

The Story of Dalton



BY EDITH SWITSER

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Dalton is situated on the Connecticut River between Lancaster on the north, Littleton on the south, and Whitefield to the east. In 1764 the area in which Dalton is located was granted by Governor Benning Wentworth, in the name of George III of England, to 47 grantees. It was named Chiswick, after the Duke of Devonshire's castle. By 1770 many of the original grantees had been bought out and the township was regranted under the name of Apthorp in honor of George Apthorp, one of the proprietors.

Apthorp was divided in two in 1784, with the southern part incorporated as the town of Littleton. The northern section was incorporated as Dalton in honor of Tristram Dalton who, with Nat Tracy, owned the land and had petitioned for the division. In that year, 1784, the first permanent settlers arrived in Dalton. Moses Blake was awarded two lots of land near the mouth of the John's River as payment for cutting a road from Haverhill to Lancaster. He settled on his land with his family, built a log cabin, and was soon joined by the Walter Bloss family. The Blosses and the Blakes were the only families in Dalton for several years.

Moses Blake was considered a great hunter. One of his favorite stalking spots was Mirror Lake, located in both Whitefield and Dalton, and originally known as Blake's Pond. (Forest Lake was once called Round Pond. When tourists and summer people began coming to the



The Dalton Ferry across the Connecticut River from the South Lunenburg, Vermont side around 1920.



During the heyday of the railroads, James Sumner's Sumner House brought visitors from near and far for tours up and down the scenic Connecticut River and carriage rides up Dalton Mountain.



A partial view of the White Mountains from Dalton Mountain with Franconia Notch in the center (photo courtesy of David Dana)

area, some felt our waters should have more elegant names.)

Moses Blake and Walter Bloss settled near the mouth of the John's River. There was no way to reach the settlements across the Connecticut River in Vermont then, except by boat. Feeling there was a need for transportation not only of people but of larger and heavier freight, Mr. Blake petitioned the legisla-

ture for the right to build and maintain a public ferry across the river near the head of Fifteen Mile Falls, a short distance above the spot where the railroad trestle is located today. The petition was granted in 1792 and a ferry was maintained there for the next hundred and forty years with only a few interruptions in service. When the ferry was discontinued there were bridges to handle



An 1892 map of Dalton.

the traffic. Descendants of Moses Blake and his wife Lucy live in Dalton to this day and take part in town affairs.

Dalton's first town meeting was held July 26, 1808 at the inn of Joshua Whitney. There were thirty voters, indicating that the population had increased considerably in about twenty years. (Of course, only men could vote.) On March 4, 1809 the voters met at Captain Whitney's and voted a full slate of officers including tithing men, fence viewers, surveyors of highways, and a hog "reaf." They raised thirty dollars to defray the expenses of the town and two hundred dollars for highways and bridges, and they decided that a man should be paid eight cents per hour for labor on the road, "finding his own tools and diet," and six cents an hour for a yoke of oxen with chains.

That year the town was divided into three school districts. Voters in each met and selected their own officers, with one committee to supervise the whole town. At first school kept only a few weeks in the winter; later a summer school was added which lasted six to eight weeks. School was held in private homes, but ten years later, in 1820, a schoolhouse was built in the first district. One hundred and ninety dollars was raised to defray the building expenses. Each scholar's family furnished half a cord of wood and boarded the teacher in turn, paying

nine shillings a week if they failed to do so. A year or two later district voters met and decided that all males should meet at the schoolhouse and repair the building, clean the yard, and provide other services or "pay one quart of good rum in failure thereof." No doubt most of the work got done.

With every family contributing wood, lumber, and labor according to its capabilities, Dalton's schools were built and maintained. At one time there were nine districts, each with its own schoolhouse, to serve the town. (In those days there was no public transportation, so the schools had to be near the students.)

Lack of good roads meant that people had to be pretty much self-sufficient. Neighbors had to help each other and get along without much commerce with the rest of the state. They worked hard, cleared land, built schools, a church, a town house, and in time produced a fairly prosperous community.

Then came the Civil War, taking men and money from this small town. Dalton responded generously with both. Each volunteer received a sum of money, and often the families of men in the service were supported by the town while they were gone. By the close of the war the town was in debt and, like most of the rest of the country, had to start finding its way back to prosperity.

Aside from agriculture, lumbering was

probably the earliest means of raising money. With its allied industries, lumbering continued for many years to be an important source of income. Among other early industries were starch factories, sawmills, shingle mills, and gristmills. None of these exists today, but signs of them can be seen in foundations and the remains of dams on our brooks. Several brooks make their way down Dalton Mountain to the Connecticut River, furnishing dam sites for the water power that fed the various mills. The John's River running through Dalton was also a site for water-powered mills and factories. The John's River begins in Pondicherry Pond and runs through Whitefield and Dalton to the Connecticut. Its namesake was John Glines who, with his brother Israel, hunted through the territory long before it was settled. (The Israel River in Lancaster is named for Israel Glines.) Some of their descendants still live in the area.

Many farmers went into sheep raising in the early nineteenth century, and this represented an important factor in the town's economy for many years.

Taverns were a necessity for travelers of that era; they also enhanced the social life of the town's inhabitants. The first tavernkeeper was Moses Blake. Licenses were issued yearly to innkeepers, and before the meeting house was built town meetings were held at a tavern or inn.

James B. Sumner, who bought a great deal of land in Dalton, built the Sumner House to attract summer visitors. These people came by train and enjoyed carriage trips to Dalton Mountain and other scenic tours up and down the river. One of the trips offered to Sumner House guests was a ride to Lovers Leap on the mountain. A short walk from the road brought them to a sheer cliff from which an Indian girl's husband and a rival are said to have leapt to their deaths in a fatal struggle for the girl. The girl pined away and was soon found dead on her husband's grave. Mr. Sumner also built a tollbridge across the Connecticut River which lasted about thirteen years, and a steamboat which had a much shorter life. By 1900 the hotel was abandoned and decaying.

Dalton's only church is Congregational. Organized in 1816 with only nine members, early meetings were held in private homes. In 1830 the parishioners decided to build a meeting house and erected a very substantial building which still

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Dalton's Congregational Church provides the background for a 1976 Bicentennial flag raising ceremony.



A view from Dalton Mountain toward Mt. Martha with Mt. Washington hidden in the clouds on the left. (photo courtesy of David Dana)

stands and serves the congregation and the community. It was used for town meetings until the 1840s.

When in 1844 Dalton found itself with some surplus money, the voters elected to build a town hall. First used for town meeting on March 10, 1846, it stands today and is used for many purposes. For the past twenty years it has housed the Dalton Public Library, which was es-

tablished in 1892. The Grange meets in the town hall, as do the Boy Scouts, 4-H clubs, youth groups, the Dalton Historical Society, and many other organizations.

High school was kept in the town building for about sixteen years. An addition was built to accommodate students from Dalton and Gilman, Vermont. In 1944 the high school was closed. Students from

the other schools in town were brought in and the town hall became the Dalton Elementary School for about fourteen years. Now a new school has been erected across the street, and the town hall is a town hall once more, with the library housed in the addition.

The Connecticut River has always been important in the growth of Dalton. It was a highway when few roads existed and those were poor. It was a source of power for gristmills, sawmills, and other industries. It furnished food and entertainment—after it froze in the winter, spaces were cleared and everyone skated. Log drives down the Connecticut were common in the day when lumbermen were clearing our forests. The river has seen its share of tragedy. But it is also a thing of beauty when it lies calm and serene, reflecting the trees and plants along its banks and offering a contrast to the mountains nearby.

Long before the first settlers arrived, long before the Indians hunted its shores, the river brought life and texture to the land. Today, the river forms a strong thread in the fabric of Dalton, its history and its people. ■