

THE VILLAGES OF MERRIMACK/SOUHEGAN

Thomas Chamberlain was one of the Dunstable proprietors in Jan. of 1727. When Capt. John Chamberlain came north before 1734 from Dunstable to settle in what would become Naticook, he received 300 acres to establish a grist and sawmill along the Souhegan River to provide the materials needed for settlers to come. Chamberlain built the mills and a log cabin near where the central fire station is now located. Naticook was divided and Merrimack received its first charter on April 2, 1746 to form the southern part of Merrimack. In 1750, a second charter added the land north of the Souhegan to the Bedford town line from what was known as Narragansett #5. In 2021, we will celebrate our 275th anniversary.

A survey of the land showed that the geographic center of Merrimack was the place to build a Meetinghouse. A committee was appointed in 1751 to build a meetinghouse and a bridge. Construction started in 1771 at the junction of Turkey Hill Road and Meetinghouse Road (1) near the Souhegan River, when the residents selected its first minister, Jacob Burnap. He lived temporarily in a cabin nearby while his home was being built at the corner of McQuestion and Turkey Hill Roads (2), where it still stands. In 1837, it was decided that a new church was needed closer to the main road from Boston to Concord, and construction began for the First Congregational Church on Baboosic Lake Road (3), now known simply as the "First Church" with the Last Rest Cemetery nearby. Town business continued to be centered in the old Meetinghouse until the new Town Hall (4) was constructed. This opened with great celebration on New Year's Day 1873. On July 4th, 1896 the old Meetinghouse burned to the ground. The front doorstep still stands on the old site by the Turkey Hill Graveyard.

The Turkey Hill Bridge was completed in 1751 with many repairs until 1831 when the first covered bridge was built. It was replaced in 1859 and burned on April 7, 1968.

Thus the new center of Merrimack, the Village of Souhegan continued to grow and prosper. By 1754 there were three school districts, but no schoolhouses were constructed until much later in the 1840's. Schoolhouse (#9) was built near the new center (5), and, with much renovation still stands as the Adult Community Center. Another schoolhouse (#4) was built on Loop Rd.(6) but moved further south to the current site of the VFW Post (7). Other central schools were at the junction of Amherst and Naticook Roads (#1) and on Joppa Road (#7). (8)

A store known as Ayers's was built at the junction of Baboosic Lake Rd. (9) with a meeting room above. It was built by Silas Roby in the 1700's and is still the oldest continuous commercial business in NH. In 1920 it was purchased by AP Kiestlinger and is now a mattress store. Most older residents still refer to it as Kiestlinger's Store. Isaac Riddle opened a store in the early 1800's near the Souhegan River (10) mostly as a company store for the mills growing at that location. It now holds a bakery. The location, at the waterfall, provided power for much manufacturing of leather, shoes, chemicals, furniture, a chicken processing plant all of which thrived in this fast growing village. By 1960, Merrimack boasted of Zyla's Auction House, (11) an early discount store, where public auctions were especially popular during the Christmas season. Most teenagers worked at those auctions at some point. Travelers came from all over New England for the auctions.

The coming of the railroads in the 1840's along with river and road access inspired much activity in this part of the town. With the main east-west access road toward Baboosic Lake, the population began to expand. The Daniel Webster Highway began to sprout taverns, restaurants, gas stations, drug stores,

grocery stores (before the 1960's grocery shopping was in Nashua or Manchester). Then came the strip malls we see today.

In 1924, the Gordon/Lowell daughters from Reeds Ferry decided it was time for a central library, and purchased the land on the corner of Baboosic Lake Road (12) near the church and town hall. They moved the tavern at that location across the road to become an apartment house, and built the library, which has expanded and still needs more space. The church was renovated and a parsonage built, followed by the addition of Our Lady of Mercy Catholic Church nearby (13).

Over the years, several locations have hosted post offices. There was one in a private home at the end of Railroad Ave. (14) in the chemical factory near the river (15) , a leased building now a computer business (16) and now, in its current location (17). In the 1960's, mail was delivered to RFD 2 Reeds Ferry, but you could have a post office box, buy stamps or mail packages at the post office.

In 1950, the school population had grown so that a new high school was built on "the Lake Road" (18). It is now the Upper Elementary School. By the 1960's James Masticola had donated land to build a school, and the sale of his land lead to the Masticolas Elementary Complex and a new High School being built (19). More recently, a Middle School was built further west on Baboosic Lake Rd (20).

So a small farming community at the junction of two rivers grew from 2400 hundred residents in 1960 to 27,000 now. It is one of four villages that make up the town of Merrimack, with its center at SOUHEGAN. In only 5 months, the town will celebrate its 275 anniversary, so keep alert to all the excitement ahead.

Records, memorabilia and artifacts are found at the Merrimack Historical Society, 520 Boston Post Road in the Village of South Merrimack. It is open on Tuesdays from noon to 8 PM. Contact Anita at 424-5084 or anitacreager58@comcast.net for more information or to add to our collection. Volume II of Merrimack's History in the 1800's is available for sale for Christmas giving.

1. 3 Meetinghouse Road
2. 45 Turkey Hill Rd.
3. 9 Baboosic Lake Rd.
4. 6 Baboosic Lake Rd.
5. 4 Church St.
6. Behind #3 Loop Rd.- no longer there\
7. 282 DW Highway
8. Now Woodbury Condos
9. 471 DW Highway
10. 433 DW Highway
11. 526 DW Highway
12. 470 DW Highway
13. 16 Baboosic Lake Rd.
14. 14 22 Railroad Ave.
15. 432 DW Highway
16. 399 DW Highway
17. 521 DW Highway

18. 20 Baboosic Lake Rd/
19. 35 McElwain St.
20. Madeline Bennett Way