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## Of Leaders and Loyalty: The Pejepscot Historical Society, 1888-1987

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*Pejepscot Historical Society*

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## Of Leaders and Loyalty: The Pejepscot Historical Society, 1888-1987

### Cover Page Footnote

This article provides an overview of the history of the Pejepscot Historical Society during the years, 1888-1987.

OF LEADERS AND LOYALTY  
THE PEJEPSCOT HISTORICAL SOCIETY, 1888-1987

The task of writing history should never be considered complete, a situation which certainly pertains to the following summary of the Pejepscot Historical Society's ninety-nine years of existence. Much is lacking in the written records left by the Society's founders and directors, the source of most of what has been compiled for this history. Local newspaper articles add to our knowledge, as do the papers written by members and scholars and read at Society meetings. Annual reports, financial statements, photographs, and correspondence tell more of the story, but it is really the personal memories and experiences of those involved that hold the intricacies imbedded in the founding and development of the institution. Unfortunately many of these people are gone, and the hours necessary to tap those still around would carry us into the next decade. So I preface this paper with the words used by one of the Society's founders, Henry W. Wheeler, co-author of *The History of Brunswick, Topsham and Harpswell, Maine* (1878): "So much is said by way of apology for the unavoidable errors that may, perchance, be discovered in this volume. The undertaking itself needs no apology, as the value of such compilations, not only to the writers of general history, but also to the public more immediately interested, is now everywhere admitted."<sup>1</sup>

The Pejepscot Historical Society was founded by a group of sixteen local citizens who, with one reporter present, met in the Brunswick Selectmen's Room on January 10, 1888. The climate of the day was characterized by a sense of pride in the 150-year-old town which was enjoying a period of modernization and growth. In 1880 Brunswick was recognized as the largest and wealthiest town in the state. The municipal building had been built in 1883, electricity was introduced in 1887, and the economy was secured by the textile mills growing along the banks of the Androscoggin River, the shipbuilding



The Varney Lecture Hall — first home of the Pejepscot Historical Society. Not unlike the York Institute's founders, those who named this society chose "Pejepscot" to reflect a regional outlook, encompassing Brunswick, Topsham, and Harpswell. Pejepscot Historical Society photo.

activity on the coast, and the well-established presence of Bowdoin College. The feeling was summarized by Professor Charles Carroll Everett in an oration honoring the Town of Brunswick's 150th Anniversary in 1889 when he stated, "Perhaps to most men, their native town seems thus exceptional. I cannot, however, believe that it is merely this subjective illusion which makes Brunswick seem to us to have a character and attractiveness of its own."<sup>2</sup>

The rapid changes embodied in industrialization and modernization also inspired many to look back at the lifestyles, traditions, and history of the area soon to be lost. Among those who committed themselves to honoring and documenting the past was Henry Warren Wheeler, the Society's first president from 1888 to 1893.

On that Tuesday evening in January 1888, Wheeler was joined by a company of others dedicated to the formation of a "Local Historical Society," a list of whom is worthy of review. In his company were I. P. Booker, Prof. H. C. Chapman, Prof. Henry Johnson, Rev. E. C. Guild, Rev. W. P. Fisher, Lyman E. Smith, John Furbish, Weston Thompson, Esq., Barrett Potter, Esq., Edward P. Pennell, George L. Thompson, D. D. Gilman, and Frank E. Roberts. Of this group, seven were involved in local business and town affairs, three associated with Bowdoin College, two were members of the clergy, and three were lawyers. The one minor in attendance, Charles S. F. Lincoln, later served as the Society's president from 1947 to 1949.

The Society's first set of by-laws, adopted on that January evening, designated its purposes as researching, collecting, and, from time to time, publishing matters of local history relative to the towns of Brunswick, Topsham, and Harpswell, not contained in the Wheeler text and from the post-1878 period, as well as to establishing an "Antiquarian Museum" for the preservation and exhibition of "relics of old times." Officers were elected, membership dues were set at one dollar, and a regular meeting schedule established. The name Pejepscot Historical Society reflected the Society's concern with the three towns which comprise the Pejepscot Region — Brunswick, Topsham and Harpswell. These procedures were formalized when the Society was legally incorporated on December 10, 1891.

From its founding to the present date, the Society's history might best be viewed in terms of five periods characterized by cycles of growth and decline. Each was dominated by the personalities, ambitions, and pursuits of its chief officers.

### **The Founding**

From 1888 to 1905 the newly formed local historical society remained a small but enthusiastic and active group of men and women who possessed a strong appreciation for their communities and for the overall history of the area. The reading of "papers" became the focus of the two to three public meetings

each year held in different town offices. Writing in 1967 Louise R. Helmreich characterized this founding group and their meetings: "The authors were not scholars; they were talking to a group of their friends in an atmosphere of affection and loyalty to the town which was their home, and in most cases the home of their forebearers."<sup>3</sup> The first public action by the Society was an observance of the 150th anniversary of Brunswick's incorporation. The celebration, held in 1889, made history in its own right through a Society publication documenting the occasion. Earlier that same year the Society published the first volume of *Collections of the Pejepscot Historical Society*, a series of six papers given by Society members at earlier meetings. No other publication of papers occurred, despite ongoing interest and intent, until 1967 when a selection of twelve early lectures were compiled by the Society in *Our Town*, by Dr. Helmreich.

The sense of informal, although sincere and thorough exploration of the past was carried into the annual "Field Days" conducted all but one summer from 1890 to 1899. Groups of twelve to fifty men and women gathered each year for historical and geographical outings to such places as Potts Point, the New Meadows River, "ancient Wiscasset," Bunganuc and Bailey's Island. At these sites, shell heaps, Indian burial grounds, foundations of buildings, canals, mill sites, and quarries were examined and then discussed by a knowledgeable guide or resident of the area. A social hour, meal, and occasionally an overnight stay always added to these "most enjoyable" outings. Research and documentation of current affairs were important, as John Furbish explained in 1894: "We must not forget in our efforts that what is every day talk and work to us will be historical not many years hence."<sup>4</sup>

An early concern was the need for a building with space for the Society's artifact collection. The collection, which numbered approximately 500 items by 1889, included portraits, maps, a collection of spinning and weaving implements, utilitarian objects, lantern slides, and an assortment of documentary materials. In 1891, John Furbish, who had been very active

in the establishment of the Society, purchased the 1827 Congregational vestry and property on School Street for \$1,000 in hopes that it would become the Society's future home. After a successful fund-raising effort conducted through circulars and newspaper announcements, the building was purchased from Furbish in November 1892, and necessary repairs were made. The Society remained in debt for the next few years, but the first exhibits were prepared.

In 1894 came the death of Henry Wheeler. Nevertheless, the next eleven years brought great activity under the leadership of Professors Henry L. Chapman and William MacDonald, and John Furbish. Field days continued until 1899; papers were presented on topics including industrial history, town and national events, militarism, and antiquities, and the "rooms" were opened to the public on a regular basis in 1901. An interest in cataloguing the collections was first recorded during the presidency of John Furbish in 1905. However his death that same year halted all Society activity; the next meeting was not held until October 1908. There, Professor Chapman read a memorial to Mr. Furbish stating that "after three years of inactivity — during which however the building and collections have been duly cared for — the Society desires to renew active life, and to express and record its appreciation of the character, the gratitude for the services, and its regard for the memory of Mr. Furbish."<sup>5</sup>

### A Silence

Despite these sentiments, the records show only one meeting during the period from 1908 to 1923. Many of the founders and members passed away during this time and no "leader" emerged to carry the cause forward. The one meeting, held in 1909, honored the Society's twenty-first anniversary at which its faithful Secretary Ira P. Booker read a history of the first years. No other meeting was held until May 31, 1923.

The period was not totally silent, however. During this time one of the founding fathers, Lyman E. Smith, prepared the first catalogue of the collections, which was published in

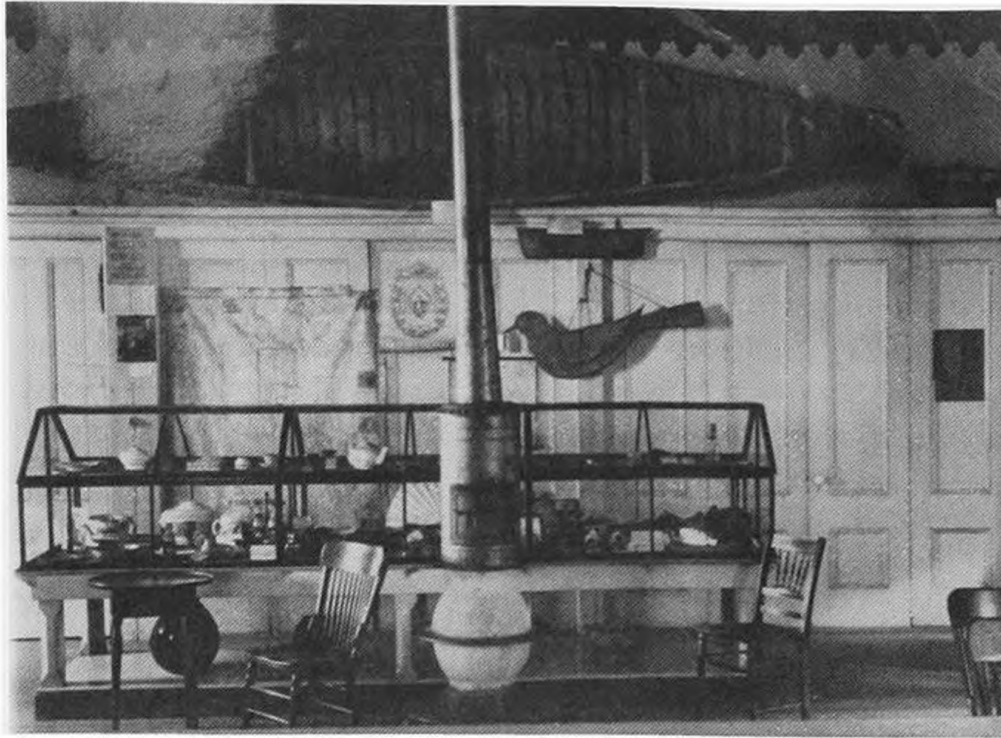
1924, apparently funded by a \$200 bequest from the will of Mrs. Jane H. Curtis. One of the most significant financial donations was also made at this time. In a will dated February 10, 1910, Viola Phipps of Brunswick left to the Society \$2,000 and the income from real estate established as the Varney Fund in memory of her mother, Mary J. Varney. The fund was designated to be used for "paying expenses incurred for talks or lectures, mostly on New England and especially local history." As of 1987 over 350 "talks and lectures" have been held.

### **Rebirth**

After years of inactivity, a reorganizational meeting of the Society was held in May 1923 and Samuel A. Melcher, the grandson of one of the area's most notable architects, was elected president. The newly formed Board of Directors again included those involved in local business and Bowdoin College and descendants of some of the area's most established families. Many of the earlier activities were reinstated; papers were read, slide shows were presented, exhibits were prepared, and much needed attention was given to the physical plant. The Mary J. Varney Fund allowed the Society to recruit some distinguished speakers from all over New England. Among the six or so lectures held each year during the 1920s and 1930s were "Colonial Newspapers," by Yale University Professor Allen Johnson; "Timepieces," by John Albree of Boston; "Pirates," by John H. Edmonds, Chief of the Massachusetts Archives; "The March of Benedict Arnold through the District of Maine in 1775," by the Honorable Charles J. Nichols of Portland; "When Brunswick was Pejepscot," by Mr. Howard I. Corning of the Essex Institute; and "Shipbuilding," by author William Rowe.

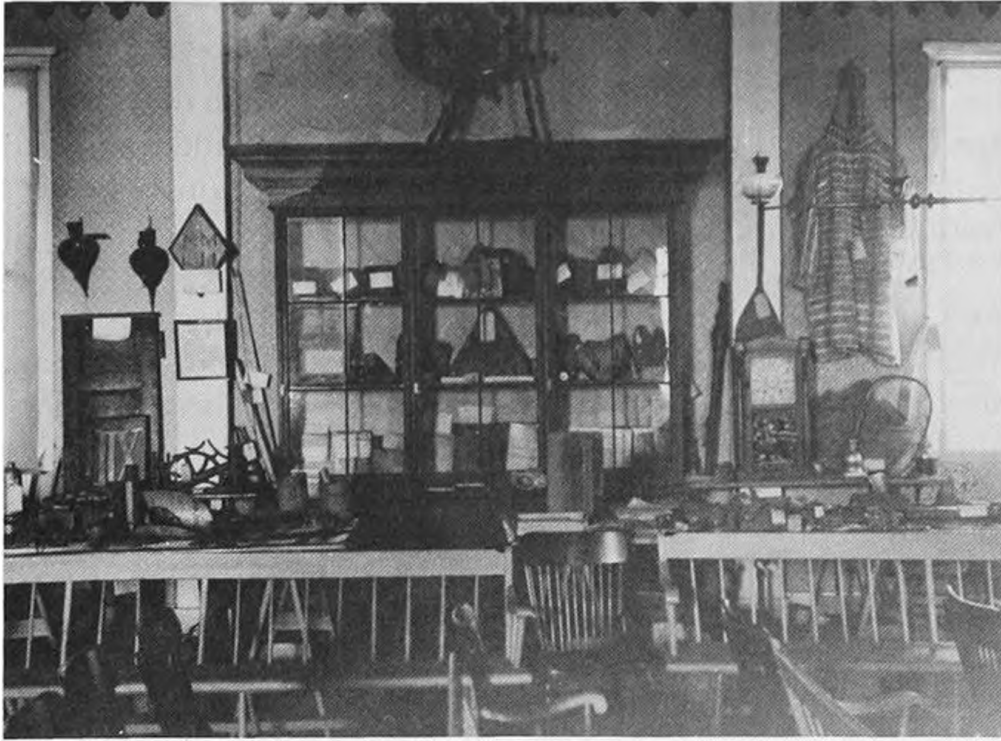
Despite the success of the lecture programs, the demands of upkeep and ongoing collection burdened the Society and a great deal of time was devoted to building public support. By 1937 membership in the Society had grown to sixty-two; the newly painted building on School Street was open to the public on a regular basis; and visitors averaged seventy-five or so each summer.





The 1938 slate of officers reflected continuing involvement by prominent residents of the area. Dr. Thomas E. Ashby, pastor of the First Parish Church, served as its president after the death of Samuel Melcher in 1937. Other trustees included Dr. Charles S. F. Lincoln, Frances Woodside, Mary Gilman, Mrs. Hartley C. Baxter, Bowdoin President K. C. M. Sills, Lewis W. Stuart, and Robert D. Perry. As in the first days of the Society, this group gave attention to commemorating Brunswick's anniversary — this time its bicentennial in 1939. New exhibits were prepared and the building painted, cleaned, and decorated. Over 350 people visited the Society during the three-day event in July. As in 1889, the celebration was documented in a publication. *Brunswick, Maine* was written by Dr. Ashby and Isabel Congdon.

The 1940s were years of slow growth for the Society, with the war drawing the community's attention to other concerns and affairs. Lectures, slide shows, and summer exhibits continued, but with very low participation. By the end of the decade the Society began cosponsoring the Varney lectures



*Pejepscot Historical Society photos.*

with Bowdoin College and drew much larger crowds. Overall it was a tentative time, however, and when the Society looked to the town for support in the early 1950s one citizen responded, "The Pejepscot Historical Society is dead, bury it!"<sup>6</sup>

The late 1950s brought "a flight from [this] destiny,"<sup>7</sup> however, in great part due to the efforts of its new president, Andrew Pennell, and his wife, the sister of Professor Robert Peter Tristram Coffin. With the building in disrepair and the membership declining, it took "staunch New England determination" to bring order back into the Society. The effort proved successful, however, and by 1957 when the building was reopened, membership stood at seventy-five people. Along with the reinvigorated Varney lecture program, activities were expanded to include student essay contests and school tours. Town support, through the Nathaniel Davis Fund, helped for many years with building repairs.

This period cannot be discussed without mentioning the involvement of two individuals who came to Brunswick in 1953 and provided professional guidance to the Society. Mr.

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and Mrs. Bela Norton had been actively involved in the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg and devoted time and energy to completely restoring the Society's building, cleaning nearly every artifact, and rearranging the exhibit spaces.

In 1958 the Society, having operated without a set of by-laws since 1909, put its affairs in order. Early records were found, bylaws revised, committees established, and a regular meeting schedule set. A collections policy was adopted for the library and manuscript collection; cataloguing of artifacts was resumed; a program of marking historic sites was initiated with the Boy Scouts; and measures were taken to professionally upgrade all aspects of the Society's operations. These efforts continued through the 1960s under the guidance of three strong presidents: Rev. Sheldon Christian, John L. Baxter, and Mrs. Ray Hanson. By 1967 the Society had 283 members, had published an early collection of papers in *Our Town*, taken on the services of a professional archivist, initiated active collecting, and maintained museum hours on a regular basis each summer. School programs became a major focus, along with the Varney lectures, historic house tours, and a number of special exhibits, including those of Joshua L. Chamberlain, the Dennison Manufacturing Company, and early quilts.

The ongoing concern with the inadequacies of the building plagued the Society. As early as 1955 members began a search for a new home, but lack of funds prohibited relocation. The long-awaited move to a larger, heated, and protected space came in 1974. Aided by a matching grant from the Maine Historic Preservation Commission, the Society purchased the McManus-Richardson House (1857) at 11 Lincoln Street in Brunswick. By 1977 the mortgage had been paid off due to the success of "Operation Independence," the Society's first major fund drive since 1892.

A gift of \$5,000 from Mrs. Samuel Furbish was also made in the early 1970s in memory of her husband, son of John Furbish. These funds were later donated to the Brunswick Library Association for the purposes of retaining a room in the Curtis Memorial Library for the Society's archives collection.

By the end of the decade this collection was finally properly stored and protected in its new home.

Under the direction of Presidents Robert Voltz and Mrs. F. Webster Browne in the early 1970s, the Society reprinted the 1878 Wheeler history and supported publication of Professor William D. Shipman's *The Early Architecture of Bowdoin College and Brunswick, Maine*. State and federal funding also allowed the Society to recatalogue the entire collection utilizing professional museum registration methods. By 1973 some 1,532 artifacts had been "registered."

### Modern Era

For all museums and historical societies, the 1970s were years of increased awareness, a time when professional standards were established for museum operations. It was a time of increased state and federal funding, due in great part to the country's bicentennial. For Pejepscot, by then an established museum in a year-round facility, these were years of tremendous growth. CETA funds allowed for a larger staff. An extensive educational series was developed for use in the schools, and the Society's collections nearly doubled. Visitation levels neared 3,000 per year, and up to seven Varney lectures were offered each summer in the School Street building, newly named as the Varney Lecture Hall. The guiding force during these years was Mrs. Paul R. "Bette" Copeland, who not only served on the board but volunteered to direct the Society's daily operations. Presidents Samuel A. Ladd, Jr., Irving W. Stetson, and Clement S. Wilson presided.

Two new projects came under the wings of the Society during this time: the Pejepscot Area Architectural Survey and the Joshua L. Chamberlain Corps. The Survey, having been initiated independently some years earlier, involved the documentation of all buildings in Brunswick, Topsham, and Harpswell more than fifty years old. This massive task continues today with funding from the Maine Historic Preservation Commission. The Joshua L. Chamberlain Corps was founded in 1979 to honor the General's 150th birthday. The Corps was involved in sponsoring programs relating to

Chamberlain's Civil War achievements and his career as president of Bowdoin College and governor of Maine. Chamberlain's place in Brunswick history was soon to become an even greater concern of the Society.

As in the past, the Society's lack of finances and large expenditures on building repair and maintenance clouded this otherwise flourishing period. In 1979 another fund drive, "Project Preservation," was initiated to match a state grant for major work on the Lincoln Street building. By 1981 the structure had received a new roof, and storage, windows, electrical wiring, and heating had been improved. Yet the job was far from done.

An unexpected occurrence turned attention away from Lincoln Street in March 1982 when Dr. Alice Skolfield Whittier offered her home and its contents to the Society. The south half of an 1858 double-brick building on Brunswick's Park Row, this house had been occupied by three generations of the ship-building and seafaring Skolfield family, as well as Bowdoin's Dr. Frank Whittier, and was a virtually intact Victorian time capsule. As expressed by Society president F. Burton Whitman, Jr. this was "the biggest and best gift ever made to our Society."<sup>8</sup> To assist with its maintenance and restoration Dr. Whittier also made provisions for an endowment of \$10,000 per year. The owners of the adjoining building, once a Skolfield home as well, recognized the value that their house would have for the Society and graciously sold it to the Society. The Lincoln Street building was sold to facilitate this purchase and the offices and collections moved to their new home. Thus, only nine years after relocating from the Varney Lecture Hall, the Society was on the move again.

Another unexpected event occurred the same year, creating one more challenge for Pejepscot. Mr. Emery Booker, the owner of Joshua L. Chamberlain's former home on Main Street, passed away, and the building was placed on the open market. In response to the urging of local citizens, the Society placed a bid on the house and soon became the owner of what is now its Joshua L. Chamberlain Museum. Having been used for

BRUNSWICK, ME., MARCH 1, 1892.

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At a public meeting, February 16th, it was voted that an effort should be made to raise the sum of fifteen hundred dollars to purchase for the Pejepscot Historical Society, and put in proper repair, the property known as the "Congregational vestry," on School Street. The building itself is of historic interest, and unusually well fitted by location and size for the Society's collections of historic and curious articles. These collections are already of much value, and considerable additions to them may be expected when a safe and eligible home is provided for them.

In behalf of the Society, and in accordance with the vote of the public meeting, we present the accompanying appeal, endorsed by fifty of our responsible citizens, and ask your help.

Please state on this paper what you will give, and when you will pay your subscription, and return to the committee in the accompanying envelope, or enclose your contribution therewith. In the interest of loyal citizenship and public spirit it is hoped that something will be received from everyone to whom this circular is sent.

HENRY L. CHAPMAN, }  
BARRETT POTTER, } COMMITTEE.  
JOHN FURBISH, }

student apartments since 1939 with minimal maintenance and repair, the building required total renovation. The Society thus confronted the restoration and maintenance costs of the three new buildings, and to meet this challenge it initiated the Captain Skolfield-General Chamberlain Fund Drive. With two substantial grants from the Maine Historic Preservation Commission, the drive raised nearly \$600,000. As with most old houses, however, the expenses incurred far surpassed the funds raised, leaving the buildings far from completion and the Society with debts from which it has not yet fully recovered.

The excitement of the period, as in times past, overcame these financial constraints as hundreds came forward to share their time, energy, and enthusiasm. The Chamberlain House provided an exciting opportunity for the Society to become involved in its first authentic restoration effort as rooms, highlighted by Chamberlain's library, were brought back to their original condition. Four apartments were modernized in the ell and upper levels of the building to ensure a steady income for maintenance. The existing Chamberlain and Civil War collections, supplemented by gifts from Chamberlain's granddaughter and others, provided interpretive exhibits. After months of continuous work, the Joshua L. Chamberlain Museum was opened to the public in July 1984.

On Park Row, a curator was hired to begin cataloguing the contents of the Skolfield-Whittier House, and extensive exterior repairs were done on the building. Scholars from all over the world visited this most unusual home, and excitement mounted as the potential for research, publication, and interpretation became clear. Since Dr. Alice Whittier was still alive, immediate attention was given to documenting the family's lives and belongings — a process continuing to this day. Next door, adjustments and improvements were made as the building was prepared to house the Society's headquarters and the local history collection formerly at Lincoln Street. Volunteers aided in these efforts while at the same time assuring the continuance of the Society's school programs, Varney lectures, flea markets, and Antiques Forums.

Amidst the flurry of activity related to the new buildings came the familiar realization of mounting financial burdens. The physical plant had tripled in size and the collection now numbered over 20,000 artifacts. In addition, the Varney Lecture Hall required constant maintenance and repair, some of which was accomplished with Federal Revenue Sharing Funds in 1984. Furthermore, it became clear that the primarily volunteer management of the Society was insufficient. A 1983 survey funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities stressed that an executive director was needed to ensure professional guidance in the years ahead. The ways and means of meeting this need were addressed by all three presidents during this time: Paul R. Copeland, Jr., Joseph Jefferson, and John F. Haskins. A formal search committee was formed in the summer of 1985. By January 1986 Katharine B. Hudson had been hired to fill the position.

The ability to financially support this position was, as one might expect, limited. The situation brightened, however, when the bequest of Laurence W. Pennell, former director and supporter of the Society, was announced. Once again the loyalty and devotion of those who recognized the value of the Society's efforts ensured its continued growth and survival.

The year 1986 was positive, characterized by reorganization and a reevaluation of the Society's facilities, collections, operations, and priorities. The need for financial stability took precedence, owing to the debt lingering from acquisition and restoration of the new buildings. To alleviate the situation, the Society sold the Varney Lecture Hall, which had been used only seasonally for lectures and programs since 1974. Local citizens came forth once again with donations, and by 1987 the debt had been reduced significantly. The Society initiated long-range planning efforts, acquired state funding to hire a part-time curator, and resumed restoration on the Skolfield-Whittier House.

Today, as the Society nears its centennial in 1988, the mood is one of pride and loyalty, much like that of the original founders. A review of the Society's first 100 years suggests that it



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is precisely the loyalty, devotion, and appreciation for the rich historical traditions of the area which have enabled the Society to endure, despite struggling times, periods of inactivity, and the financial burdens of its buildings and operating needs. The role of the Society has remained basically unchanged; it continues to “research, collect and, from time to time publish matters of local history,” and maintains not one but three “antiquarian museums” for the preservation and exhibition of “relics of old times.” The future promises further challenges for Pejepscot, but it is with a continuing sense of confidence and commitment that the Society enters its 100th year.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Henry W. Wheeler, *The History of Brunswick, Topsham and Harpswell, Maine* (1878), p. v.

<sup>2</sup>Charles Carroll Everett, *Celebration of the 150th Anniversary of the Incorporation of the Town of Brunswick* (1889), p. 18.

<sup>3</sup>Louise R. Helmreich, *Our Town* (1967), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup>John Furbish, “Notes Read by John Furbish at the Dedication of the Historical Society Building, June 2, 1894,” in *Our Town*, p. 16.

<sup>5</sup>Professor Henry L. Chapman, Minutes of the Society, 1908.

<sup>6</sup>Edith Labbie, “Couldn’t Ignore Past, Mrs. Arthur [sic] Pennell Tells County Historical Society,” *Lewiston Evening Journal* (Maine), October 28, 1959.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, Mrs. Andrew Pennell.

<sup>8</sup>F. Burton Whitman, Jr., Minutes of the Society, 1981.

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