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HISTORY

OF

"NORTHAMPTON"

MASSACHUSETTS

FROM ITS SETTLEMENT IN 1654

BY

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VOL. II

Of Patriotism is Liberty Born

NORTHAMPTON:
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First Postmaster. Col. John Breck, son of Robert Breck, was the first postmaster in Northampton. His first accounts were rendered to the department, March 1st, 1793, when he had undoubtedly been in office about six months. He was at that time in business with his father, under the firm name of Robert Breck & Son. They dealt in "English and Hardware Goods," and "crockery and Glass ware." The store was at the corner of Main and King Streets, near the school-house. The first list of letters was published in the Gazette of Oct. 3^d, 1792. In it were letters for persons living in Chesterfield, Deerfield, Belchertown, Granby, Southampton, Glasgow and Amherst.

Other Postmasters. Col. Breck remained in the office six years, when he resigned and Levi Lyman was appointed, January 1st, 1798. He kept the office at the Registry of Deeds office, west of the Court-House, or opposite the meeting-house. In about two years Mr. Lyman resigned, and Simeon Butler was appointed, April 1st, 1800. He removed the office to his book-store on Shop Row, where are now located S. E. Bridgman & Co.

No Method of Extinguishing Fires in Practice. No public provision for the extinguishment of fires was made in this town till the latter part of the eighteenth century. From the unsafe method of building then existing, with the huge chimney and enormous fireplaces, the exposure to conflagration must have been very great. Yet notwithstanding the fact that pumps and buckets were the only appliances for quenching them, the surviving record of houses destroyed by fire in this town is not large. The first step towards the purchase of a fire-engine was taken in 1792, when the sum of £30 was voted for that purpose at the May meeting. It was not available, however, till an equal amount had been raised by subscription. The incident that undoubtedly called attention to the need of some such provision for safety, was the burning of the malt-house of Benjamin Prescott, which occurred on the 6th of March, involving a loss of \$1000. Undoubtedly the money was promptly furnished, and the engine purchased. At any

rate an occasion occurred for its use in the following October, when a very disastrous fire took place in the center of the town, by which four buildings were destroyed. It broke out about midnight on the 12th of October, in a new block of four stores, situated a short distance east of the present Mansion House. A strong easterly wind prevailed, which drove the flames upon the house of Asahel Pomeroy, then the principal inn in town. A building adjoining, occupied by Nathaniel Blake & Co., soon caught, which was destroyed, together with the dwelling-house of Col. William Lyman. Rain had fallen during the evening and continued to fall while the fire was burning, which aided greatly in extinguishing the flames. In the newspaper account of the fire,¹ no mention is made of the engine. Had it then arrived in town, no doubt some allusion would have been made to its use. This fire, however, led to the procurement of further means of protection. At the November meeting the selectmen were ordered to procure a "suitable number of fire hooks and ladders as they shall judge necessary for the public buildings in case they should be on fire." The engine² must have been obtained during that year, for at the same meeting the first board of fire-wardens was appointed. It consisted of Samuel Henshaw, Dr. Hunt, Col. Lyman, Dr. Shephard, and Capt. Lane. During the month of March, the town voted to buy leather pipes for the engine, and in April the fire-wards were instructed "to procure an Hose for the engine at the expense of the town."

The Engine.

Fire-engines constructed at that day were simply tubs or boxes on wheels, with pumps worked by brakes, forcing the water upon the fire. They were supplied by buckets from wells or cisterns, the people forming lines and passing the pails from one to another. Where the conditions were favorable, water was pumped from wells directly into the engine reservoir. Suction engines did not come into use in this country till 1822, and none found their way into this town till many years later.

¹ Hampshire Gazette, Oct. 17, 1792.

² Dr. Hunt has a memorandum in his account-book in 1792, as follows: — "Our fire engine cost 213½ dollars in Philadelphia."

A Water Supply.

When the engine was purchased there was no adequate supply of water for its use in the more thickly settled portions of the town. The only dependence was upon private wells or cisterns, and in such a fire as that just narrated they could have been of little service. An attempt was made to remedy this deficiency, and in the following year, Thomas Star, who lived on Elm Street, near the present Round Hill road, sold the springs in his pasture adjoining that of Samuel Henshaw, to Asahel Pomeroy, William Lyman, Timothy Mather, Benjamin Prescott, and Ebenezer Hunt, who formed the first aqueduct company in town. An aqueduct, consisting of logs bored through the center, the ends accurately fitted into each other, was carried across the rear of the Elm Street lots to a reservoir, built near the front line of the lot on which Mr. Alexander McCallum now lives, and thence across other lots on the same side of the street to the house or tavern of Asahel Pomeroy on meeting-house hill. Near this house a reservoir was built in the highway, which was presumably on or near the site of the one now existing there in front of the First Church. This aqueduct supplied water to the above-named parties at their residences, and was in use when the present system of waterworks succeeded the old method in 1871. Another large reservoir was afterwards built at the junction of Elm and Prospect Streets, in the highway near where the fountain now is. These reservoirs were the only reliance of the town for the suppression of fires for many years. The water was supplied at the houses by smaller logs to which a "pent stock" was attached from which the water was constantly flowing.

Another Aqueduct Company.

A few years afterwards a second aqueduct company was formed, and water was brought from springs on the easterly or northerly side of Round Hill. It passed down King and into Pleasant Street. In 1804, the aqueduct was in need of repairs, and the company voted that each member should pay for them in proportion to the number of "Pen Stocks" he had in use. Signed to this agreement were the following names:—Solomon Williams, two pen stocks; C. L. Seeger,

one ; Hezekiah Hutchens, one ; Noadiah Pease, two ; Lewis Strong, one ; S. Hinckley, two ; Levi Lyman, two ; and Henry Frink, two.

Division of the
County.

One of the permanent grievances of the time seems to have been the size of Hampshire County. Various attempts for its division have already been noted. The question was once more agitated in 1792, by certain persons from the northern part of the county. At the November meeting a committee was appointed "to show cause why the county should not be divided agreeably to the prayer of David Smead and others."¹ This committee made an elaborate report against the petition, which was entered at length upon the town records and published in the newspapers. It was as follows :—

"1. Because of the expence & inconvenience arising from the local situation of the Petitioners, & their distance from the places of holding the Courts, we presume, has always been & still is within their power to remedy by giving their votes to establish the Courts in a central situation.

"2. Because we are clearly of the opinion that if the ancient number of Courts were again restored to the County, & made central, all their complaints of unreasonable delays in obtaining Justice would be obviated, unless at the Supreme Judicial Court : And as the whole time of the Justices of that Court is occupied in performing their present circuits, we cannot conceive that they would derive a remedy by a division without an additional number of Justices made to that Court, who shall ride in different circuits, and in that case we believe they may be as well accommodated without as with a division of the County.

"3. Because the present form of the County is such that in case of a division, the Inhabitants of many Towns will not be at all benefitted or relieved, but many of them be less accommodated than with a central situation.

"4. Because we believe that the total amount of expenses within the two Counties will be much greater than in the present situation of the County, besides having a tendency to multiply law suits, and be-

¹ A convention of delegates from a number of towns in the northern part of the county, held in December, 1791, voted "to petition the Legislature to divide the County of Hampshire by a line running east and west, across the same, where to your Honors may seem best." This petition was signed by David Smead in behalf of the convention, and was dated "Greenfield, Dec. 29, 1791." The only reason assigned for such a division was the "very great increase of population, settlement, and improvement in the northern part" of the county. It was presented at the next session of the Legislature, and an order of notice served on the several towns, under date of June 25, 1792, returnable at the session of the following year. It was in accordance with that document that the above action was taken by the town.