History of Franconia

By SARA NELSON WELCH

Mrs. Welch is the town historian and life-long citizen of Franconia. Her great-grandfather, Luke Brooks, was one of the first settlers of the town and it is said that he was the first to discover "The Old Man of the Mountains".

The history of Franconia is unique in that the land was granted to two different parties at two different times. It was first granted by Governor Benning Wentworth to Jesse Searles and a group of men on February 14, 1764. Then on June 8, 1772 it was granted to a group of men of which Corbin Morris was a member. This group named it Morris-town in honor of Corbin Morris. A law suit followed and it was ten years before it was settled and the first group won out and restored the name of Franconia to the town. (The name of the town is said to have been named after a territory ruled by one of the great dukes in Old Germany, “The Land of the Franks”.)

The early settlers cleared their land and built their homes and farms. They raised their own grains, flax to make their linens, as well as their food. As there was no gristmill, they took their grains to Boston or Portsmouth to be ground into meal or flour. They took a dressed beef and a dressed hog to pay the miller for grinding their grain.

A lode of iron ore was discovered in Franconia, in the late 1700's, that ran across the road to Easton and mining soon began. A smelting furnace was built about a mile out from the present center of town and this was operated until it burned in 1827 with all the surrounding buildings. In the meantime the New Hampshire Iron Foundry was established in the northern end of town. They mined their iron ore from Iron Mountain on Sugar Hill and operated for many years.

The New Hampshire Iron Works was called the Upper Works and the Lower Works. They had a large blacksmith shop, where today's Franconia Garage is located, where they made iron kettles, mortars and pestles, axes, horseshoes, ox shoes, drills and numerous other items such as andirons. Some of these items can still be found in Franconia.

All cooking of the early settlers was done over open fires in the fireplaces or in a brick oven at the side of the chimney until the 1830's, when the first cook stove was introduced. They heated their homes with the fireplace for years until there were box stoves similar to those made by the Franconia iron works.

An important phase in the history of Franconia was the building of a gristmill where the first iron works was located. This was after the fire in 1827, that destroyed the Upper Works. The gristmill was built by Horace Brooks and Daniel Whitney and operated until the late
A late 1800's map of the Town of Franconia. Today, almost three-fourths of the area on the right is owned by The White Mountain National Forest and the area through the Notch is owned by the State Forest Department.

At left: Looking northwest from Fox Hill in Franconia Village around 1918, with Scragg Hill on right.

Three men who helped make Franconia: (l. to r.) Richard Taft, the builder of the famous Profile House Hotel in Franconia Notch; Moses Arnold Dow, the publisher of the popular Waverly Magazine and founder of Dow Academy; and Colonal Charles H. Greenleaf, owner of the Profile House from 1881 to 1922 and benefactor of the Abbie Greenleaf Memorial Library in memory of his wife.

1880's. It was run by water power from the Gale River. Also in town were some sawmills. The first was an up-and-down sawmill, run by water power, located on Copper Mine Brook and this was followed by a steam sawmill on Main Street owned by Brooks and Whitney and operated until around 1932. It stood about where the present BP Service Station is located.

In connection with the sawmill, there was a bobbin mill which at one time was a starch factory. At one time there were two starch factories that made starch from potatoes grown by the local farmers. There were also wheelwright shops, milliners, shoe shops, barbershops and others as well as grocery stores. Parker's General Store was started in the early 1800's and in 1884 Howards Store was built.

The first local hostelry was The Iron Mine Tavern. It was located on the site of today's Franconia Garage. About 1805, it was moved intact across the street to where the present Snack Bar is located, in order to make room for the New Hampshire Iron Foundry Company. It took forty yoke of oxen to move the building.

In 1835, one of the first hotels built for tourists north of The Notch was built by Stephen C. and Joseph L. Gibbs called Lafayette House. It was built at the base of Mount Lafayette near Echo

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The second cold blast furnace in Franconia was built in 1805 by the New Hampshire Iron Foundry Company. It had a successful and continuous operation until 1845 and then continued intermittently through the Civil War. Main Street is on the left and Franconia Notch on the far right. The furnace still stands as a monument to the enterprising businessmen of their day.

A box stove made by the New Hampshire Iron Foundry Company in the early 1800's, was just one of many cast iron tools and home implements made in Franconia.

A view of "The Old Man of the Mountains" natural rock formation located in Franconia Notch as seen from the edge of Profile Lake. (See front-cover for a close-up photograph.)

The original home of Zebedee Applebee, where the first town meeting was held, later became the Spooner Farm and when additions were put on, was the McKenzie Hotel. It now operates as the year-round Franconia Inn on Route 116.

Lake. They operated it until 1852 when they sold it to Richard Taft and his associates.

The new owner began immediately to build the famous Profile House just five hundred feet away on what is now the location of the parking area for the Aerial Tramway. The hotel opened on July 3, 1853 and had one hundred and ten rooms which were increased in 1866 by a large addition.

News of the beauty of Franconia spread quickly in the 1850's. The long hard years the farmers had put in to make a living from the land took its toll. The prospects for extra income and a livelihood better than before suddenly came to light.

Tourism started in the 1850's, when the farmers opened their homes for people from the cities to come and spend the summer months. The farmers had their own wagons which would hold ten or twelve people. They were taken on trips to see the many points of interest in the area. When they went through Franconia Notch they were told the history of the many things they saw, like the Old Man of the Mountains which was discovered by Luke Brooks in 1805, when he was tax collector in Franconia and surveyed lots on which the taxes had not been paid. They were told about the Boise Rock and The Pool, Basin, etc. as well as Washington Lying In State which is very plain to see on a good day. One can read many facts about The Notch history in the booklet called "Franconia Notch History and Guide" on sale in many places.

To add to the tourist history, is the change in the roads with the introduction of the automobile. The roads now have no waterbars and are paved. The road through The Notch was not open to travel from the middle of March until about the middle of May, due to the deep snow. Then in the winter of 1928, The Notch was plowed for the first time so automobiles could come through. There were local citizens called Blue Angels who helped tourists if they had car trouble or ran out of gas.

The Aerial Tramway was built in 1937 to the top of Cannon Mountain and revised in 1980. Larger cars were put into use to carry more people. This enables the skiers to make more trips to the top of Cannon mountain and also enables more people, who would never get to the top of a mountain, to enjoy the

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The original mile-long cable tramway (foreground) was installed in 1937 to the top of 4,040 foot Cannon Mountain as a State-owned tourist attraction. One of the new triple-capacity cars is shown in the background during construction of the new Tramway which opened in 1980.

Winter travel through Franconia Notch was closed until 1928, when snow plows, such as these, were put into operation.

A grand view of a grand hotel, The Profile House, in Franconia Notch (1853-1923) with Echo Lake in the background and Profile Lake in the lower left corner.

beautiful view from this 4,040 foot vantage point.

The Town was divided into districts for many years with a district school in each district. Each district also had their own road surveyor. The town officers included, in addition to the regular officers we now have: a charcoal surveyor, wood surveyor, fence viewer, hog reeve, and there was a pound for stray animals. Each farmer had a special mark for his animals so he could tell them from any others that strayed away.

Each district had their own one-room school house. In 1884, Moses Arnold Dow, the president and publisher of the popular Waverly Magazine, who was born in Littleton, left the sum of $100,000, and appointed a group of men as trustees, to start an academy so the children in Franconia could go on to College if they desired. An agreement was made between the Franconia school board and the trustees that if the Town took their students out of the Academy and sent them somewhere else they would lose their use of the building and if the trustees decided to close the Academy for any reason the building would revert to the Town. The Town was allowed to use three of the rooms for elementary grades and pay for the supplies and part of the cost of heating the building. At the school meeting in March, 1958, it was voted to send the high school students to Littleton on a tuition basis, therefore the Town lost the use of the building.

In 1961, the trustees decided to start a junior college. This became Franconia College and due to financial difficulties, it too had to close its doors. In the meantime Franconia School District, which had become the Lafayette District School, decided to join with Bethlehem and build the Profile School as a Junior and Senior High School.

Church services were held in the district school houses in the early times and in 1832, the Congregational and Baptist members decided to build a church which was called the Union Church that stood on the green across the road from Bob’s Exxon Station in the present center of town. This was called the Union Church until 1884, when the Congregational members decided to build a church of their own across the Gale River. The church is now the Community Church of Christ. Then the Union Church became the Baptist Church and was so known until about 1939, when the Baptists joined membership with the Congregational Church.

In 1947, it was decided to sell the Baptist Church to the Catholic Diocese and they moved it to the land next to the Town Building and it is now called Our Lady of the Snows. The bell in this church was given by Moses Arnold Dow in 1864, when it was the Union Church. He also gave the bell for the Congregational Church when that church was built.

The Clock on Dow Academy was given to the Town and the bell in Dow Academy was given to the children of Franconia by Henry W. Noyes. The children are allowed to ring the bell on special occasions.

The Franconia Library was started in 1880 with a gift of one hundred books given by the authors Mrs. Annie Trumbull Slosson and W.C. Prime. In 1895 the Library was moved from a corner in a store to a part of the first school house that had been moved to the center of town. It became a public library and the students used it a great deal. Then in 1913 Colonel Charles H. Greenleaf gave the present Library in memory of his wife, Abbie, and it was named for her. It has grown so that an addition had to be added in 1969.

Franconia also furnished her quota of men for the armed services when called on. Those who were not admitted to the armed forces went to work in the mills or shops to make items used in the war efforts. Many gave their lives in the service for Franconia and their country.

I’ve touched on only a small part of the history of Franconia, but perhaps it is enough to create a spark in your interest to learn more about it.