

# SOME HIGHLIGHTS OF GORHAM'S HISTORY

## BEFORE THERE WAS A GORHAM

One of the important things about history is that it can give you a sense of perspective. It can let you know what *is* in terms of what *was*. For example, try to imagine what it was like in Gorham when it became incorporated in 1836.



### Currier and Ives Print

For one thing, the only sounds were those produced by oneself, one's neighbors, or by nature. Most of the things that are taken for granted today did not exist. There was no radio, no television, no telephone (much less a "smart" phone) and not even a telegraph. In a time when two, or even three, of the above are in use simultaneously, imagine the relative quiet of those days. There was also no electricity, so the early town grew dark when the sun set, and the only lights, if any, were from the candle lanterns carried by people still at their chores or on a visit. Most of the citizens did their cooking at a fireplace hearth well past 1836, since the first cook stove (which we are told did not work very well) did not make its appearance until 1849!

Prior to incorporation, Gorham was known as Shelburne Addition and already was a crossroad of sorts. The road from Shelburne and Gilead, which was the route followed by most of the early settlers of the town, was extended to Durand (Randolph) in 1802, and eventually to Lancaster, the county seat. The road north to Maynesboro (Berlin), made its appearance around 1820, and the Glen Road through Pinkham Notch about four years later. These were not roads in the current sense, but

rather narrow, rutted trails best suited for foot travel or horseback in the early days and they were often washed out.

There were still a handful of Native Americans about, but not many. They were the survivors of diseases that the settlers brought with them, something that the Abenaki had no immunity against.

## **1836 -1861**

No one knows for sure how many houses there were in Gorham in 1836, but there were still several log cabins. We do know that there were twenty-three taxpayers and a \$25.00 school budget. There was a gristmill, a store, and an inn (the Lary House). Interestingly, there were only three horses in town. This tells us that horses were a luxury used mostly for travel, and that oxen were the principal draft animals.

Growth was rapid during this period, however, and spiked very significantly around 1851 because of the anticipated arrival of the Atlantic & St. Lawrence Railway, the principal aim of which was to provide Montreal with an ice-free port in Portland, Maine. But there was a second aim, and this was tourism. Prior to the arrival of the railway in Gorham, the only way to visit the White Mountains was by horseback or by bone-jarring stagecoaches. Now whole families could visit with as much luggage as they wished to bring, and they could either stay at the newly constructed White Mountain Station House (later called the Alpine House) in the center of Gorham or at other first class hotels in the area. The railway also sited a large complex of repair buildings in Gorham, being halfway between Portland and Montreal.



**Photo taken from Alpine Hotel,  
circa 1880.**

Not surprisingly, the coming of the railroad sparked tourist-related construction throughout the White Mountains. A bridal path had been constructed to the summit of Mount Washington, and the first crude inns were built on the summit in 1852 and 1853. An inn at the Glen was refurbished as the

first Glen House in 1853, for example. The Gorham House, still standing today, was also built in 1853.



By 1861, 25 years after incorporation, Gorham's permanent population had increased tenfold to between 900 and a thousand people. Interestingly, 148 of these residents were of Irish descent, most of who depended upon the railroad now called the Grand Trunk Railway for their livelihood. Gorham had quickly become one of the two or three major centers of railroad activity between Portland and Montreal. The completion of the Carriage Road to the summit of Mount Washington in 1861 became yet another attraction for city people to take the train north. Gorham became known wide and far at the "Gateway to the White Mountains."

### **1862 -1887**

It is difficult to say much about the impact of the Civil War on Gorham, but it is known that 34 men signed up in Gorham in 1862. It is not known if they were all residents of the town, and it is not known how many residents may have signed up in other communities. Given the fact that this reflects to situation near the beginning of the war, it is reasonable to surmise that the final tally would have been greater, and that the impact on the town was significant.

The Congregational and Methodist churches were organized during the first 25 years of Gorham's history, while the Universalist and Catholic churches were organized during the second 25 years. The Catholic Church was a satellite of the Lancaster church before 1876, when it became a parish in its own right. At that time, about a fifth of the population was either Irish or French-

Canadian in origin.

The Alpine House, situated where the tennis courts are now, burned down in 1873 and was rebuilt two years later. During that same period, a large first-class hotel was constructed on the summit of Mount Washington, and news of that appeared in the newly founded newspaper, *The Gorham Mountaineer*.



**Alpine House with stage coaches, 1876**

The most important event of this period, however, was the great fire of 1879, which burned down a third of the town center, including most of the town's retail businesses. There was no organized fire department at the time, but the railroad carried firefighters and equipment all the way from Portland, Maine. Of course, they arrived too late to save much. It is testimony to the vitality of the town that the area was quickly rebuilt, with most of the enterprises back in business within a couple of years.

The good news of the time included the discovery of what appeared to be a large deposit of galena ore on the side of Mount Hayes and the subsequent formation of the Mascot Mine Company, and the beginnings of the pulp and paper industry in Berlin.

**Photo: Guy Shorey  
Collection. Mascot  
Mine**



Elihu Libby, who had been involved for many years in the wood processing business as a manager and partner in the companies of others, now assumed control of what eventually became known as the Libby Mills.



**Photo: Guy Shorey Collection.  
Libby Sawmill**

Two other events are worth noting. The first is that Gorham's first library was established with an inventory of a hundred volumes, and in 1886 Jintown, which was named for a school built by Jim Heath, got its name.

### **1887 - 1911**

At the beginning of this 25-year period, kerosene streetlights were considered a great improvement, but by the end of the period, electric streetlights were installed. It is indicative of the relative primitiveness of the area and the abundance of wildlife still in it, that a hunter could legally

shoot one moose, three deer and a caribou in 1889.

The Riverside and Burgess mills were built in Berlin B a good thing for the economy, since the Mascot mine closed after only a few years of operation, and much of the railroad shop activity moved away to other towns. The Berlin Street Railway, which began to be built in 1901, was the means by which Gorham workers were able to take advantage. It was also the instrument by which Berlin and Gorham became tied together socially as well as economically. For example, the inhabitants of one town, which might be dry that year, could access bars in the other community, which was conveniently wet in that same year.



**Cascade Mill Aerial 1930's**  
**Photo: Beaudoin, Berlin Coos**  
**Historical Society**

This period was characterized by much activity and many improvements. The town saw its first concrete sidewalks, the replacement of the fire department hand pumpers, the first water reservoir at Ice Gulch, and the construction of its first high school, which meant that those youngsters looking for a basic education would not have to commute to Gould Academy in Bethel or to other communities. The first motion pictures were shown at the Gorham Opera House, and after the old Alpine House was moved to become part of the Mount Madison House at the corner of Main and Alpine Streets, the Gorham Common was created for public use. As a result of expansion in the Libby Company and its mill operations, the community of Bangor, then called “Frenchtown” was formed. The Libby Mill area became a company town with a row of identical houses for employees and its own store and supply emporium.

The town also saw a double murder and the shooting of its most notable selectman, Woodbury

Gates in 1897.

The Whitefield & Jefferson RR (later to become part of the Boston Maine RR) was extended to Berlin, and the Harriman spring enterprise (eventually to become the Mount Madison Spring Company) was founded. Forest fires had been a common occurrence ever since the beginning of large-scale timber cutting, and the Pine Mountain fire tower was built in 1910.



**Boston and Maine RR in the 1950's.**  
**Photo: John Ames from "Trackside: Grand Trunk New England Lines"**  
**by George Melvin with John Ames**

Automobiles became a more and more common sight in Gorham around 1905, but at that time there were fewer than a thousand automobiles in the entire state.



## 1912 - 1936

The lumbering industry grew rapidly to satisfy the demands of builders and the pulp mills in Berlin, and as a result, a kind of frontier flavor developed in the Berlin-Gorham area as hard-living loggers, and the scores of single male immigrants who were building the dams and mills, looked for entertainment.



**Photo: Guy Shorey Collection. Logging Camp.**

The opera house, where the first “talkie” motion pictures had been shown in town with a phonograph playing while the film advanced, burned to the ground, was rebuilt, and burned again. It was replaced by the current town hall in 1919.



**Photo: Guy Shorey Collection. Second Opera House Burns 1917**

The United States declared war on Germany in 1917, and eight of the scores of Gorhamites who served in that conflict were killed in action. The war had been in evidence for some time, however, as there were shortages of all essential goods, and trainloads of wounded Canadians steamed northward. Berlin considered changing its name to something other than that of the capital of Germany, and the name “Brown Company” replaced “Berlin Mills Company.” The tragedy of the time was amplified by the great influenza epidemic that swept through town in 1918. Tombstones bearing that date in town cemeteries still testify to the event.

The town held its first winter carnival in 1920 and even built a ski jump on Route 16 across from what is now the Libby Pool. The carnival was followed by a powerful blizzard that isolated the town for several days. In those days, snow was rolled or shoveled by hand rather than being plowed.



SKI JUMPING AT THE WINTER CARNIVAL, GORHAM, N. H.

In 1927, an autumn flood devastated the town, washing away roads, bridges, railroad tracks and buildings, and leaving the area around Messenger Field under four feet of water. Townspeople marveled that no one had been killed.



FRESHET OF NOV. 4, 1927 GORHAM, N. H.

**Photo: Guy Shorey Collection,  
Gorham Historical Society**

That disaster was followed by the coming of the Great Depression. In 1930, many lost their jobs at the mills in Berlin, and the Brown Company was saved by the city and the state in an early version of the “bailout.” On the positive side, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) made its appearance with two large camps in Gorham, creating the Dolly Copp Campground and the Moose Brook State Park, and the Work Project Administration (WPA) employed many in road building projects.

The period closed with a huge gala centennial celebration in the town, with many floats and activities.

### **1937 - 1962**

Shortly after the celebration of its hundredth year, Gorham was hit by the only hurricane of consequence in its recorded history. There was considerable damage to roofs and windows, but the principal damage was to trees, including the loss of many feet of timber in blow downs throughout the surrounding forests.

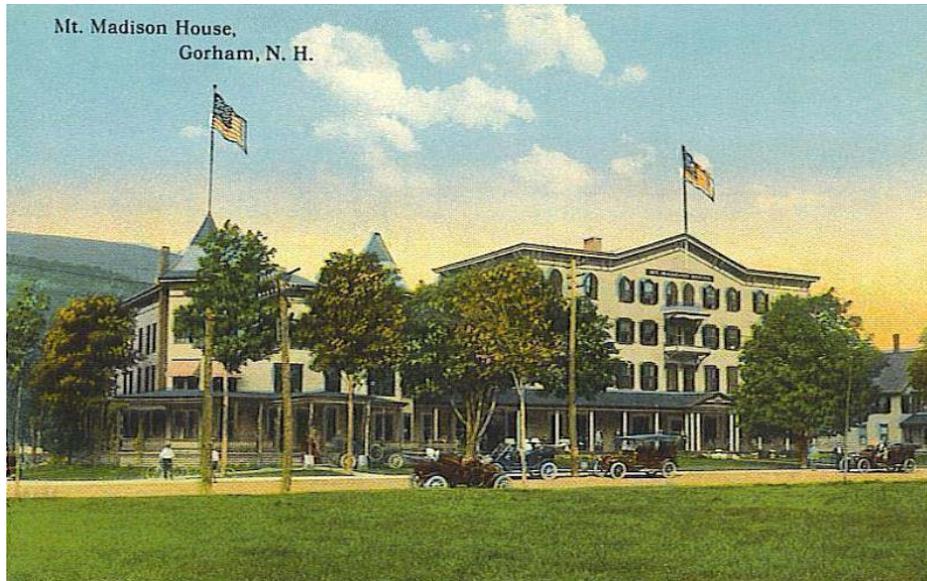
The United States declared war in 1941, and Gorham sent many of its young men and women off to foreign shores. Practically everyone in town had a relative in the service, and practically every house had a window with a star in it signifying that a son or daughter was gone to war. Before it was over, seven of them had been killed in action. The war also manifested itself locally in shortages and rationing, and in trainloads of munitions and armament that passed through town.

After the war, the town grew prosperous again, and reached a population of 2639 in 1950 while Berlin’s population declined by more than 2400, a major sign of the decline in the pulp and paper industry. Automobiles became *the* mode of transportation, and as a result, the Berlin Street Railway went out of business in 1938, and the Grand Trunk Railway terminated its passenger service in 1960.



**Berlin Street Railway, Berlin  
Coos Historical Society**

Our Lady of the Mountains Academy opened in 1946 in the old Mount Madison Hotel, which had been closed for a few years. The academy continued to serve young women, mostly from out of state, until the mid sixties. In 1956, the Edward Fenn Elementary School was built and dedicated.



**Mt. Madison House Before Becoming Our Lady of the Mountains Academy**

Tourism, which had begun to change character with the advent of the automobile in the 1920s, was becoming geared to shorter stays and the visiting of more attractions in a shorter time. Cabins, then motels, replaced the Grand Hotels as more people came and went on their own schedules, and novelty attractions, such as Story Land, began to spring up. The Libby Memorial Playground and pool was established for the use of townspeople in 1960.

### **1963 - 1988**

It is indicative of changing times that Gorham, which had always been a rural community with much livestock on its tax rolls, could muster but one cow to tax in 1964. It was still possible at that time to buy groceries and notions in small shops that one could walk to, but the trend was to larger stores, like Samson's and Kelley's Supermarkets and the Globe Discount Department Store. The first-named were located in the center of town, but eventually gave way to larger, so-called box stores that needed more parking space, like Butson's and Shaw's and eventually Wal-Mart.

The Brown Company, which had undergone financial problems since the depression, finally ceased to be in 1968. The property was sold to the James River Corporation, which continued operation for a number of years.

In 1973, the Gorham Historical Society was incorporated and has served as custodian of the town and railroad history ever since, preserving many area artifacts in its 1907 Grand Trunk Railroad depot museum.



**Photo: John Ames. Grand Trunk Railway Depot in the 1950's.**

## **1989 -2011**

In his 1967 book, *The Androscoggin River Valley*, D. B. Wight laments that the closer we get to the present, the less there seems to be to write about. That is because we find it difficult to tell what of today will be important tomorrow. Certainly, what transpires in Berlin will continue to be important to the Town of Gorham with respect to employment opportunities.

In 1991, Wal-Mart opened its first store, which reopened as a “Superstore” recently. In more or less the same area, the Berlin City Auto Group was built and expanded into nearby states.

In 1999, the Northern New Hampshire Correctional Facility was constructed in Berlin, signaling a new direction for the area, which now includes a new federal medium-security prison completed in 2010.

In 2002, the old Brown Company mill property was purchased by Fraser Paper of Toronto, Ontario, and operated until 2006, when the Burgess Pulp Mill in Berlin was shut down, while the Cascade Mill continued to operate until it closed in late 2010. Currently, the Cascade Paper Mill, has been purchased by Patriarch Partners, and is now operating as Gorham Papers & Tissue, LLC. This new firm has made large capital investments in order to tie into the Portland Natural Gas Pipeline and the Androscoggin Valley Regional Refuse Disposal District for natural and methane gas respectively, so that they may reduce their dependency on No. 6 Fuel Oil. They have also committed to purchasing

another tissue machine, which will employ an additional 40 workers. This Gorham mill is the last vestige of what was once the largest paper mill in the world. On the grounds of the old Burgess Mill, there is the possibility of constructing a 70-megawatt biomass facility, which could rejuvenate the struggling lumber industry in the area.

**Author: Guy Gosselin. Editor: Reuben Rajala**

Sources: D.B.Wight: *The Androscoggin River Valley*, 1967, Charles E. Tuttle, Rutland VT, 558 pp.

Merrill, Georgia Drew: *History of Coos County, New Hampshire*, 1888, W.A. Fergusson, Syracuse NY.