

HISTORY OF BETHEL COMMON

by Eva Bean, July 1957 The Bethel Citizen

This account of Bethel's Common and the house surrounding is the work of Miss Eva M. Bean, who has devoted much time to local historical research. It is presented at this time when the Common will be the center of interest during the Bazaar of Saturday of this week. (1957 was first year Bazaar became Mollycokett Day)

The Common on which the Bethel Bazaar is being held on July 27, 1957, dates back to the early days of the town. Originally Bethel was called Sudbury Canada, named for the Massachusetts town from which men set out in 1690 under Sir William Phips on a disastrous attempt to reduce the French city of Quebec to an English colony. "Canada" designated the campaign for which the troops were due pay. A grant was not made until 1768 and none of the veterans ever came here to live. A very few sent sons. Indians of this region had remained hostile and that fact discouraged settlement for more than half a century.

Captain Joseph Twitchell was one of the original surveyors. He arrived in 1774 and is credited with having built a saw mill and a rough dwelling-house at the foot of Mill Hill. He bought up a great many rights from those who could not come to settle and became proprietor of much good land in the new town. He did not live here for a very long period himself.

In 1779 Captain Joseph persuaded his son, Captain Eleazer Twitchell, to move here from Dublin, NH, with a considerable retinue. Captain Eleazer brought his wife and five children; the youngest was born in March of the year he came. There were also his wife's sister, young Betsy Mason, and six hired men. They came as far as Fryeburg before winter set in and spend the coldest months there. Towards spring the men tramped on snowshoes the 40 miles from Fryeburg to Sudbury Canada to make a path. Then they went back and dragged all their baggage on wooden-runners sleds. The women and children followed in the rear. Their first house stood on a little island at the foot of Mill Hill, not far from the original site of Captain Joseph's mill and cabin.

Here they were living on the tragic day in 1781 where the Indians descended on the little settlement. The Twitchell home was not molested, but on that morning of August third, Captain Eleazer was visiting his nearest neighbor, Lieutenant Jonathan Clark (on Lover's Lane or Frost Hill). He was seized and bound along with the other men but managed to loosen his thongs and escape to the woods to hide while his captors were draining Clark's keg of rum. He lay behind a log (in the present location of Kimball Park) all night and in early morning sent one of his hired men to ask for help from Fryeburg. Three men from Sudbury Canada had been taken away, but one, Lieutenant Clark, managed to elude the Indians reached home safely from Shelburne. The younger men were forced to march all the way to Montreal where they were kept for some months by the English. They came back to Sudbury Canada and spent the rest of their long lives here.

No further raids were ever made against the settlement. In 1781 there were only ten families and four single men living within the limits of the whole town.

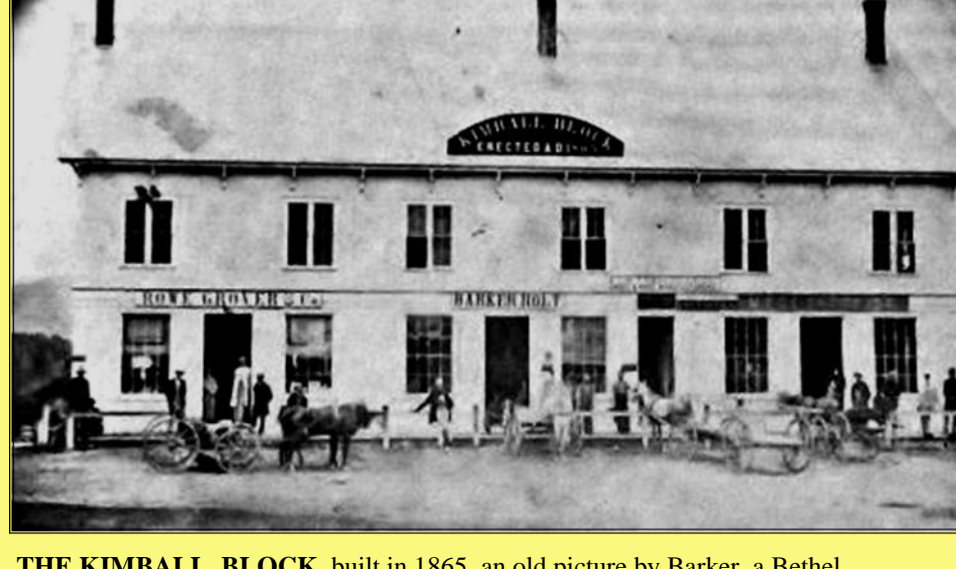
Nobody was disturbed except in the homes of the Clarks, Lieutenant Jonathan and the young Benjamin both quite near to what is now the village.

Sudbury Canada was named Bethel in 1796 and became the 106th town incorporated in the State [District] of Maine (the incorporation was in the State of Massachusetts.)

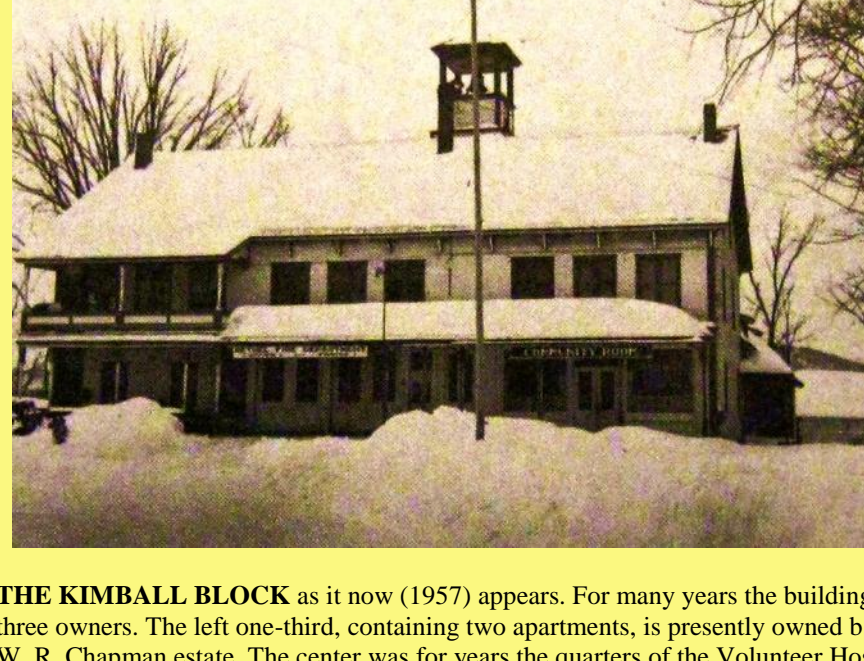
By 1797 Captain Eleazer Twitchell had built himself a "Castle", so-called which stood somewhere near the present tennis courts of Bethel Inn. That was the first house on the Common. The Captain is considered the founder of Bethel Village. The road up Mill Hill was its first street. That same year Captain Eleazer gave the Common to the West Parish of Bethel on condition that the town would clear the plot and build a church upon it. Opposition arose for there were almost no other families around Bethel Hill at the time. A church was erected beside the Androscoggin and not far from the present steel bridge. The Captain was not satisfied. He fenced the Common and used it as a wheat and potato field for some years. (Captain Twitchell died in 1818, age 74.)

As originally surveyed Bethel was divided into the East Parish and the West Parish with the line of partition running (north to south) across town near the road to Edith Eyper's farm in Middle Intervale. Captain Twitchell was a moving spirit in the development of this matter and of Bethel so he eventually pulled down his fences to provide a parade ground for West Parish militia. Broad Street was also cleared of trees to increase space for the musters. The Captain died without having given a deed to the property but in 1823 his heirs, Joseph Twitchell and Jacob Ellingwood deeded the Common to the town. Dr. Nathaniel True, in his Centennial Address of 1874 hoped that "the ladies of the village will devise means to have the rocks removed and the surface graded."

Bethel has never had a different village green.



THE KIMBALL BLOCK, built in 1865, an old picture by Barker, a Bethel photographer. This illustrates the activities of 90 years ago, as some of the enterprises shown here are known to have moved before 1870. The signs indicate that the occupants at that time were: Rowe, Grover & Co., Barker Holt; A. S. Twitchell, boot and shoe manufacturers; E. Foster's law office; Post Office; and M.C. and C. J. Kimball.



THE KIMBALL BLOCK as it now (1957) appears. For many years the building had three owners. The left one-third, containing two apartments, is presently owned by the W. R. Chapman estate. The center was for years the quarters of the Volunteer Hose Company and for the past 21 years has housed the town's fire fighting equipment. It was owned by the Bethel Village Corporation until absorbed by the town two years ago. The present Community Room was the store of Ceylon Rowe & Son until closed about 1940, and is now town property. The fireman have recreation rooms over the center portion of the building and the Boy Scouts have their meeting place over the Community Room. This photo was not the one in the Citizen it comes from Bethel, Maine An Illustrated History by Randall Bennett

James Walker came to town in 1799 and opened the first store in a room in the Twitchell "Castle". He bought some land of Captain Eleazer and in 1832 put up a large house and a store. Due to financial difficulties the Walker house changed hands and was finally moved to give way for Frank and William Chandler to build the Bethel House. That burned. Meantime James Walker had gone off to become a preacher. Jedediah Burbank bought the "Castle" in 1833 and the next year erected a hotel which later was known as the "Lovejoy House".

Around 1911 the sites of both these hotels became the property of the last William Bingham 2nd. He razed the Prospect Inn on the old Walker lot, which was damaged by fire in July 1911.

As late as 1814 there were only four dwellings in the limits of the present Bethel Village, the "Castle", the Walker House, John Hastings' and Dr. Mason's. John Hastings was the village blacksmith and a man who took his share of responsibility in local affairs. He built the big white house on Broad Street near the end of the Common, which later was the home of his son Daniel and is now the property of a great-grandson, Edward H. Hastings of Dorchester, Mass. It is opened only in the summertime. John Hastings also built the next house above on Broad Street, as a wedding present for his son, Robert. That is now the home of Marshall Hastings, son of David R., whose daughter is the wife of William C. Chapman.

The fourth house on the Common and the first in town to be painted white was built in 1814 by Dr. Moses Mason. Today is it the home of Mrs. D. T. Durell. The good Dr. Mason caused considerable consternation amongst his contemporaries by putting up the frame of a two story dwelling. Apparently the originals of the other three structures must have been of a less ambitious size, for folks thought his building too tall to stand up. They even went so far as to delegate a committee to wait upon the doctor and to remonstrate. His house is still standing today! Doctor Mason's was the first home in town to have blinds—a useless extravagance, people said. The hallway inside the front door is still painted with an early woodland scene. On the day that the frame went up it was Parson Gould for whom the Academy was named who invoked divine blessing. After that all hands took a good drink and carpentry progressed. Doctor Mason was the first one in Bethel to own a sofa. It was made by the cabinet-maker, Marshall Bonney, who lived at the end of Church Street where Joe Perry has a filling station. Doctor Mason's was the second family in town to have a piano. There were no Mason children, so the doctor and his wife took a niece to live with them. Cyrene Ayer married Daniel Alphin Twitchell, great grandson of the surveyor, Joseph. Young Daniel Twitchell was a storekeeper and built the place now known as Brown's Variety Store on Main Street. He died early of diphtheria. Their daughter was the mother of the late Daniel Twitchell Durell.

In 1812 and 1813 the road to Norway was opened. It led out over Paradise Hill and all the other hills in the 20-odd miles. Post riders came in that way. Doctor Mason was the first Bethel postmaster. Profit for the first quarter of the new post office amounted to \$2.83. His desk and mail boxes occupied the further end of his living room. After 1833 Doctor Mason was twice elected to Congress. He gradually became so involved in business and politics that he gave up his practice of medicine. The nearby township of Mason was named for him.

Old stories bring out the methods of olden days that were used to prevent undesirable consequences. John Hastings was long gone and the Bethel Centennial was past. The late David Straw Hastings lived in his father's house and viewed with alarm the prospects of what the cutting through of a new Mason Street would do to him. He went down to Hanover, bought and disassembled a small school house and set it up on his lawn so placed the new highway had just enough space to squeeze between his school house and the home of the Mason heirs. After the street was down the school house disappeared forever.

Mason Street runs just 18 inches from Mrs. Durrell's foundation. The Hastings lawn across the way stays green and wide.

In 1832 Robert A. Chapman bought land north of the Common and put up a small store. His home was in the same building. That is the site of The Elms (Bethel Inn) today. Robert Chapman married Frances daughter of Dr. Timothy Carter of the Brick End House in Middle Intervale. Their daughter, Sarah, became the bride of Judge Enoch Foster and lived on in the family home. The judge was an outstanding lawyer of Maine and a staunch promoter of Bethel. His office stood where the Library does today and it was there that he opened the Bethel Savings Bank in 1872. The original bank's safe is said to be the one still in use by the Bethel Town Clerk.

Sarah Chapman Foster has gone down in history as one of the neatest housekeepers. The judge and his pal, the village doctor, always took off their shoes at the door if and when they got together for an evening for a game of cards and an oyster stew beside the kitchen stove. Those were the days when ladies dressed in black silk and wore a beaded bonnet perched high and tied under the chin. Thus arrayed Mrs. Foster always preceded her husband and her car by a couple of paces as they went down Church Street on a Sunday morning. Hot weather or cold she carried a black shawl neatly folded over her arm. That was as much a part of her Sabbath as her Bible. Nobody ever saw opened for use.

John Oliver had a hatter's shop near the corner originally. The shop was moved to the site of Ruth Carver Ames oil company office. It was converted into a store by George Chapman and later bought by Edwin C. Rowe, who erected the present building for his bigger trade. Ideal Hall, a place for entertainment and commencements is upstairs. That went out of use when the Cole Block was opened in 1891. Mr. Rowe's successor was the late Irving L. Carver, who gave up the general merchandise of the old-time village store and developed his Shell Oil agency which has many branches in surrounding towns.

Back on the corner of Main and Broad Streets the brick block was started as R. A. Chapman's store. It has had many tenants through the years. The store part is now the Specialty Shop. Henry Hastings law office and home were originally stores. Who settled there first is not known.

William E. Skillings is supposed to have built the William Rogers Chapman house on the corner across the way. It is pictured in its full two stories on a map of 1878. Once in the years between it was a boarding house, "The Howard", run by two daughters of Jewett Howard from the lower part of town (North Bethel). Then Moses Hastings took it for a summer home. It was he who sold it to Prof. Chapman. The house is filled with memories of the long life of music and of travel that the Chapmans enjoyed. He was the man who did much to promote the ideas of music festivals in this part of the United States.

The first painted building in Bethel stood where Fred Hall lives today. It was a house and painted red. It was mentioned as early as 1804. Mr. Stiles, a carpenter, built the Hall house much later. It was a departure from the usual four-square colonial dwelling and was said to have been viewed with considerable alarm. The roofs were too steep to endure. The Congregational Manse was built by Gilbert Tuell in 1904. The Ladies Club of the West Parish Church furnished the funds.

The Community Room was Ceylon Rowe's store for many years. He sold everything from boots and shoes to flour and kerosene. Before his time there existed a block of stores which burned down, proprietors not now on record. The building is the property of the town, excepting the two apartments next to the Ruth Carver Ames building, which is part of the Chapman Estate.

The fountain on the Common was first turned on, in November of all times of the year! The item fails to relate how long folks kept it running.

The Common has been the scene of an annual bazaar for the past eight years. Proceeds go for local community service needs. It is 140 years since Captain Eleazer Twitchell gave the land to the West Parish. The rocks are gone. Surely he would consider it a worthy idea for the townspeople to get together for a day of fun. Today no one can fail to be thankful for the lovely village that has spread out around that old-time Twitchell gift.

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