

History of Georgetown, Massachusetts

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History of Georgetown

“One of the prettiest and pleasantest of all New England towns is located about thirty miles from Boston, on the line of the Boston & Maine Railroad, and the name is Georgetown....”

The Boston Traveler, December 18, 1875

THE BEGINNING:

Georgetown was incorporated in 1838 but its birth was 200 years before when a small group of Yorkshire families led by Rev. Ezekial Rogers set sail in 1638 from Rowley, England for Salem, Massachusetts on the ship “John”. Mr. Rogers and his party of about 100 men, women and children, having arrived late in the year, remained in Salem for the winter living in common houses.

In the spring of 1639, the group, now numbering over 200 individuals, purchased a tract of land between the villages of Newbury and Ipswich and named their plantation Rowley. This territory included the present day towns of Rowley, Georgetown, Groveland, Byfield and Boxford. Working together they erected shelters and prepared for the coming winter. They lived in common houses for about three years until they were able to help each family erect their own humble dwellings.

The community thrived and after a few years these settlers began to explore the rest of their plantation that extended to the Merrimac River. From the vantage point of Prospect Hill, named in anticipation of what lay to the west, they saw another hill, bare at its summit and surrounded with trees below. The image suggested a bald pate and today is still known as Baldpate Hill. It is the highest point in the county, and on clear days one could see the ocean from this Georgetown hilltop.

THE MOVEMENT INTO THE INTERIOR:

Venturing westward, beyond the bounds of their settlement, the Rowley men discovered meadowlands. It was thought the land might have been cleared by the Indians who would prepare land for planting by burning shrubs and brush. The many artifacts discovered in various locations in Georgetown indicate evidence that this region was a favorite Indian camping ground. Household utensils, cutting instruments and stone points have been uncovered near brooks, the Parker River and by the shores of the ponds.

The colonists found the meadowland was ideal for pasturing cattle and a path soon extended from Rowley to the area around the present Union Cemetery near Penn Brook. As further explorations were made, the villagers recognized the opportunities this wilderness offered. A bog iron works began operating in 1697 near the brook connecting Rock Pond to Pentucket Pond and is the first record of a business here. Soon, others followed.

John Spofford, the first permanent settler in this western section of Rowley, built a log hut on the plateau at the crest of Andover Street in 1669. The village elders gave him a lease with

certain conditions to farm the western end of the “Old Town Field on the Gravell Plain.” “He is to have the benefit of the land for 21 years and the rent shall be used for the ministry or town. He may only use timber for buildings and what is necessary for farming. Any timber he may wish to sell may only be sold to the town of Rowley and no more than five loads of hay will be sold each year. Further, manure may not be given away or sold but must be placed back into the land. Finally, any buildings or fences erected by Master Spofford are to be maintained and left in good order at the end of his lease.” At the end of his lease, John Spofford bought the land and, over time, many Spofford families made their homes on what became known as Spofford’s Hill. On the northerly side of Andover Street close by West Street is a boulder monument with the inscription, “John Spofford, descendant of Orme and of Candlebar of Spofford, England, with his wife, Elizabeth Scott founded the race of Spofford in America, a race respected for integrity, courage, generosity and intelligence.”

Before John Spofford settled here, young Samuel Brocklebank would bring cattle during the summer months to be penned near the brook referred to as Pen Brook also known as Penn Brook; a name it retains to this day. Samuel became a strong influence in the village and was planning to make his permanent home here in the West Parish of Rowley (Georgetown) where he had already cleared some farmland. However, this was not his destiny.

In June 1675, several Indian tribes led by the Indian chief, King Philip, declared war on the settlers. To fight the Indian uprising, all villages and towns were required to impress a company of men. Capt. Samuel Brocklebank recruited a company of twelve Rowley villagers. This Rowley contingent joined those led by Capt. Wadsworth of Milton and Lt. Sharp of Brookline. They marched on to Sudbury where, on April 21, 1676 they encountered a large Indian war party. Casualties were heavy and Brocklebank, Wadsworth and Sharp were among those killed. Of the twelve Rowley recruits only six returned home. An obelisk stands in Sudbury Cemetery dedicated to the memory of those who died in that battle.

Capt. Brocklebank died at the age of 46. His eldest son, Samuel, occupied the farm with his family in 1685. The Brocklebank House is still standing and is owned and maintained as a museum by the Georgetown Historical Society.

Only one tragic encounter with Indians occurred in this area. On a Sunday in late October, 1692, a small band of Indians was searching for a Newbury individual with whom they had a grudge. Unfortunately, they found the Goodrich family in their home on North Street near the Newbury border and vented their anger on the hapless members. Mr. Goodrich, his wife and all but one of the children were killed. Their seven-year-old daughter was taken captive and ransomed the following spring at the expense of the Province. A sign on North Street marks the nearby site of the tragedy.

There once was an Indian watchhouse on the knoll in Harmony Cemetery. It’s size and shape, similar to a telephone booth, required a sentry to remain standing thus preventing his falling asleep while on duty. Today, a granite marker in the cemetery indicates the site of the watchhouse.

THE GROWTH OF THE WEST PARISH TO GEORGETOWN'S INCORPORATION:

By 1700, about twenty families settled within the western section of the Rowley territory and Georgetown was in the making.

In 1686, Elm Street was the first road opened for public travel in the West Parish. Until that time, East Main Street ended at Elm Street. John Brocklebank built a corduroy road made of logs laid one after the other across his swamp. Swamp Road is Library Street today. Redshanks Hill, at the junction of Central and East Street, was known by that name back in 1715. During the gold fever of 1849, Redshanks Hill and Shute's pasture (Nelson and Central Streets) were cleared of trees that were used for timber to build ships carrying the 49'ers to California. Until 1740, the road from Rowley (East Main Street) ended at the Elm Street intersection. Travelers went over the highlands east of the village where part of North Street was opened to travel in 1713. The following year Haverhill Street (West Main Street) opened. North Street extended to the Newbury line in 1743. Central Street was only wilderness to the north and south until 1800 when a lane was opened from Main Street to the section near Brook and Nelson streets. Many Chaplin families eventually built their homes and businesses in this area of Georgetown and it became known as Chaplinville.

The first meetinghouse was built on East Main Street and Pillsbury Lane in 1729. Citing the difficulty of traveling eight miles to the Rowley church, these West Rowley villagers petitioned for a separate parish. Two years later, in 1731, West Parish was incorporated. After forty years, this first meeting house, in need of repairs, had outlived its usefulness. A new church with steeple and porch was erected at the intersection of Elm and East Main Streets. The building, 55 feet by 40 feet, was raised in one day on July 5, 1769. The steeple's rooster weather vane inscribed with 1769 is preserved at the First Congregational Church on Andover Street.

The first West Parish schoolhouse was built in 1739 on Searle and East Main Streets to accommodate the village's West and Byfield sections. Eight weeks schooling in the winter for boys was the norm for more than 100 years. Girls were taught the bible and catechism at home. The Centre Schoolhouse, built sometime before 1795, was on the green in front of our Town Hall. The structure was abandoned in the early 1800's and demolished in 1840.

As the town grew, so did the need for school districts. By 1840, there were seven one-room schoolhouses located in various sections of the town. Most of the schoolhouses were approximately the same size, 20 feet long and 16 feet wide. All the one-room schoolhouses closed when Central School opened in 1905. The schoolhouses were sold, moved or abandoned. The exception was Schoolhouse #3 or Hill School on Andover Street. It reverted to the Perley family, owners of the property on which it stood. In 1984, the heirs of the property gave the structure to the town. The Georgetown Historical Commission moved the schoolhouse from Andover Hill to the site of the Captain Brocklebank Museum on East Main Street where it is maintained and preserved.

The intersection of East Main and Elm streets was the village center until 1740 when travel went beyond Elm Street to the "Corner," the present square at Main, North and Central Streets.

By 1800, the “Corner” had 4 or 5 buildings and about 60 houses were scattered throughout the West Parish. The distances between homes required landowners to clear and maintain a road through their land. The practice was to place a gate across the road and charge travelers a fee to have the gate raised.

Businesses flourished. There was a flax-breaking mill and a snuff mill, molasses produced from cornstalks and watermelons, nails formed with forge and hammer; saddlebags, harnesses and horse-collars were made in an Andover Street house. More than a dozen mills were making apple cider and perry, a fermented beverage of pear juice. The Temperance Reform Movement put an end to cider making in 1849. There also was a rope walk where cordage was made. A man walking backwards on a path coiled twisted strands of hemp around his waist. A helper turning a wheel accomplished the twisting or spinning. The length of the path determined the length of the rope. One unusual industry for this village distant from the sea was the construction of 18 to 20 ton fishing vessels in the area of Chestnut Street. Oxen hauled the completed ships to the water at Rowley or Newbury where the vessels were floated to Essex. The cutting of ship timber for the Essex and Newburyport builders continued until about the mid-1800’s.

The most important industry was shoemaking. In 1810, encouraged by the growth of the West Parish, Benjamin and Joseph Little, brothers from West Newbury, opened a store near the church at East Main and Elm. The Little’s traded their goods for odd lots of coarse shoes in the ell of Solomon Nelson’s tavern, originally the Captain Brocklebank House. Many farmers had little shoe shops adjacent to their homes where they made these coarse shoes during the winter months and off-seasons to barter for their necessities. The shops were called “ten-footers” because they were usually ten foot square. One of these shoe shops can be seen on the grounds of the Capt. Brocklebank Museum. Within three or four years, the Littles moved to the “Corner” where business activity now centered.

The shoe industry grew rapidly in the 19th century. Shops and factories opened in various sections of the village. To name a few, there was Harriman’s on Elm Street, the White Shop on Middle and West Main streets and two Chaplin factories on Central Street in South Georgetown. The Phoenix Block on the corner of Central and West Main streets had a shoe manufactory. Another was in the Odd Fellows Block on West Main and North streets. J. B. Giles’ factory was on the corner of Elm and Chestnut streets and Malloy was on Park Street. C. S. Marston had a shoe factory on East Main and Park streets and in later years made a large percentage of the country’s ice skates and baseball shoes. By 1939, it was the only shoe factory still operating. About 1970, this last shoe factory closed. During one period, the town probably had more shoe manufacturers than any other town in the United States with a similar population. Other businesses related to shoemaking, such as tanning and currying leather and manufacturing shoeboxes, also prospered.

In the early 1800’s, Paul Pillsbury invented a machine that mass-produced shoe pegs. Instead of hand-sewing soles and heels to the upper part of the shoe, shoe pegs now made shoemaking easier and faster. Among Pillsbury’s many inventions were a machine for shelling kernels from ears of corn and another for stripping bark from felled trees.

The West Parish or New Rowley village experienced a building boom from 1830 to 1838 when 80 houses were constructed. In one year, 1839, more than 50 houses and stores were built. The rapid growth brought demands from the townsmen for separation from Rowley. The distance between the two parishes hampered businesses. Mail was delayed because it went to Rowley before being sent to New Rowley. Of Rowley's population of 2,444, 1500 individuals lived in the New Rowley section and only 944 in Rowley. There was overwhelming sentiment for separation and in 1838 the Town of Georgetown was incorporated. Muddy Brook, on the East Side of Route 95 became the easterly bounds of the new town and Rye Plain Bridge near the Newbury line another.

GEORGETOWN INTO THE 20TH CENTURY:

During the latter part of the nineteenth century, Georgetown continued to prosper as more industries and shops, such as the manufacturing of clothing, cigars, soap, furniture, coffins and caskets, began their businesses here. Hardy's Lumber Mill cut lumber and also made wooden boxes and crates. Moses Atwood made patent medicines and was best known for his "Atwood's Bitters". A New York City firm bought the Bitters formula and, under another name, sold the medicine nationally until the mid-1900's. Atwood also made the first daguerreotypes in town in 1847. Newspaper publishing began in 1846. All attempts to publish locally were short-lived until the Georgetown Advocate began printing in 1874. It was the first successful Georgetown newspaper, publishing local news for over twenty years.

About 1853 another industry began in town, the cutting of ice by Little and Tenney. During one particular period, there were four icehouses cutting ice blocks for local consumption and for shipment to Boston and nearby areas. Over the years, many icehouses were erected on Rock Pond and Pentucket Pond but, because of their construction, fire was a major problem. Eleanor Stetson in her book *Tales and Reminiscence of Georgetown*, describes the icehouses as made of wood with double walls spaced 24 inches apart at ground level and tapering to 18 inches at the top. Sawdust for insulation filled the space between the walls, which explains why these structures burned often and completely. In 1952, the Elliott Brothers closed their icehouse, ending the era of ice cutting in town. The structure was in the process of being dismantled when this last icehouse met the same fate as all the others and burned in June 1953.

Prosperity encouraged the building of a railroad between Newburyport and the interior of the county through Georgetown, Groveland and Haverhill. In March 1846, the Massachusetts Legislature granted the Newburyport Railroad Company the right to construct the line. From the outset, the company experienced continuing financial problems and in February 1860 was forced to lease the line for 100 years to the Boston & Maine Railroad. The glory days for railroading continued until after World War I when motorized transportation had a ruinous effect on rail travel. Increasingly, automobiles and trucks used improved highways and rail transportation declined. The last passenger train traveled the tracks from Boston to Georgetown to Newburyport on December 13, 1941. The rapid population increase in Essex County over the past twenty years has brought the railroad back to this area in 1998. The commuter train now runs between Newburyport and Boston with the nearest depot for Georgetown residents in nearby Rowley.

In 1855, the Town purchased for \$2,000 the Universalist Meetinghouse and lot, the site of our

present Town Hall. The Town kept the lot and sold the house to Mr. Sawyer who moved it to 21 Central Street to be used for his store. Selling a lot and building separately and moving the structure to another site within town or even to another town was common practice. Usually, a structure was cut into sections to make the move less difficult. The Universalist Meetinghouse, however, was transported as a unit by using 20 oxen. It was several days before the house reached its destination across Andover Street and up the slope to the site where it still stands today as a residence on Central Street. The following year, at a cost of \$10,000, a Town House (Town Hall) was erected on the old meetinghouse lot. The high school occupied the first floor. Then, in 1898, fire destroyed the Town House. High school classes were temporarily held in the Central Fire Station on Middle Street until completion of the Perley Free School in 1899. The town offices were housed at an East Main Street location.

The town's first public library came into existence through the generosity of George Peabody. He was a London banker and philanthropist, giving generously to causes he deemed worthy. Peabody's mother, Judith Dodge Peabody, was born in Georgetown and his sister lived here. During visits to his sister, he developed a fondness for the town and gave funds for the construction of the Orthodox Memorial Church and a town library. Work for the library began in 1866 in the area to the rear of our present town parking lot on Library Street. The church was built on the same lot, fronting on East Main Street. After 22 years, the library building became inadequate for the Town's needs and a more favorable site for a larger structure had to be found. There was much controversy over various locations until the issue was settled in 1904 when the Town accepted from Milton Tenney of Georgetown and his sister Lucy Tenney Brown of Ipswich the one and on-half acre lot now known as Lincoln Park. Construction for this new library began that same year and was completed in 1905. However, it did not open its doors until September 1909 when arguments concerning the payment of bills were finally settled in court. The original library, known as Library Hall, was used for movies and entertainment until the mid-1930's when it was demolished.

The Odd Fellows Building Association constructed a four-story brick structure on the corner of North and West Main Streets in 1870. Because it was built on Little's Lot, this imposing building was always referred to as Little's Block. ("Block" is the term for a structure housing several businesses.) At street level there were a number of shops, a grocery store and the street railway waiting room; a shoe manufacturer occupied the upper floors. It was the center of activity at American Legion Square for fifty years until fire destroyed it on July 9, 1923.

In 1874, to commemorate the Civil War veterans, a monument was erected on the green in front of Town Hall at a cost of \$3,000. The two Civil War cannons that were on both sides of the monument were removed during World War II and it is believed used in the manufacture of armaments.

While the town experienced growth and prosperity, it also suffered devastating fires. On October 26, 1874, a fire began in Tenney's stable at seven in the morning and was out of control until noon. Destroyed were a number of East Main Street properties, the Tenney residence and shoe factory, stables, store buildings and the old Boynton house. Dr. Huse's residence (the present Baybank) to the west and the old Masonic Block to the east were spared.

After this disastrous fire, the town voted \$8,000 to build an engine house on Middle Street and purchase a steam fire engine. The June 12, 1875 edition of the Georgetown Advocate describes the new engine house as “an ornament to the town. . . It’s dimensions, we should judge, are about 40x42 with 25 foot posts, a pitch roof surmounted by a tower for drying hose, rising 50 feet from the ground. The lower floor is all one room and intended for the Steamer, Hand Engine No. 2 and the Hook and Ladder carriage. The second floor is divided into three rooms being connected by folding doors, for the companies, and a room for the engineers, each provided with convenient closets, the three separate rooms may be thrown into one for sociables.”

The greatest devastation by fire with loss of life occurred on December 26, 1885. It is remembered as the Christmas Day fire though it actually began shortly after midnight on the 26th. The fire spread rapidly from the Main Street business block to Tenney’s brick building that housed the National Savings Bank, the post office, Butler’s law office, the A. B. Noyes Boot and Shoe factory and G. J. Tenney’s Shoe Manufactory. Again, Dr. Huse’s residence to the east and the Pentucket House to the west were spared. This time, the old Masonic Block did not escape destruction. Killed, were two members of the Steamer Company, Chase and Illsley, when the brick wall of the Adams Block fell, crushing them instantly and injuring several others. A member of Empire Company died several weeks later from “complications of amputation”. The buildings to the rear, including the Pentucket House all that survived this 1885 conflagration, were destroyed in 1898 by another fire.

The Haverhill, Georgetown & Danvers Street Railway began service in 1896 from Haverhill terminating near West Main Street in the area of our present Trestle Way Housing. Here, passengers would have to disembark and walk to the center of town because the railroad commission would not allow the streetcars to cross the track. This inconvenience was eventually corrected by building a trestle that crossed high over the tracks. Later, the street railway line was extended to South Byfield with the terminus at the car barns on North and Chute Streets. Fire destroyed the car barns in 1901. The era of the street railway system ended in 1930 when buses operated between Georgetown and Haverhill.

Paul Nelson Spofford purchased the old Mighill mansion on Baldpate Hill in 1898. Dr. David Mighill enlarged the house, built in 1733 by Deacon Stephen Mighill, when he and his wife resided there. Mighill descendants continued to occupy the house until Spofford obtained the property and began converting the mansion into an inn. The Baldpate Inn remained a popular hostelry for thirty years until it was sold to a group of doctors who converted it into the Baldpate Hospital in 1938.

Fires continued to plague the town. In 1915, the Erie 4 Firehouse including the Erie #4 handtub, the North Star, the tub “Old Bill” and all records from 1854, when the group was organized, were completely destroyed. It is believed that a poorly discarded cigar caused the fire.

The Orthodox Memorial Church on East Main Street, built in memory of George Peabody’s mother, burned in October 1920 and had to be torn down. The concrete pillars and fence are all that remain to remind us of the church that once stood on the site of our town parking lot.

Perley Free School opened in 1900 on North Street with the high school occupying a portion of the building. On January 28, 1935 fire gutted the school but the exterior brick shell remained standing. The school was rebuilt within these outer walls and rededicated as Perley High School in September 1936.

With the installation of electric lighting in 1912, the era of the lamplighter came to a close and Georgetown entered the modern age. The first section of the public water system was completed in 1935 and, during the same period, gas pipelines were laid in the center of town.

Central School served the town for seventy years from 1905 until June, 1974 when the structure housed the Town Hall with town offices and school departments sharing the facility. The Police Department moved into the former lunchroom in the basement area. Prior to finding a home in Central School, town offices and Police Headquarters were in the Masonic building, the present location of the Pingree Insurance Agency on East Main and Park Street.

Georgetown Junior/Senior High School was built in 1961 on Winter Street and an addition completed in 1969. Penn Brook School on Elm Street began classes for fourth through sixth graders in 1972. By the early 1990's all three schools, Perley Elementary, Penn Brook and the high school were in need of extensive renovations and enlargement for the burgeoning student population. Funds were appropriated at the 1993 annual town meeting to begin the building process with a feasibility study. The official School Building Project groundbreaking ceremony was held on July 13, 1995. Classes continued during the renovations and construction and 1998 completed the projects.

By the 1980's it was obvious that the Police Department, located in the basement of the Town Hall since 1975, and the Central Fire Company, still housed in the 1875 engine house on Middle Street, were in need of larger and more up-to-date quarters. The Town approved construction of a Public Safety Building at the 1985 Annual Town Meeting. Work by the building committee began immediately and by the November special town meeting of the same year a preliminary design was presented to the Town and approved. Funding problems and delays during construction kept the police and fire departments from their new home until 1988. The efforts of a dedicated group of volunteers made the completion of the building possible by conducting fundraising projects, seeking donations and obtaining volunteer construction workers.

From the beginning, what has made Georgetown special is the spirit of community evidenced by the many volunteers who come forward when a project is in need of assistance. It is this spirit that retains the feel of a small town and is its attraction.

There is more that can be written about Georgetown's past. Many people and places of interest and some highlights in the town's history have not been included on these pages, but that is for another time.

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