

2009

# Abridged History of Guilford Maine

Guilford (Me.). Historical Society

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### **GUILFORD – River-born, Resourceful, and Resilient**

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#### Pre-Settlement and the First Century

At the conclusion of the Revolutionary War, Maine was part of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. In the year 1794 the Commonwealth made a large land grant to Bowdoin College consisting of four townships, one of which is now the incorporated town of Guilford. Almost every town located in the interior of Maine was settled in the vicinity of a river or stream which could be harnessed for power to run saw mills, shingle mills, grist mills, or anything else that needed more power than could be supplied by men or animals. In Guilford's case it was the Piscataquis River, Salmon Stream, and a small outlet from Davis Pond thus there was the areas of Guilford Village, Guilford Center, and North Guilford, each sprouting small settlements. The area known as the village gradually became the business and economic heart of Guilford, with North Guilford and Guilford Center remaining predominately agriculturally oriented and slowly fading in population with the advent of electricity and the railroad.

Initially there were only seven men residing in the township.

They were Robert Low, Jr., Robert Herring, Jr., David Low, John Bennett, Isaac Bennett, Nathaniel Bennett and John Everton. The care these men exercised in laying the foundation of this new settlement at Guilford Center, on the bedrocks of religion, industry and education, set a tone and character for that has carried over into our times, hence, we call these men the seven wise men of Guilford. We never hear further of David Low, and this name may have been a misprint, as there was a David Herring.

On February 16 of 1806, Robert Low Jr. moved in the first family and three weeks later Robert Herring Jr. followed with his family. The three Bennett boys also arrived about this time and during the summer were busy raising corn and wheat and helping with the building of cabins. That fall Capt John Bennett went back to New Gloucester and brought back a loaded ox-cart and a young cow. New Gloucester lies just south of Auburn, approximately 100 miles from Guilford as the crow flies, so the journey would have been a very arduous trek at the time, and usually took about a week. Capt Bennett stayed with his family in the township until after the harvest; then returned to New Gloucester, leaving his three sons, approximate ages 13, 12, and 11, to look after the property and tend the cow. Their parents, accompanied by other members

of the family, returned in March of the following year, the boys having survived the winter on cow's milk, hilled corn, boiled wheat, and roasted potatoes. The nearest neighbor was roughly a mile away. In September of 1806 Mrs. Robert Herring Jr. gave birth to the first child born in the settlement, a baby girl which she names Esther. Then in December Mrs. Robert Low Jr. gave birth to a daughter she named Polly.

In the winter of 1807 John Everton moved his family into the settlement which was a real blessing as Mrs. Everton was skilled in obstetrics. She served the settlement for ten years, before being thrown from a horse, fracturing her hip. She never recovered the use of her hip but lived an additional 20 years. In the spring of 1808 Deacon Robert Herring moved his family into the settlement and from that time forward religious services were held on more or less continuous basis.

The first census to include Guilford (Lowstown) was in 1810 and showed a total of 65 inhabitants. In October of 1812 the settlement was officially organized into Plantation 6, Range 7, and in November a meeting of voters was held for the purpose of raising money for school. Twenty-one dollars was eventually raised, a school board elected, and the first school was kept in a room owned by John Bennett. From that time on the town has always been generous in supplying funds for educational support.

The first church was organized in Guilford Center on January 7, 1813, and on April 22 a meeting was held to see if the plantation will agree to give Elder Thomas Macomber an invitation to settle here as town minister. On June 7, Mr. Macomber was accepted and served the Baptist church at the Center for many years. On December 18, 1852, Mr. Macomber died at the age of 78 and his remains lie in the old cemetery at the center.

1816 was a pivotal year for the settlement as they petitioned the general court of the Commonwealth for incorporation as a town to be named Fluvanna. The legislature in its wisdom did not approve the name Fluvanna, changed it to Guilford, and passed the act on February 8, 1816. The first town meeting was held on March 1st. And on March 9th, Moses Guilford Low, the first male child was born in Town. At different times, as boundaries changed, Guilford was located in the counties of Somerset, Penobscot, and finally Piscataquis. In the early years school was taught, roughly speaking, in the loft of Capt Bennett's Shed until the first school house was finished in 1818, across the street from the current Guilford Valley Grange. Guilford was incorporated as a town on February 8, 1816. In 1827 Guilford began to grow and prosper and by 1865 there were saw mills, law offices, retail stores, and a woolen factory. The railroad arrived in 1871 creating opportunities for business to expand. In 1890 the population was 1022 and along with the B & P railroad, the town had 29 businesses, 2 churches, 2 physicians, 1 dentist, 1 lawyer, 2 undertakers, and 1 newspaper; the Guilford Citizen. In 1903 the United States Post Office was located in the Braeburn Building on the corner of Water and North Main Street. The new Guilford Memorial Library building was dedicated in 1909 and in 1910 Guilford got its first movie house.

The first bridge across the river, was built by volunteer work and subscription, and opened to travel around 1821. There have been 12 bridges on the Piscataquis River; three at Low's Bridge, four at Sangerville, one foot bridge and four regular bridges at Guilford Village prior to the present structure.

The Guilford Fire Department was organized in 1893 and was comprised of 16 men and their equipment which consisted of linen hose, a two wheeled hose reel, and a sled for winter use. The pay for firemen was either \$3 per year or their poll tax. The water supply came from the river using a pump in the Piscataquis Woolen Mill. In 1931 the Town purchased their first fire

truck, a 1931 Ford which is still running today.

The Guilford Water Supply Company was developed when Charles Taylor, a respected engineer and entrepreneur from Wellesley, Mass bought the necessary material to build a piping system from Bennett Pond into town. In December 1910 when the work was complete the average daily use was 70,000 – 80,000 gallons per day.

Guilford was home to the largest fair in Piscataquis County. The date of the first Guilford Fair is uncertain but appears to have been some time in the late 1800's. Always a traditional agricultural fair, it was held on the Saturday following Labor Day and featured livestock judging, horse and oxen pulling, and an assortment of carnival rides and games, while the centerpiece of the one day event came to be a double-header baseball game between the local semi-pro Guilford Advertisers and a visiting team from the Eastern Maine League.

December 15 and 16, 1901 will go down in history of the State of Maine as days of unusual calamity, and while many others suffered unexpectedly, none more than did those on the Piscataquis shores. Previous to the week of the flood, some 56 inches of snow had fallen. Cold weather had prevailed and everybody had decided that a solid winter had set in. Then it rained during the week continuing through Saturday night and during that night and Sunday the water fell from the skies in sheets. First the ice came, then logs and ice, and finally buildings were seen in the water. It was a wild scene with the water rising over 4 feet in 15 minutes.

In late September of 1909, the boom strung across the river at Guilford Mfg Co to hold that company's logs had been taxed to its utmost by the rapid rise of the rivers waters the previous few days. A heavy down pour of rain proved too much, the boom snapped, and, with a loud roar, about 2,500,500 feet of logs were on a rapid journey down the Piscataquis. The thundering logs swept everything before them until the dam just below the bridge was reached. Here the dam stood its ground. At this point on the river were located the mills of the Piscataquis Woolen Company and the M.L. Hussey Woolen Company. With the big head of water rushing over the dam, logs were hurled directly through the windows of the lower floors of both mills. Hardly a whole window casement in the lower floors of either mill was left. The big boilers in both mills were under water.

At just about midnight, Friday evening April 10, 1903 the residents of this town were called from their beds to fight one of the most stubborn fires that had ever been known here and which for a time threatened to wipe out the entire business section of the town. The fire started in the stable connected to the Turner house. The stable and shed and the hotel was a total loss. With the high winds and lack of firefighting equipment it was a miracle that more of the business section of town did not suffer. It is interesting to note that the 3 story hotel portion that remained was moved approximately 150 feet up the road.

In 1916, Guilford citizens joyously celebrated the town's 100th anniversary. Mr. Henry Hudson, a prominent lawyer and former state legislator, concluded his remarks this way; "We should be proud of our town. In this Centennial we have all done our best to pay full credit to the memories of our men and women not now with us. In the words of another written for this occasion:

"Stout hearts were theirs, to them all hail! With pluck like theirs, we cannot fail  
God bless Guilford, with flags unfurled, To us, the best in all the world."

The Next Fifty Years (1916-1966)

In 1918 people of Guilford gathered in the square and burned the Kaiser, celebrating the conclusion of the war.

In the 1920's many new businesses were established. The Minto Toothpick Company purchased a local wooden box mill and converted it to a toothpick mill. A grist mill and feed store changed hands from M. L. Hussey to Frank Palmer. S. J. Jackson Company set up a Men's Haberdashery. The Guilford Hospital was formerly opened. N. N. Scales purchased H. Douglass and Co. and after interior changes, continued sales of groceries, sporting goods, boots and shoes. Leslie Adkins wagon shop was built to paint and repair wagons. Piscataquis Valley Country Club was incorporated. The Guilford Chamber of Commerce was organized. Charles Herring started a slaughterhouse. The American Legion Hall was built and operated a bowling alley and pool tables.

The 20's also brought Guilford devastating times. In 1925, the Guilford High School building was destroyed by fire. Students used the Town Hall for their classrooms until a new high school was built in 1926. In 1928, the magnificently built structure, the Town Hall, was completely burned to the ground. It was never rebuilt. One of Guilford's more damaging floods passed through in April 1923, leaving extensive wreckage to businesses and residences.

The 30's brought to us the Skinner's Furniture Store, two beer parlors, Weatherbee's Hardware Store, The Community Movie Theater, the "Five & Dime" Variety Store, Haley's Construction Company and Blake's Insurance Agency. A modern alarm system and vault safe were added to the Bank.

The Guilford and Sangerville Bridge was replaced with a steel truss bridge. A banquet was held at the Braeburn Hotel on June 21, 1931, to make our plea for a new road, allocating from the Federal and State highway funds.

A picketing demonstration was held in Town on September 20, 1934. Organizers and agitators in the textile strike were busy that week, as Guilford mills operated as usual. Police and the National Guard were on hand in case of troubles.

May 19, 1938 the First Air Mail arrives at the Hudson farm field.

Another flood in March 1936 caused more extensive damage to Guilford's industries, and residences.

Hudson house was torn down and replaced with the US Post Office.

Guilford continued to thrive in the 1940's. A new restaurant was opened called the Gold Nugget Restaurant. Guilford Woolen Mills Company was formed. McKusick Fuel Company was established. Samuel and Paul Herrick expanded their business to include a service station, painting, welding and body work on cars. Piscataquis area schools formed in the name of Piscataquis Community School District, and a new gymnasium was built. Central Maine Radio Services & Sales was established.

In the early 1950's the construction for a new steel and concrete bridge was underway after being interrupted once again by another flood. The temporary footbridge and new abutments had been swept away, only to have the crew work harder and persevere until completion in 1954.

Johnston & Hibbard Garage was established. Guilford Kiwanis Club was organized, Tripp's

Sporting Goods store came to Town along with Guilford Dairy, Goulette's IGA and Davis Brother's Furniture. A new fire house and elementary school were built.

In 1958, the B & A Railroad discontinued passenger service. This year there was a devastating fire which destroyed the Hardwood Products Mill. Guilford, once again, rebuilds, the following year, with volunteerism and pride shown as usual in the community.

In the 60's Worthen's Market was opened at the Odd Fellows Building. A new church was built on High Street. A new business came to Town called Wood Chips, Inc. Gerald Palmer closed the gristmill, and Guilford Lumber went out of business. Some other businesses seemed to be "changing hands" or were "merging together" but still remained and improved their services – including the bakery and hardware store, law offices and banking.

On June 17 & 18, 1966 townspeople chose to celebrate! It was Guilford's 150th Birthday. Residents come together, once again, with a parade and special events to remember their accomplishments.

### Modern History -1966 to Present

Following the raucous sesquicentennial celebration of 1966, the town settled back into its familiar routine, accomplishing much, losing occasional battles, and rolling along like a floating leaf borne by a babbling stream, haphazardly bouncing over the rapids and alternately lazing sleepily through quiet eddies, but always moving, ever dynamic, always adapting. The ups and downs continue.

In less than six years, the town went through three town managers, the third making a thirty-one year run until retirement; replaced by a local currently in his ninth year of service. Half the downtown burned in a tremendous fire during a wild snow storm in '69, and five businesses were wiped out, yet it seemed not a beat was skipped. The last class graduated from the "old high school" that year, and a new one was erected at the edge of the village. Fluoride was added to the water, a new sanitary district was incorporated, a tennis court was built as was a 24 unit senior citizen's complex, which soon expanded to 40 units.

Recession hit in '74, but having seen this so many times before, nobody blinked. Two new bridges were built, a national flood insurance program was studied, the library was renovated, zoning ordinances were drafted, but not accepted so the entire planning board resigned in frustration. Change doesn't come easy when you've learned to ignore its effects. The Town Dump closed for good and a crude transfer station was developed, a nearly new tire store was lost in a fiery spectacle, and the '79 flood caused severe damage at Pride Manufacturing and destroyed the Chase & Kimball Oil Co. tank farm, an oil storage facility near the ball fields. Bad news cohabitated with good news and it seemed nothing could discourage the machinery of progress. There were over 1000 jobs in a town of 1800 residents.

In 1983, there was not an empty storefront in all of Guilford. The three local industries were modernizing and expanding exponentially, there was no municipal debt, several new businesses including a credit union arrived and even another great downtown fire, one which consumed a clothing store, caused little more than a hiccup, as the store rebuilt immediately. The town's mettle was tested on April Fool's Day in 1987, however, when the greatest flood in our history struck, cresting at levels 7 feet higher than a ever before, pushing huge ice floes ahead of the water, wiping out many buildings, damaging over 50 homes, destroying our famed covered bridge, and causing millions of dollars in losses to businesses. It was as if a Mother, determined that a lesson be gained, was admonishing and chastising her child. Spirits were not long dampened, though, and the community pulled together as always, focusing on the

necessary. Many hands pitched in to help their neighbors by moving furniture, making daring boat rescues, cleaning up the aftermath, repairing and rebuilding. We were still in a boom despite the setback. A local restaurant rebuilt and enlarged; a furniture business expanded, a new car wash was constructed and the 16 units demolished in the flood were replaced with 24 new apartments. The mills dried themselves off and were going full tilt once again, a \$20,000,000.00 state of the art yarn manufacturing facility was planned by Interface, the credit union erected a brand new building, the Oak Ridge Apartments complex was developed on Hudson Avenue, a \$60,000.00 addition was approved for the town office, an honor roll was built on Elm Street, and things were growing so well statewide that comprehensive plans for towns became mandatory. Soon, Low's Covered Bridge was replaced, Interface built a huge corporate office building, the town office project was completed and King Cummings Park was dedicated as we tried to slip quietly into the Nineties.

Just as Guilford was recognized as a "Main Street 90 Community", recession crept up from nowhere. Layoffs were many and fear eased its way into the local psyche. Something had to be done. So in 1991, with oil stains several feet above ground level yet adorning the clapboards of once flooded homes, dozens of people unemployed, and the town's future on the balance beam, the town was ready for, in fact in desperate need of, a celebration. After all, it was her 175th birthday. And what a celebration it was; with a huge parade, contests and challenges of all types, music, dancing, speeches and remembrances, and very high spirits sufficient to go around. But reality soon came storming back in. Guilford's downtown district was in the upheaval of further change; a 100 year grocery store was closing, the hardware store was moving to the outer edge of the village, a long standing restaurant had shut its doors. Augusta was cutting funding to the towns yet again. In the meantime, a previously committed million dollar renovation occurred at our Primary School, the library got computers for public use, and a boat launch had been installed on the Piscataquis River, the significance of which would not be realized until well after the turn of the century when we rediscovered its importance.

The following year, Pride Manufacturing purchased the former Ethan Allen plant in Burnham, a move which foreshadowed their diminishing presence in our town. New rules forced the closing of our local brush dump, general assistance expenditures hit an all time high of \$54,000.00, and soon thereafter, Burt's Bees which had recently established its presence in town, headed south to North Carolina to escape the burdens of taxes and workers compensation. Laws, economic conditions and technology all indicated that it would cost more than before just to stay even. Still, hope was not totally lost; the pungent aroma of her memory hung heavily in the air. Like a crocus forcing its tender shoot against the morning hoarfrost in yet frozen spring earth, Guilford refused to submit. The medical facility was renovated and a physician's office added; a new middle school was constructed and the old one sold for a dollar to house a new transportation company which brought excise tax dollars and jobs; a fitness center opened; library usage increased by 56 percent; and the Saulter Facility was built as planned by Interface. Cell towers and fax machines came to town.

Instead of listening to the usual economic indicators, the resilient people of Guilford kept forging new roads and in fact paved some that had been only gravel for over a century. A complete remodeling of the corner filling station into an eight-pump marvel, the destruction of six properties to make way for a giant Rite-Aid store, a new Masonic Hall, a huge addition to the IGA store, construction of a self-storage facility, and the doubling of jobs at Pride Manufacturing, all flew in the face of conventional wisdom. The school became the first to put a laptop in the hands of each fifth grade student, a program that has continued to grow. A new Subway Shop

came to town, the credit union grew yet again, a new machine shop was built, and then, suddenly, for a moment, the spinning subsided. The Town Clerk of 25 years died from cancer, and as if in sympathy, a silent retreat was realized. The Town Manager resigned after 31 years. The D.E.P threatened suit over an unpermitted transfer station, the town garage was deteriorating, the planning board had ceased to meet and applications for grant funds to complete water main replacement and downtown revitalization had been rejected.

Then a new manager took office and tried to ignore the bad news and its accompanying omens. And the optimism was contagious. Hardwood Products Company was named Exporter of the Year, new looms were installed at Interface, Pride's grew and expanded its product line, the H.K. Melvin Park was created, a new transfer station was approved, and updated computers were installed in the town office.

Then in 2003, America went to war! Believing that the economy would rise on the same tide as our collective spirit, a new municipal garage was purchased, a large expansion was accomplished at the library, and an Economic Development Board was created even as the state began to shrink from its commitments. The town was on another roll. We had just received notification that we were awarded a \$400,000.00 grant to spruce up our downtown, Interface was awarded the E.P.A. National Merit Award, having been nominated by the town office, a new brick and bronze war memorial was built on Water Street, a grant had been received by the Abaris Club to assist the town in rebuilding its playground and tennis court, and new bridges had been installed on either side of town. Although tax relief from Augusta somehow proved to be costly rather than helpful, we continued to ride the grant horse across a few more deserts. Pride Manufacturing packed up and left town in a trice, and a \$400,000.00 Business Assistance grant aided a new buyer, American Pride out of New Vineyard, in purchasing the plant. A Homeland security grant was obtained providing most of the cost for a new fire truck. And the price of oil was scaring the future back into hiding.

Then Key Bank donated the so-called Edes Building to the town which erupted into a divisive firestorm of a different sort, pitting those that wanted the building saved against the majority that knew the million dollar price tag was too high to absorb. At least this took focus from our troubled times. The Kiwanis Club, along with an assist from the economic development board brought everyone back together with the first Piscataquis River Festival, a gala event with a huge parade, day long musical entertainment and contests, a rubber duck race, kiddies' games, dancing and a good time in general. The new playground and tennis court complex was dedicated, the Samuels family proposed to build a million dollar civic center and café on the Edes lot, the long awaited but slow-to-complete Route 15 project was finally finished, the new fire truck arrived, our librarian was named Maine's Most Outstanding, the town took on the Tax Collector and Treasurer duties for neighboring Willimantic, and road work was undertaken in the replacement of 26 culverts. Then the governor sprung his plan for consolidating schools on an unsuspecting state and small towns such as ours were thrown into a tailspin. Penalties were threatened for non-compliance, even though we could prove it saved money to stand pat. The Downtown Revitalization project was completed and a whole new appearance to the south side of town was created with period lamp posts, concrete and granite sidewalks, street trees, removal of overhead wiring, green spaces, and, ta-da, on street parallel parking and a new parking lot. Exciting times prevailed as a town wide revaluation was accomplished which caused the kind of great consternation that only comes with change, the town experienced its first bank robbery, the library trustees turned the property over to the town thus making the library another town department, the Partnership Food Pantry was established to help feed area

hungry, and a \$250,000.00 Housing Assistance Grant was landed to make home improvements for many homes in town.

Interface Fabric was sold while the argument raged over saving the Edes building and the new company did not honor the prior promise of a gifting the land in the adjoining lot. The community building project was lost. The stock market crashed and capital was in short supply, so the building was flattened and the lot sits empty, awaiting the next great idea. Guilford Historical Society was also torn from the rift and tempers heated to the point that a physical altercation ensued and national news was made by old people fist fighting. A change in leadership and a successful Harvest Fair brought things back to a peaceful state. In 2009, everyone was working together with renewed effort and purpose, as layoffs again abounded and 200 jobs were lost. The town was named the Lilac Capital and the Chickadee Capital of Maine and a Little Miss Lilac Pageant was held in conjunction with the ongoing annual River Festival. The Historical Society, the Town Office, the library, the school, and the economic development board sought and received a grant to establish a town historical website, thus creating unity across several lines.

The world remains in conflict in all corners and the global economy is as scary as it's ever been. The State of Maine is in deep financial troubles and has shown signs of spreading its pain to the property tax payers through increased fees and less services, a giant curtailment of education dollars, a reduction in revenue sharing and road tax monies characteristically returned to the towns, and a host of other broken promises. With many jobs lost, the likelihood of increased taxes, the stock market struggling, the school being underfunded, roads crumbling, and all of the other woes, how will we survive? JUST WATCH US! This is Guilford's story and could be the tale of many other towns. We were born of the river, empowered and made wealthy by her awesome strength, humbled and groomed by her relentlessness, both robbed and rewarded by her capriciousness, and inspired by her tireless, unceasing example. As in each moment, when new water passes a given spot, as banks and bends imperceptibly erode and relocate, as ice forms, melts, and moves on by, so too will the fortune and history of Guilford be wrought with change. The pattern has been one of ups and downs comparable to any roller coaster; and we have proven over and over again, when times get hard, we get strong. We will soon roll again.