Peeling
A New Hampshire Ghost Town

by

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Elbow Pond from Peeling
The following is a portion of a copyrighted work in process by Dr. Leonard J. Nyberg, Jr. for publication later this year or early 2013. The work focuses on Peeling, NH, now Woodstock, and, in particular that portion of Peeling known as the Mount Cilley settlement. This brief excerpt describes the Sawyer, and R. G. Smith sites, a spruce oil mill and a site marked “unknown” but believed by some to be the remains of the school. The author, with assistants, visited the area many times, taking many photos, and making many measured drawings. The conclusions expressed are the author’s.

A Settlement Was Developed

_Some spring the white man came, built him a house, and made a clearing here, letting in the sun, dried up a farm, piled up the old gray stones in fences, cut down the pines around his dwelling, planted orchard seeds brought from the old country, and persuaded the civil apple tree to blossom next to the wild pine and the juniper, shedding its perfume in the wilderness. Their old stocks still remain. He culled the graceful elm from out the woods and from the river-side, and so refined and smoothed his village plot. And thus he plants a town._ — Henry David Thoreau

The Mt. Cilley settlement was first carved out of the northern New Hampshire wilderness around 1818 and abandoned near the start of the Civil War in 1861. This work is focused primarily on those who remained as the settlement neared the end of its existence. The key for this focus is the 1860 Walling map of Grafton County which shows the location, use and ownership of the sites remaining as of that date.

Shown below is a portion of the 1860 map entitled *Topographical Map of Grafton County, NH from Actual Surveys by H. F. Walling, published by Smith Mason & Co.* It illustrates the few residences that are discussed herein.

[Map of Grafton County, NH]

Approaching Peeling from Woodstock, the first site noted was the home of Dr. Sawyer, who came with his family from Boston to Peeling. Dr. Sawyer was the first doctor in Woodstock and, according to town records, was given authority to sell liquor, (for medicinal reasons of course).
Dr. Sawyer made visits to remote parts of Woodstock and many times he would have to remain away from his home overnight. The doctor and his wife were in their late 50’s or early 60’s when they arrived in Peeling. Dr. Sawyer also farmed the land in addition to practicing medicine. We located the remains of the Sawyer dwelling. The Sawyer foundation is probably the best preserved that we have found to date.

The sketch at the left is believed to be the site of the Sawyer residence. The foundation measures approximately 18’ x 20’ and it appears that the northerly wall may have held a foundation for a fireplace. The photographs on the following pages show what appear to be quarry stones rather than the typical field stones.

The photograph above is of the front (southeasterly) corner of the foundation.
Above – This photo shows one of the two quarry stone slabs on the north wall that may have been part of the foundation for a fireplace.

The author standing in front of the rear (north) wall.

Proceeding westward along the Mt. Cilley Trail, the next site is what we believe to be the site of the spruce oil distillery. It shows on the 1860 Walling map but very little is known of it.
The interesting operation of a spruce oil distillery is described in *The Moosilauke Reader* (Volume 2) by Robert W. Averil, published by Moose Country Press:

“…The art is primitive in the extreme, the appliances crude, and the distilleries themselves mere shanties in the woods, or near them, beside some convenient brook.

The distillery itself is a rude building loosely boarded, with a still ruder chimney protruding from a roof, a vat or tank of matched plank outside and a huge pile of boughs, redolent of the odor of spruce, which has already passed through the operation of distilling. The tank is the only well made part of the establishment. It is of plank, carefully matched, and may be 10 x 12 feet each way, and eight feet in depth. It is supplied by a close-fitting cover of boards which can be pressed upon the mass of boughs by means of large wedges driven beneath the cross-beams of the frame.

A pipe from the distillery enters the tank at the bottom, and another returns to the building from the top. With tank full of boughs from the spruce or fir and cover securely fastened down, everything is ready for the steam, the process of generating which is the simplest imaginable. A sap pan, or something very like it, is set over a rude arch of stones, and over the boiler is a wooden contrivance much like an inverted horse trough to hold the steam, or part of it. A lead pipe from a nearby brook supplies the water for this crudest of boilers, and another carries the steam to the bottom of the tank outside. The pipe that returns to the distillery from the tank is of lead and ends in a great coil that fills a barrel and which, surrounded with cold water, is the worm…. ...”
It is interesting to see how much lead was used in the process; a lead pipe from the brook, another for the steam and the pipe leading from the distillery from the tank, and the “worm”. Today, the use of lead would not meet OSHA standards, nor would the entire facility. However, at the time lead pipe was the standard and easy to work.

Spruce oil, from the *Tsuga Canadensis*, was useful in the treatment of muscular aches. It is obtained, as described above, by the steam distillation of the needles, twigs and branches of the spruce tree.

Reviewing the early photograph above causes one to wonder how profitable the process may have been. There are fourteen people, a team of oxen and a team of horses shown in the photo. In view of the number of people and animals involved there must have been a substantial market for spruce oil and a financial incentive to keep the still running. (Currently (2012), spruce oil sells for about $15 per ounce.)

The photograph at left shows the Village Street, remnants of stone walls can be seen in the foreground, center and far end portions of the road. The Sawyer place is on the north side (right) of the photograph, the spruce oil distillery site is on the left side of the road about 3/8ths of a mile, more or less, west from where this photograph was taken.

A short distance beyond the site of the spruce oil distillery, according to the Walling map, the road turned south to the Horner farm and just beyond this intersection, on the north side of the road, was the R.G. Smith place. The Smith place is located northwest of the site of the spruce oil distillery and on the north side of the main street.

The sketch at the right shows the location of the house foundation, barn and well. It also shows a rather large stone enclosure after which the road turns sharply to the west. In about 1/4th mile or less the road turned north toward the summit of Mt. Grandview. Although this road does not appear on the Walling map it seems to be the site of the former North Woodstock Improvement Association Mt. Grandview Trail that led from North Woodstock to the summit of Mount Grandview.
At the left is a portion of a 1928 Plymouth Quadrangle Geological Survey Map. The arrow shows the approximate location of the trail to Mt. Grandview and the approximate location of the road and stone walls described earlier.

The remains of a foundation is shown in the photograph at right and believed to be the R. G. Smith place as shown on the Walling map. The rationale for this is that according to Walling the Smith place is approximately midway between the school and Beaver Brook and about three quarters of a mile from the junction of Beaver Brook and the Mt. Cilley Trail.

The outside measurements are 20’ x 28’. It is impossible to determine how deep the foundation is because of water and debris. The northeast corner appears to be where the entrance was located because of three large flat stones located in that corner. At the east center is a large flat stone measuring 2.5’ x 4’ which may have been a foundation for a fireplace. However, an archeologist from the United States Forest Service believes that the fireplace would most likely have been on the north wall.

The photograph at the left illustrates what appear to be the steps and the 2.5’ x 4’ flat stone discussed previously is shown at left center. I have sat on these stones many times and enjoyed lunch, each time attempting to imagine what life was like more than 150 years ago. It is a peaceful spot and when the land had been cleared there would have been a clear view toward Mt. Cilley.
The author pictured above with right foot resting on the large stone block at the center of the foundation.

About 24 feet from the rear corner of the house is a rectangular set of stones measuring 30’ x 40’ which may have been the foundation for a barn.


“For two centuries after the initial English colonial settlement, New Englanders built their barns to a standard design inherited from England with modifications made in response to the North American climate. Traditionally referred to by farmers simply as ‘the barn’ and later as the ‘thirty-by-forty,’ these early barns, now known as English barns, typically measure thirty feet by forty feet.”

This photograph shows the wide opening in what we believe was the barn, the opening is located in the southwest corner. On the north side is a stone wall about 15 feet long, possibly a doorway.
Not too far from the northeast corner of the barn we found the remains of a well. Because of the roots that had grown about a foot or so below the surface, it was impossible to tell the depth and whether or not there was still water present.
This photograph shows a portion of a rather large stone enclosure found up the drive leading from the main street to the summit of Mt. Grandview. (Refer to the earlier R. G. Smith sketch). The theories of what the enclosure was used for range from an animal enclosure to a possible cemetery, however, there are no obvious visual clues to its former use.

Pictured below, and located about twenty feet southwest of the rear corner of the former barn is the second of two culverts shown on the foundation sketch. As of this writing, and after almost 200 years, the culvert remains fully functional.

Continuing in a westerly direction, the next site can be found west of Pike Brook. This site, according to a ranger from the United States Forest Service, was the location of the school, the USFS archeologist agrees – I disagree. A careful study of the Walling map, GPS and other calculations suggest that the school location is further west..I have labeled this site as “unknown.”
The remains of the building foundation are found on a raised ledge about fifty feet north of the Mt. Cilley Trail and measure 20’ x 25’. There is an area of stone debris on the south side of the foundation and large pieces of quarry stone “A” inside – there is no basement, on the southeast corner there are flat stones that suggest steps.

I continue to search for two foundations that I have not yet discovered – in addition, there is still a disagreement relative to the school and two more foundations. I am in hopes that this will be settled in the very near future; at that time I will be able to release additional photographs and information.

Information and/or comments relative to this settlement are always welcome, I can be reached by email at: nyberg1@roadrunner.com