

The History Corner

1828 – When the Town House Hosted New Hampton School Events

One can hardly conceive, at this day, of the scene... There were tinware peddlers, book peddlers and other peddlers, auctioneering off their goods, and you ought to see how they all deserted the moment the music was begun. Then there was on every side a rush to the Meeting House [the Town House]. There were stands, also, where gingerbread, bakers' crackers, cigars, pipes, plug tobacco, lemonade and new rum were sold.

Here is a lively account of the early days of both the town of New Hampton and its famous school. This was written by NHS alumni, John Wentworth (1815-1888), who went on to Dartmouth, then west to Chicago where he edited *The Chicago Democrat* for years. He was the Mayor of Chicago and spent six terms in Washington, D.C. as a U.S. Representative from Illinois. John, originally from Sandwich, NH, was an imposing figure at 6 ft. 6 inches – and “Long John” as he was known was always proud that he helped get Abraham Lincoln elected president.

EARLY NEW HAMPTON.

I entered New Hampton Academy in 1828, when I was but 13 years of age. The brick building [Randall Hall] had not been erected yet, and all the farmhouses for a distance of two miles, and perhaps more, were taxed to their utmost capacity to accommodate the constantly increasing number of students. I boarded with Mr. Peter Hannaford, whose house was the second house, and the first two-storied one, on the right hand side of the way as you go from the Town House to the present location of the Institution [the Village]. After I had left for Dartmouth College, the house was struck by lightning and Mr. and Mrs. Hannaford were killed.

The New Hampton Academy exhibition was always an event that was anticipated with a great deal of interest, as being the only occasion when a brass band would come to town. The younger students, who performed the first day, had no “music by the band,” as one day was all that the trustees could afford to pay for. There was no tavern nearer than the present village [on Main Street]. Near each ends of the present Townhouse there was a building occupied differently as a chapel, recitation rooms, etc. The students met in the chapel and formed a procession to escort the trustees, the faculty, invited guests, parents of students and lady students, into the meeting house [the Town House], as it was then called. We marched around the hill, taking as big a sweep as we could so as to give the townspeople the benefit of the music.

There stands the hill now [57 years later - in 1885], with I suppose the old road still maintained all around it, with the old meeting house in the center; all else has gone. One can hardly conceive, at this day, of the scene which that hill presented on such an occasion. There were tinware peddlers, book peddlers and other peddlers, auctioneering off their goods, and you ought to see how they all deserted the moment the music was begun. Then there was on every side a rush to the meeting

house. There were stands, also, where gingerbread, bakers' crackers, cigars, pipes, plug tobacco, lemonade and new rum were sold. To show the difference between the liquor drinkers of those days and the present it is only necessary to say that each stand would have a single decanter holding about a pint and a half, and at three cents a drink not more than half or three-quarters of such a bottle would be sold during the day. There was no such thing as one man treating another in those days.

The farmers near the hill did a thriving business at "baiting horses," as it was called; a horse was to have all the hay he could eat, and be watered at noon, for "four-pence-half-penny," or six and a quarter cent piece in English currency. We had not then adopted our present decimal currency. But men who had driven their horses a great distance always thought it for the best to keep their eyes upon the watering part of the contract.

What was called sacred music in the program meant selections from the anthems in the old Handel and Hayden books, from which, in those days, children were taught singing. The singers were the lady and gentlemen students, who devoted much time in previous practice for the occasion.

We spoke in black silk gowns, and I have often desired, since I got my growth, to see how near I could come to donning the one I used at that time.

JOHN WENTWORTH

Chicago, IL, September 25, 1885



For more information on the history of the town, please visit the New Hampton Historical Society website at <https://www.newhamptonhistory.org/>

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