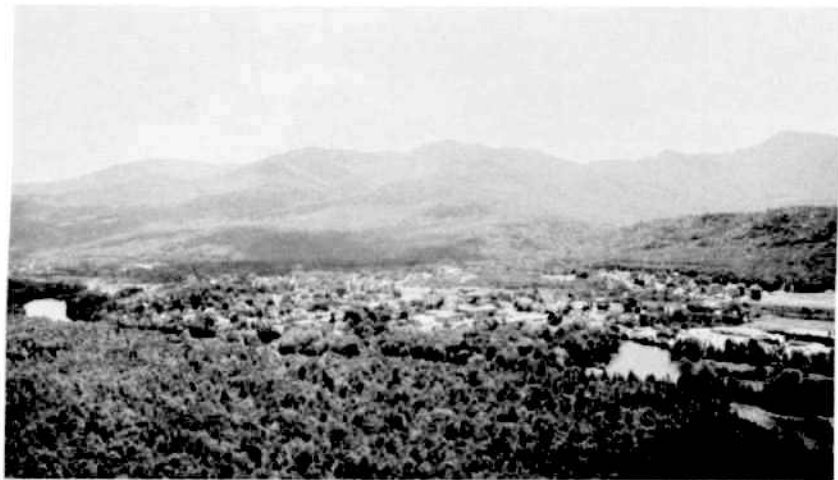


A History of Gorham



Gorham viewed from Mt. Hayes, north of the Androscoggin River.
(Photo by Roland Bergeron).



Hauling out logs destined for the Libby Mill in Gorham.



BY GREG PRENTISS

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Change in the name of progress has long been the tradition in the Town of Gorham. Situated as the Northern Gateway to the White Mountains, the narrow land area between the Carter-Moriah Range—Pine Mountain Ridge to the south and the Androscoggin River to the north—has effectively limited the growth of the town to its east-west axis. But even there, the old communities of Shelburne and Randolph have been limiting factors.

Originally founded as Shelburne Addition in 1802 to provide growing room for Shelburne's farmers, Gorham was incorporated in 1836, a village of small and generally poor farms. Between chartering and incorporation, many noteworthy events of significance to the town's socioeconomic well-being occurred.

By 1812, a public house for travelers was being operated in the first frame house built in town, on the site of the present Glenn Eastman home.

The year 1816 was remembered as one without a summer; frost and snowfall occurred every month of the year. No crops were raised because every new planting was almost immediately killed. Starvation was widespread and caused some families to leave town. It was not uncommon for the man of a family to travel miles down-country, returning with a bushel of corn packed on his back.

Residents felt sufficiently settled by 1823 to provide funds to build the first schoolhouse and hire a teacher. The one-room log building was situated on the south bank of the Androscoggin, directly in front of our present-day post office.

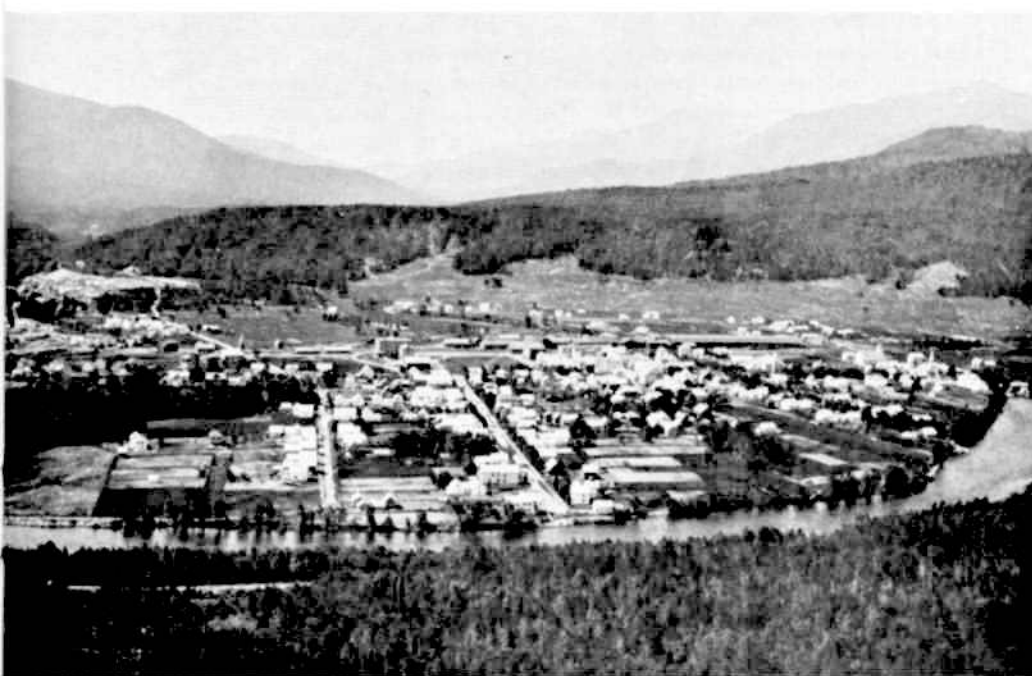
Mail service was first provided to the town in 1832 on a contract basis. E.H. Scribner owned the contract for delivery between Lancaster and Bethel, with a stop in Gorham en route. But this arrangement lasted only for a year when Hezekiah Ordway, proprietor of the public house, was appointed postmaster.

The coming of the railroad in 1851 brought an end to the pastoral life, and soon Gorham was a railroad and tourist town of not inconsiderable fame. The Atlantic and St. Lawrence Railroad (later the Grand Trunk and still later the Canadian National) saw the value of Gorham's location midway between Montre-

al and Portland, and built every conceivable railroad support facility in the yard. This construction provided many new jobs, not a few of which were taken by men who had helped build the line and chose to stay in the area. Indeed, some of the families of these workers remain in town to this day and contribute to Gorham's ethnic multiplicity.

The railroad opened the area to tourism as well, for the very first passenger train meant that now passengers did not have to detrain in the Conways, endure a coach ride through Crawford Notch, and then proceed to Gorham. The town's assets—convenience to Mount Washington and its own peaceful atmosphere—foretold an influx of visitors, and steps were taken to accommodate them.

Almost immediately new hotels sprang up in the town and surrounding area. The White Mountain Station House (later to become the Alpine and still later the Mount Madison) was the earliest of the hotels and was situated directly across from the original railroad station, exactly where the tennis courts are now on the Common. In 1977, when the ballfield adjacent to the courts was being renovated, relics of the old hotel were picked up by Guy Gosselin, president of the Gorham Historical Society, and identified as pipe-stems of the clay, churchwarden type (these may have been provided to clients in need of a smoke), as well as institutional-style crockery.



Hemmed in on two sides by the mountains, Gorham stretches out along the narrow Androscoggin Valley.

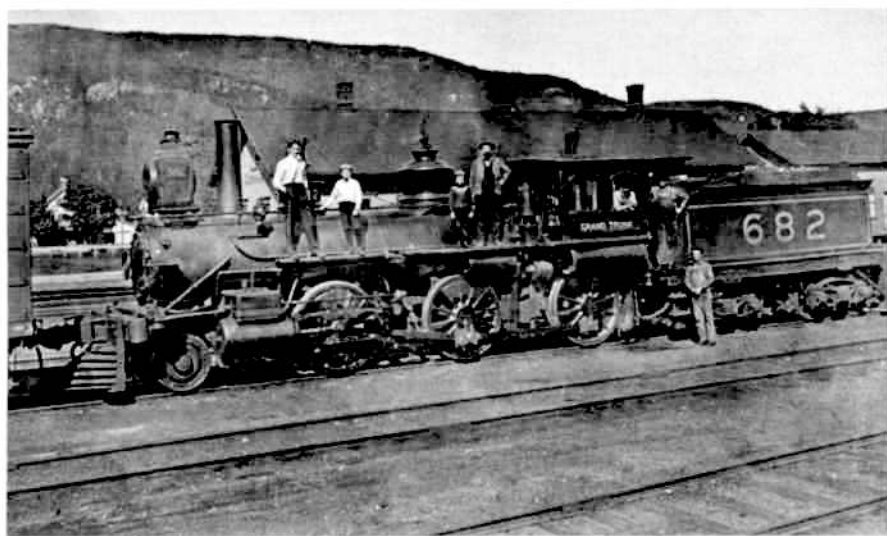
since 1861 (and still carried on by his heirs), the company owned a large percentage of the land in town and practically all the acreage east of Route 16. In this section were a sawmill, company housing, the mill pond, railroad sidings, one of the company stores, and assorted outbuildings. The store still stands, occupied now by the Knights of Columbus, but once it affected the entire town. Credit was extended to everyone and it was readily accepted. Shoppers could make Libby's their one-stop shopping center.

During the years after incorporation in 1883, the company cleared hundreds of acres for farming and purchased the Glen House and Mount Washington Carriage Road with its attendant land and buildings including the Half-Way House, the summit barns, and stage office. By 1903 it also owned 18,000 acres extending for twelve miles along the Glen Road, now Route 16.

On its farms the company annually produced hundreds of tons of hay, thousands of bushels of oats, potatoes, and other vegetables for use in feeding men and animals at its logging camps and hotel, for selling in its stores, and in connection with its various other enterprises. Additionally, the company's mills cut millions of feet of lumber of all kinds and turned out dowels and bobbins for the textile trade, some of them undoubtedly for the world-famous Amoskeag Mills in Manchester, but primarily to be sold in Massachusetts. Today this company is a landholding operation which carries on no logging business of its own but does contract with independents to cut on their land.

Gorham has also had its share of other industry. In 1842 Caleb Peabody began operating a tannery which he had moved from Gilead and situated on Moose Brook in the Upper Village. Naturally, all operations were done by hand. Hides, after being soaked in lime water to loosen the hair, were scraped to remove fat and bristles and then layered in vats with finely-crushed hemlock bark between them. Covered with water and sealed, the vats of hides were then cured for at least six months.

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Engine 682 at the Gorham Station before the turn of the century.

Passengers destined for one of the other hotels in the area were treated to the sight of coaches and teams wheeling at speed into the depot yard, drawing to a halt in a precisely-timed maneuver calculated to create a thrilling effect. Sometimes as many as eight or ten of the Abbott-Downing Concord Coaches drawn by select six-horse teams would be on hand, along with other forms of conveyance, for the arrival of the train, a high point in the town's day throughout the tourist seasons of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

But few towns could exist solely on the tourist trade, and farms in Gorham were too few, "bony", and small to make up the difference between summer af-

fluence and winter poverty. Into the breach came the logging industry. Except for the narrow valley, suitable only for a meagre existence on marginal farms, the town was hilly and densely wooded. The first logging was necessarily done by the original settlers clearing space for homes and farms, but much of the timber cut was merely burned to get it out of the way.

The first sawmill was built in 1836 by Andrew and Jonathan Lary on Moose Brook, but not until the E.E. Libby Company was founded in 1883 did Gorham become heavily involved in the logging industry. Founded by Elihu Libby, who bought out the Gorham Lumber Company with which he had been associated

Leather was a leading product with a ready market, and its processing created demand for barrels and hemlock bark. This latter demand provided an opportunity for many youngsters to earn spending money if they were industrious enough to get out and collect it. Caleb Peabody joined his brother John, who originally had persuaded him to locate in town, in building the town's second sawmill just above the tannery. This was the mill bought into by Elihu Libby and was the beginning of his involvement with logging in Gorham.

Another interesting chapter in Gorham history has to do with the Mascot Mining Company, founded in 1881. This company owned land on the east side of the Androscoggin about half a mile north of town, surrounding Mascot Pond. This property and two additional abutting parcels had been prospected and found to be well-endowed with high-quality lead ore containing a good percentage of silver. As work began the vein was found to be more extensive though harder to reach than was originally thought, but tunnelling was pushed around the clock until completion. It was estimated that 200 tons of ore would

be shipped per month commencing in October 1881, reaching a peak of 100 tons a day by 1882. Approximately two and a half tons of ore were needed to make a ton of lead worth \$100, with an additional return of about \$50 for the silver the ore contained. This smelting operation was carried on in East Boston, Massachusetts.

The mine operation was reached by a fine carriage road transiting the Androscoggin via suspension bridge. In the immediate mine area, a small community of ore houses was built to receive the workings from the tunnel, which was reached by stairs built onto the side of the mountain and which stretched some 300 feet. Ore was delivered from the shaft in buckets down a sluiceway, and the buckets were retrieved up a twin, adjoining sluiceway. In time a hotel, quarters for the workers, a superintendent's house, barns, stables, and other structures were erected.

Apparently the mine never reached its full potential for output, but it was still operable as late as 1929, described by the New Hampshire State Geologist as "... consisting of one tunnel 6 feet x 5 feet x 100 feet long ... connecting

with the surface above by a shaft of the same diameter; ... and ... a long deep cut, 4 feet wide, 100 feet long and 200 feet deep at its lowest point." The area and access road were in bad condition, and since the quantity of ore remaining was questionable the mine never produced again. But in its time it was a major industry employing a fair number of men and providing good money for the town.

Today the railroad facilities are gone, logging is conducted mechanically by a few workers, the mine is inaccessible, passengers detrain once a year during the foliage season, but the town shows the same capacity for change that has characterized it over the past 175 years. Although the old familiar names are still represented—Peabody, Burbank, Libby, Evans—an influx of new citizens has broadened the character of the town. New construction is evident in all sectors, residential and commercial. With judicious reliance on a blend of industry, tourism, and logging, the future appears bright for the Town of Gorham, a vital factor in a resurgent White Mountains region. ■