

A NEW ENGLAND HILL TOWN, 1800–1850.

CANAAN, NEW HAMPSHIRE

by

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1895

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Labor

The object of this paper is to give a brief sketch of a typical hill town in New England during the first half of the 19th century, i.e. before the advent of railroads and other agencies that so sharply differentiated the second half of the century from the first. Of course what is here stated about this town would apply about as well to many other towns in this region and much of it has characterized, in a general way, many rural communities elsewhere in the United States but perhaps there is enough peculiar to New England to be of some interest to those not, like the reader, "to the manner born".

Canaan, Grafton County, New Hampshire, was first settled in 1750 by emigrants from Connecticut, Southern New Hampshire and North Eastern Massachusetts, and has never had a population of 2000 persons in its territory of 6 miles square. It lies near the western border of the state and not far from the center north and south, in sight of the summit of watershed (in local parlance height of land) between the Connecticut and Merrimac rivers with all its streams tributary to the former. Its surface is much broken by ridges and hills large and small — indeed a native Iowan would not hesitate to call it rough and rugged to a degree, though contiguous towns surpass it in this respect. The local designations "the Gulf" "Razor Hill" "Hog's Back", "Pinnacle" and "Punch Bowl" are more expressive than any other description. Whether from this ruggedness of the surface or from lack of skill on the part of the first surveyors, or both, the farms carved out were often irregular and gores were frequent. The convenience of neighboring farmers led to many exchanges and purchases to allow lines to follow streams or ridges or to secure other advantages so that many holdings were and are not by sections and parts of sections but by lines and angles indicated by stake and stones or stream or rock or tree. It was the custom to have the lines perambulated at brief periods by a surveyor to see that the metes and bounds were correctly kept in place — a sort of modern Ambarval.

Diversified by hill and dale, stream and pond, green pastures and forest with an extensive outlook embracing the bald summit of Mount Cardigan the East, Mooseilauke forty miles away in the N. E. and the spurs of the White Mountains in the North, the picturesque landscape has a charm and a fascination for one born under its spell, not dissipated by years of distance.

At the time of its settlement the town was densely covered with timber, or rather woods, for in New Hampshire timber is a term applicable only to trees suitable for the saw mill, the shop or the shipyard. Beech, birch yellow and white, maple rock, i.e. sugar, and white, ash white and brown, hemlock, fir, pine and spruce were and are the predominant trees while elm oak and bass wood (linn) were well represented. The primitive pines particularly large and tall furnished an abundant

supply of fine lumber for two generations. The beauty of the forest was greatly enhanced by the pleasing variety in the size and shape of tree top and trunk, leaf and frond, as well as in color and tint of foliage especially in the autumn.

The town is extremely well watered by ponds (lakes) Heart, Goose and Mud, brooks (creeks) and a small river — the Mascoma — with their feeders, and numerous springs of the purest and softest water — springs that wet seasons do not enlarge and droughts do not diminish. With the exception of the intervalles — alluvial strips along the streams — and some sandy ridges, the soil is generally hard and thin — underlaid by a dense hardpan amenable neither to plow nor spade. Ledges of rock and large granite boulders are abundant and beneath the surface, to the great discomfort of the tillers of the soil, stones of all shapes and sizes are in evidence at every plowing to be gathered and removed when the field is seeded down. So abundant and constant has been this crop on many farms that each five or ten acre field is surrounded by a substantial and everlasting stone wall from this source, often grown to double or triple thickness in the course of a generation. To the first settlers the clearing away of the dense forest was indispensable to farm making and cost heavily in time and labor. The trees were felled pell mell and as soon as the foliage and branches were dry enough, the fallen mass was set on fire and so far as possible consumed. Then the large trunks remaining were cut into lengths convenient for piling and future burning, and the first crops put in. This process of forest taming bit by bit continued for a full century though diminishing from decade to decade, but to this day considerable woodland remains — a rich spoil for modern manufacturers — unhindered by forestry laws or by any consciousness of their crime against the laws of beauty and of the public welfare. The first settlers in their eagerness to rid their prospective farms of the forest did not even spare the roadside trees much to the sorrow of their successors.

The first crops were excellent even when measured by Iowa standards, but at no distant day the soil though enriched by forest fertilization for uncounted ages became so exhausted by continuous and unscientific cropping that careful tillage and the constant use of fertilizers became essential to only moderate crops. Even by the hill town standard less than half of the ordinary farm of 150 acres was fit for cultivation, and little of that half an Iowa farmer would think worth owning except for pasture. Many acres were too rough for any sort of tillage, others are too much encumbered with stones and some were too wet. As all crops were dependent upon fertilizers and these were wholly derived from the stables where all the farm stock was kept during the long winter, the area of cultivation was pretty nearly fixed by necessary limits. The average farmer kept two or three horses, young and old, two yoke of oxen, five or six cows, a dozen young cattle and two or three swine, and so could plant four or five acres of corn and potatoes, and sow a couple of acres of wheat and three or four of oats, rye and flax besides a patch for the vegetable garden. The usual rotation was corn and potatoes on freshly broken land enriched by manure spread on or put in each hill, followed the next year by grain and seeding down the process to be repeated at least every five years with a view to a large hay crop — a prime necessity on account of the long winter. Oxen were the main draught animals for the farm work or the winter teaming, except where speed was more essential than strength and fitness for service on rough ground and in difficult situations. Horses were used for plowing corn and potatoes, which process did not complete the tillage but was only a preparation for hoeing by hand, which in the hard and stony soil was one of the most tedious items of farm labor.

Haying was done with scythes and small hand rakes. Wheat and rye and sometimes oats were cut with sickles. Apple orchards were large and productive and their fruit was used profusely throughout the year in every form that a Yankee housewife could devise. Pears, cherries and plums were abundant and so without cultivation were blackberries, strawberries, and blueberries.

Wood was the only fuel and used without stint as costing nothing except the labor of cutting and hauling. For the first quarter of the century stoves were practically unknown, but fireplaces served the kitchen to the satisfaction of the cook and warmed the living rooms at least on the first story. The generous fire blazing on the hearth from the skillfully piled fuel, back log, middle sticks and fore stick of fit size and in due order diffused a warmth and glow scarcely less comfortable and cheerful than the furnace heat plus gas log of the 20th century. Some persons who lived in uncommon style were jocularly reported to use painted fore sticks. Frosty bed rooms up stairs were the rule rather than the exception, however, warming pans filled with coals and passed through the beds in some degree abated the discomforts of the situation, but the chilly atmosphere of the room doubtless shortened the period of toilet making. As friction matches had not come into use, the continuous preservation of the fire on the hearth was a matter of prime consequence, as to the old Latins, who in their worship of Vesta expressed their sense of the necessity and beneficence of fire and of the value of the hearth as the center of family life. The brick ovens were large enough to bake in one batch the week's supply of bread and pastry, with room for the pot of beans and the Indian Pudding quite essential to the Sunday dinner.

Houses were mostly of wood, the better ones of two stories sometimes with roofs gambrel or four sided a la Mansard, all with capacious cellars for the storage of vegetables, apples, cider, and all supplies that freezing would injure. Scarcely any house was too simple or plain to have a parlor, also styled spare room or best room, fitted up with the choicest furniture of the house and adorned with its bric-a-brac, closed against the sunlight by curtains and blinds, forbidden to the romping children — a place sacred to guests, formal visitors and great family occasions, and even then its atmosphere seemed hardly congenial to mirth and good cheer.

As a rule farmers lived within themselves, that is not only within their means, ample or narrow, but upon the products of their own labor and his labor on their own farms for the renter and the landless poor were practically unknown. The family breadstuff was ground in the neighborhood mill on shares. The vegetables were of course home grown, and so also the animals from which came the year's supply of meat. In early times wheat (flour) bread was sparingly used as a semi-luxury, while brown bread (rye and corn) corn bread (Indian bannock and Johnny cake) and rye bread were the staples. A standard winter dish was bean porridge, composed of beans, hulled corn and barley cooked in meat broth, properly thickened and to taste. It is said that in many families a kettle of generous size was always hanging on the crane in the kitchen fireplace ready to be warmed up for each meal of the day. A well known ditty ran "Bean porridge hot, bean porridge cold, bean porridge best when nine days old".

As the art of canning fruits was unknown, when the season of fresh fruits was over, apples dried or preserved by stewing in boiled cider, and preserves and jams took their place, and maple syrup of home manufacture was freely used, a sweet of whose deliciousness the factory imitation gives no conception.

In addition to the ordinary and necessary duties of housekeeping, including the making of butter, cheese and soap, and candles dipped or moulded, the housewives and their daughters carded and spun and wove both wool and flax, the product of the farm, for the ordinary clothing and the linen required by the household. The large wheel propelled by the peg and the small linen wheel worked by the treadle with the swifts and reel on which the skeins were formed, as well as the loom were as familiar and more essential than the sewing machine in the modern household — while the hum and whirr of these machines were the only instrumental music known in most of these homes. These same women knit the stockings and made up such garments as were not committed to the more or less skillful fingers of the peripatetic tailoress who made a regular tour through the neighborhood once or twice a year the whiles retailed the gossip of the town. You may well conclude that these housewives belonged to no clubs, had little time for visiting or making calls, did not shine in social circles or do much church work, but the qualities and activities of Solomon's virtuous woman were fairly illustrated in their lives. The boots and shoes were largely made from the tanned hides of the animals butchered on the farm, and not seldom manufactured by the farmer himself or some neighbor with whom he changed works, as it was called.

The farm buildings were almost wholly a home product. The timber for the substantial frame was cut on the farm and hewed by the farmer or some neighbor, the boards and clapboards were sawed from farm grown trees at the neighborhood mill, and the shingles rived and shaved on the farm or some nearby shop. The farmer raised, rotted, broke and hatched the flax to supply the home factory and threshed his grain in primitive fashion by flail or oxen.

In spite of the fact that the farmers families were to such a degree supplied by articles of home produce and home manufacture there was room for the country store — the type to which the modern department store is a return. The ordinary sign read "Dry Goods, Groceries and West India Goods", the latter term covering salt (Turks Island and St. Ubes) Molasses and sugar for cooking and rum. The same storekeeper or his clerk measured calicoes, silks and satins, weighed out tea, coffee and loaf sugar, spices and codfish, drew molasses, dealt out drugs and toilet articles, hardware, cutlery, crockery and farming tools, and sold rum by the keg, bottle or glass. The surplus of farm products taken in barter the merchant transported to Boston 100 miles away, whither, or to some nearer mart, the farmer sometimes went in winter with a load of farm produce and laid in supplies for the year, thus avoiding the middle man's profit — as, much complained of as in these later days.

The industries outside of farming were subsidiary to it and entirely local. A small tannery, three sawmills, as many grist mills, a little woolen factory, received the raw materials from the farmers and returned the manufactured product to them at a fixed tariff in money or in kind. A tin shop, a very small tool factory, three or four blacksmiths, two or three shops of wood work of various sorts from wagon making to furniture, a couple shoe makers and as many carpenters, a pottery for coarse wares and a brick yard, completed the list of distinctive manufacturing establishments. Note that railroads and large factories had not begun to interfere with the simple conditions of individual and local manufacture. Even these last mentioned by no means monopolized this business but shared it with even more primitive competitors. Many a farmer was more or less skilled in some trade which he plied according to neighborhood demand, particularly in winter, and at other times as farm work permitted, One made and cobbled boots and shoes from leather furnished by his customers, making his own pegs and thread; another was the neighborhood carpenter, planning and superintending the

construction of house or barn and outbuildings with helpers from the farm; another did blacksmithing for his neighbors often getting his pay in work on his own farm; another had a cider mill for the neighborhood use at fixed rates in money or in kind.

In the earliest times the local traveling was largely on horseback, partially due to the quality of the roads. Journeys of a hundred miles in his fashion were not uncommon, and often the wife sat on a pillion (pad) behind her husband, often carrying a child in her arms. In later times, the one horse buggy (open) was in universal use, exchanged for the one horse sleigh from December to April, during which period the ox sled took the place of the ox cart for all sorts of farm and local teaming. The heavy snows piled into drifts by the high winds made road breaking an onerous winter task — legally compulsory and under the direction of the highway surveyor. The use of snow shoes in the sugar camps was a survival of pioneer times, or rather of prehistoric Indian customs, that persisted to the middle of the century.

Before the rise of the manufacturing centers, particularly Manchester and Lowell, the families, as a rule very large, kept together on the old homestead until the boys came of an age or the girls married. This meant more than that they ate and slept under the same roof. It meant a close association in all the labors and concerns of the family during the most impressionable years of childhood and youth under conditions favorable to the most permanent influence. It meant the thorough industrial training of the young and their attachment to the family and to the homestead that was likely to be as lasting as life.

It goes without saying that everybody worked, old, and young, the richer and the poorer, and nobody boasted of it, was ashamed of it, or complained of it. When outside help was needed it came from the boys and girls, the young men and young women of the neighboring families, all of English descent and New England birth — as good and respectable as their employers and so treated. To be lazy, idle and inefficient was to lose caste — and as the rare exception.

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