

PROFILE OF LONDONDERRY

Prehistoric Londonderry, 12,000 BC To 1700 A.D.

As the climate warmed about 13,000 years ago, the last ice age ended and the topography of Vermont was formed. Great lakes and seas were developed to the west and east of the flattened mountains we now call the Piedmont Area of Vermont. With great water masses on each side of the mountains, sediments led to fertile valleys in the lowlands and rocky terrain in the highlands.

About 12,000 years ago, as the tundra-like conditions became rich farmlands and virgin timberlands, Eastern Abenaki Indians (Paleo-Indian), akin to Algonquins and Mohicans, migrated westward from Maine. Villages were ultimately established in these valleys as the tribes became the Western Abenakis. The waterways of the Connecticut River valley to the east, and the Champlain valley to the west provided easy water transportation as well as fertile lowlands to grow maize and other crops.

The tributaries, such as the West, Black and White Rivers, afforded access to the Piedmont for the hunting of abundant deer, moose, otter, beaver and bear, as well as fish in the rivers. Large birch was abundant in the forests, as well as oak, maple and evergreens from which the Indians built their boats and dugout canoes, and made household vessels and utensils. Clay of the mountain valley was also abundant for making pottery.

Archeological sites are common in the western and eastern valleys but have not been found in the Piedmont perhaps because the climate was too inhospitable to grow crops. The mountain valley of Londonderry served as fertile hunting grounds for Abenaki braves. It is also likely that the mountain valley served as a route across the mountains via the West and Black rivers to Otter Creek en route to the Abenaki villages of the northern Champlain valley. Similarly, bands of Iroquois, Mohicans or Mohawks may have passed through in their intermittent wars with the Abenakis, as did Colonial militia during the French and Indian Wars, perhaps following cairns left by the Abenakis. Colonel James Rogers (Rogers Rangers) was among these.

With the arrival of the Europeans in 1606 (Champlain) and later the Puritans, plagues of diphtheria, typhoid, small pox and measles had a devastating effect on the Abenaki population that was compounded by Chief Gray Lock's wars to the south. As the settlers confiscated the farmlands, the few remaining Abenakis assumed western ways and their culture nearly disappeared.

Indian relics have been found in the Mountain Valley to confirm the presence of Abenakis, at least as travelers. A prehistoric projectile point, made of black chert from Mt. Independence, 3,000 – 4,000 years old, was identified in 1988. It was found during a gardening excavation high above the valley floor. Five others, neither dated nor documented as to origin, were also reportedly found near Under Mountain Road on the west side of Glebe Mountain and are now in the Londonderry Historical Society Museum. Three areas in the Town of Londonderry have been archaeologically studied: the excavations for the new bridge across the Millpond, the Ball Mountain Dam Project, and most recently at the new bridge across Cook Brook. Nothing of archaeological significance was identified at these sites.

Colonial and Early Londonderry, 1770 – 1870

Colonel James Rogers of Londonderry, New Hampshire, received a royal grant and led the first settlers into an area called Kent between 1770 and 1772. Among these settlers were Deacon Aiken and Captain Samuel Thompson. By 1775, they held their first Town Meeting at Great Pond (Lowell Lake) where they had cleared land and established small farms. Rogers was a Tory and left town in 1777 in order to fight for the

King. Kent was subsequently renamed Londonderry in 1780 by act of the new Vermont Legislature. At that time it included most of what is now the towns of Windham and Londonderry.

In 1782, the General Assembly of Vermont granted to Captain Edward Aiken and several others a tract of 930 acres adjoining the west boundary of the Town, to become part of the Town. During the 1790's it was agreed between the settlers on the two sides of Glebe Mountain to divide Londonderry into two towns with the land on the east side of the mountain becoming the separate town of Windham. Finally in 1804, the present dividing line between the two towns was established and each town was allowed to send its own representatives to the State legislature.

Early economic activities focused primarily on self-sufficient agriculture. Livestock were raised for family use; some grain and forest products were sold. Potash became the first significant cash crop. Waterpower and plentiful lumber encouraged the early establishment of mills.

The first saw mill and gristmill were built in 1774. Around 1800, a small shop for iron castings and forgings was built. The population increased sharply from 1810 to 1830, as a farming and industrial base was built. A wool carding shop opened in 1812, a post office was established in 1823, tannery, harness, machine and tool shops in 1824 and a marble works in 1867.

Religious And Cultural Life of Early Londonderry

Much of the cultural, educational and social life of the community was centered in the churches. Deacon Aiken, a Presbyterian, founded a house of public worship in 1777. The first Congregational Church was founded in 1809, and held services in a building off Middletown Road. A Methodist Church built in 1840 was bought in 1868, and became the Second Congregational Church, organized in 1868 after fire destroyed the earlier building. The Methodist Church, subsequently located next to the old Town Hall, did not survive and that building was destroyed. The Baptist Church, founded in Peru, moved in a split to South Londonderry in 1811, where the present church was built in 1834. Saint Joseph's Catholic Church maintains a chapel off Route 100 in the north village.

An active theater group also existed during these later years of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century and used the stage and auditorium in the old Town Hall.

Following the Civil War, in which 66 young men enlisted, Londonderry went into decline. Mills were lost to floods and fires; farms were abandoned as the population declined.

The West River Railroad was chartered in 1867 and renamed "The Brattleboro and Whitehall Railroad Company" in 1876. In 1880 the first trains ran over the narrow gauge tracks from Brattleboro to Winhall Station and on to South Londonderry. The Railroad was seen as the salvation for the area's economic woes in the last half of the nineteenth century. As a result, the Lowell Lake Resort and Peabody house were opened in 1880. The Highland House began accepting guests about the same time. The line, troubled with failures and floods, was never extended to Whitehall, NY, as originally proposed. The 1927 flood destroyed many miles of track and several bridges. These were rebuilt and service resumed but with fewer passengers and less freight as the depression came to Vermont. In 1933, James G. Ashley leased the railroad and put a gas powered engine and passenger car in service. He moved his family to South Londonderry and worked very hard to maintain rail service. By 1936 it was evident that the railroad could not be viable and operations ceased. The rails and bridges were sold for scrap and the B&W RR Co. became only a memory.

South Londonderry's Champion Fire Company acquired a hand pumper in 1881

and was incorporated in 1903. The Phoenix Fire Company, for the north village, was organized also in the early 1900's. They bought their first pumper in 1906 from the Town of Rutland.

George T. Shanks, better known as "Sifter John," established a weekly newspaper "The Londonderry Sifter" in 1883 and remained the editor until 1903. The paper was still published until the middle 1920's. Shanks was a feisty Vermonter, unafraid to take on the politicians or the railroad. An inexperienced editor, he was jailed for his explosive efforts and nearly ruined financially, but he was never silenced, nor his paper suppressed.

In 1893 an electric plan was established in the south village and in 1901 the Melendy Telephone Company began service to local residents. This set the stage for twentieth century Londonderry.

Modern Londonderry, 1900 to Present

Small businesses and industries combined with recreation, tourism and summer residents have sustained the Londonderry economy in this period while agriculture has been in decline. A 1912 publication lists Londonderry farm products as potatoes, hay, apples, maple sugar, syrup, stock and dairy products. South Londonderry's West River Creamery shipped 5,000 to 6,000 pounds of butter per week.

The flood of 1927 destroyed much of the industrial base. Although Judge A.E. Cudworth described Londonderry in 1936 as primarily an agricultural town, the economy had already begun to rely on tourism. As early as 1912, the West River Valley Association urged its dwellers to purchase and restore the "cheap" abandoned farms.

The region's first ski area, Bromley, was built in 1936, followed by Magic Mountain (1960) and Stratton (1961). By 1945, there were numerous sawmills, woodworking mills, a plastic novelty factory, inns, restaurants, arts and crafts shops and farms producing dairy and maple products. This commercial activity contributed to surpluses in the town coffers in the 1960's and 1970's, the first in many years. The significant population growth in the decade of 1970-1980 has been partly explained by jobs becoming available from the new economic activity in the area.

Between 1964 and 1988, the Mountain Market Place was built. This 50,000 square feet shopping center provides an opportunity for residents to meet most of their shopping needs in town. It is currently occupied by a supermarket, hardware store, bank, post office, pharmacy, assorted shops, restaurants and offices.

Smith's Mill started in South Londonderry in 1920 and moved to its current site in 1946. This light manufacturing facility of wood based products closed in 2002 and reopened in 2004 under new ownership. It remains the town's only light manufacturing facility. Horace Haywood's mill in Londonderry, where machine tools for lathes were made until approximately 1910, was converted to the Mill Tavern in 1966 by the present owner. The owner operates a small museum there along with his restaurant business.

Dairy farming has continued to decline. The town's agricultural heritage is carried on by two working dairy farms, an organic vegetable farm and several small-scale sheep and beef producers. A highly successful seasonal Farmer's Market started in 1995 provides a popular venue for local small agricultural producers and crafters. Four farms been permanently conserved through the Vermont Land Trust.

A library was founded in South Londonderry in 1902. Several original school districts were consolidated into the Flood Brook Union School #20, which opened in 1964 to serve the entire Mountain Valley. The Londonderry Historical Society was founded in 1971. The Historical Society houses its collection and holds exhibits in the Bernadine Custer Sharp House (Circa 1840) on Middletown Road. The renovated buildings additionally serve as an arts and cultural center for the community. The Historical Society was instrumental in gaining recognition of South Londonderry, as a

National Historic District in 1986; 79 buildings are included. There are probably an equal number of other buildings of historical interest that have not been inventoried.

The Mountain Valley Medical Clinic was established in 1976 and serves Londonderry and the surrounding communities. The Clinic maintains a staff of three providers, nurse practitioners, registered nurses, several technicians and support staff. The Clinic also hosts specialized services including psychotherapy and rehabilitation.

References:

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