revere bell weighing 1,228 pounds was purchased for the First Parish Church.

In 1826 a young circus performer named Sylvester Reynolds died while performing in Gorham. He was standing on his horse and fell. The town of Gorham erected a stone marking his grave, which school children still visit today. It’s in the “Old Yard”, the graveyard on South Street.

Trains came to Gorham in 1850. Gorham was now connected to the rest of New England. The first *depot* was built in 1850. On February 5, 1851 the first train ran from Gorham to Portland. The trip to Portland took 50 minutes and cost 30 cents. This depot was later used as a blacksmith shop and then a lumber storage. It was torn down in 1976. The second depot built stands today and is now a restaurant.

In 1868 Toppan Robie donated a clock from Boston to the First Parish Church. His grandson went on to be a governor of Maine from 1883-1887. Many streets and schools continue to be named after the Robie family.

Gorham continued to grow. The population grew from 2,244 people in 1800 to 3,253 in 1860. The major industries were logging, raising farm animals,
lumbering, masting, fishing, haying, farming, manufacturing of boots, shoes, and cotton, grinding mills, gunpowder mills, canal transport, and sawmills.

**North Gorham in the 1800’s**

The 1800’s was a busy time for the North Gorham community. In 1808 a religious group called the Shakers was active in Gorham. They came to Gorham in 1784 and stayed until 1815. They practiced their religion by shaking and dancing. The Shaker community closest to us was at the corner of Queen Street and route 202.

In 1823 the Oxford and Cumberland canal was formed. It was completed in 1830 at a cost of $206,000. On June 4, two boats loaded with cord wood, timber, and farm products like salt pork, apples, corn, and potatoes went to Portland. The most important use of the canal was to float white pine logs from the Sebago Lake area to Portland so they could be sold for building. At times the entire surface of the canal was a bridge of logs for miles. The logs often would pile up and make a log jam. That's how Middle Jam Road was named. Some products were placed on barges and oxen were hooked to the barges. The oxen walked down the banks of the canal, pulling the barge through the water as they went. In 1879 was the last time that boats were used on the Oxford and Cumberland Canal.

In 1842 there was a furniture business that made chairs, tables, and bedsteads. It was located on the Windham side of Babb’s Bridge.

North Gorham had its own railroad. It was located in the White Rock area.

Other businesses included United Indurated Fiber Company which made preplastic kitchen utensils. There were mills including gunpowder mills. During the Civil War in the 1860's, Gorham was the third leading producer of gunpowder.

Levi Hall grew up in North Gorham, went to Bowdoin College and John Hopkins University, and became a famous physicist. He taught at Harvard University. He discovered what is known in physics as the Hall effect. He died in 1861, but during his life he participated in many community activities. The Levi Hall School was built in 1895 and named after him. It still stands today and is a church.
In 1887 the Frederick Robie School was built. It still stands today and is now the PTA building in the Little Falls area.

In 1898 Sebago Power Company presented a plan to generate electricity. To do this, they had to flood an area that included homes and businesses like the United Indurated Fiber Company. This area was located near White Rock. Many deals were made and homes and businesses were relocated. Sebago Power Company bought everything standing in their way and built a dam that flooded the area. Most homes and businesses had been moved, but some were left behind and the flood waters covered them. When the river is drained, some of the old buildings can be seen. After the area was flooded, a “powerhouse” was built that would produce electricity.

Also of interest, in 1898, Donald McMillan taught his first year of teaching at the Levi Hall School. He later became a famous Arctic explorer.

GLOSSARY

barges - a long boat with a flat bottom, used on canals

bateau - a long, light, flatbottom boat with a sharply pointed bow (front) and stern (rear)

bedsteads - the frame supporting a bed

chink - to fill the cracks between logs or boards

depot - a railroad station

diameter - a straight line through the center of a circle

epidemic - an infectious disease that spreads quickly through a community

frontier - land where few people live

immigrated - when someone moves from one country to live in another country
**legend** - a story handed down from earlier times, the story is based on facts, but is not completely true

**maize** - corn

**masts** - a tall pole that stands on the deck of a boat or ship and supports the sails

**nomads** - a person who wanders from place to place

**pelts** - an animal’s skin with the hair or fur still on it

**replica** - an exact copy of something

**settlers** - people who made a home or lived in a new place

**surveyors** - people who measure an area in order to make a map or plan

**tanneries** - a business where hides (animal skins) were changed into leather by soaking them in a liquid that had tannin

**wigwams** - a hut made of poles and covered with bark or hides