Glimpses of Life Along the New Meadows River

The following excerpts are from “Meadowsweet”: its rich historical environment, a paper written by William C. Purinton around 1973 – Bowdoin College Library. Meadowsweet was the name of the Ring farm on Harding Road, overlooking the New Meadows River.

This attractive, scenic area...was originally roamed freely by both the Indians and wild animals. In fact, many are the stories that have been passed down to us of the bears and wolves that then lived in the wooded area which much of Brunswick, Harpswell, and Bath region was then comprised of.

Quite frequently the Indians would come up to the head of the New Meadows River in their canoes, and then carry their light vessels across the short stretch of land between the New Meadows River and Whiskeag, or the Kennebec River, when they were on their way to Merrymeeting Bay. This short section of land was called Stevens’s Carrying-Place for Thomas Stevens....This, as well as several other well known carrying places, saved the Indians from having to go clear down the Kennebec River and around Small Point, when they were coming down from the Androscoggin and Kennebec Valleys to reach Casco Bay.

The first prominent white man to buy land from the Indians in this region...was Thomas Purchase. He arrived about the year 1628 and had settled in Pejepscot, now Brunswick, by 1639....Mr. Purchase built himself a log cabin which burned down within a few years. He replaced it with a much larger and permanent building which was known as the “Fair Stone House.” As to where he built these structures there has been wide dispute....It is very likely that Thomas may have had several houses as he moved up the Androscoggin River.

No matter exactly where he lived we know that Mr. Purchase went through all this area trapping animals, farming, and catching and curing fish, particularly salmon and sturgeon which were quite abundant in the river at that time. It is said that after having cured the fish, which he had caught, he would pack them into barrels to be shipped to a “foreign market.”...

Thomas Purchase did a lot of trading with the Indians, but he many times deceived them, or treated them unjustly, and finally they got down on him. It was in September, 1675 that Mr. Purchase’s house was attacked by twenty Indians who stole his liquors and ammunition, spoiled a “feather bed” and killed some of his sheep, but they did not harm any of the women in the house at that time. Some articles mention that at the time the Indians were plundering the store his son was coming home on horseback. He noticed the Indians, realized quickly what they were doing, and turning about he sped back to give the alarm. He hadn’t escaped without being noticed. One Indian chased him for quite a distance with a gun, but the son managed to get away from their clutches. After several days, having had time to gather into a group, about twenty-five settlers went up the New Meadows River in a sloop and several other boats, only to find “a number of
Indians pillaging the neighboring houses. They made an attempt to get between the savages and the woods, only to run into three spies. One was shot, one wounded, but the third escaped and gave the alarm. Because of their finding out the Indians concealed themselves, until after the men has loaded the corn into the boats, when they “gave their war-whoop,” and descended upon them. They succeeded in wounding several of the settlers, and “carried off the boat-loads of corn in triumph.” But this was a forewarning of the King Philip’s War which was to follow that same year.

The next prominent person who we find to have purchased land and residing in the New Meadows area was Thomas Stevens…. On July 3, 1675 Mr. Stevens removed to the head of the New Meadows River and bought some lands from three Indian sagamores, “Robinhood, Eramket Daniels, and Manessumet.” … Mr. Stevens resided at the upper end of the New Meadows River, which was known for many years as the Stevens’ River. Likewise, the path, which was well traveled between the head of the river and Whiskeag, was given the name Stevens’s Carrying-Place in his honor.

It was in September, 1688 that the Indians attacked the blockhouse at Merrymeeting Bay which was then commandeered by Capt. John Rowden. They then proceeded down the river, and after going to Capt. Rowden’s house, took captive wives, children, and several men.…

In May, 1689 the Indians descended upon the entire area destroying houses by fire and killing cattle that were west of the Kennebec River. The early settlers, who had been warned beforehand by the friendly Indians of this attack, took refuge in several of the forts.…

It was in 1747, during the Spanish, or Fifth Indian War, that blockhouses, or garrisons, were built in the Brunswick and Topsham area of rugged timber. This war lasted from 1745 through 1749…. On May 5, 1747 the Indians shot Seth Hinkley on Ham’s Hill near the garrison of Tobias Ham and Joseph Smith at New Meadows…. Joseph Smith and Tobias Ham, being tanners, Seth had gone over to obtain a “strap for a cowbell,” as cows were loose in those days and it was important to have the bell so their ringing would tell the owner where they were to be found. As he was returning the Indians shot him about 8:00 P.M. that evening. And, as if that wasn’t enough, they scalped him and removed his clothes, and took his gun off with them according to a letter written by his brother, Isaac.…

About 1739 [Capt. James Thompson] and his family removed to the New Meadows area in Brunswick…. Besides being a dealer in various items it appears that Capt. Thompson was a cobbler, did farming, and used scows on the New Meadows River. He distributed gunpowder to the neighbors during this period. It would seem, from all evidence, as if he was a man of much importance and that he made a good living.

We should mention here that packet sailing vessels used to run from this very locality on the New Meadows River to Boston and Portland. They continued to do this until Portland and Kennebec Railroad (later to become part of the Maine Central Railroad) was
completed. Much of Brunswick’s and Topsham’s merchandise for the traders was landed at two wharves, which were known as Cushman’s and Brown’s wharves. To add to this quite a bit of the lumber which was sawed at the mills, from the water power at the falls, would be loaded onto the packet vessels at Cushman’s wharf to be shipped to the West Indies and southern ports.

The Hinkley house... was erected in the old barn raising style. Instead of using nails, as we do today, the men pegged the rugged beams together as many of the old houses were then built in this fashion. With much of this work being done on the ground the men would then put their muscles into action and hoist the timbers into position. These weren’t narrow boards, as we see today, for they used wide planking.

After Capt. Peterson had erected his new residence he established a thriving business in this area... He had a dam built on the west side of the cove at Howard’s Point. It was principally constructed of stone, but in order for people to walk across it he had the top finished off with boards... A double sawmill was run at the western end of this dam. ...We understand that lumber was standing in piles all round the area... It wouldn’t surprise us any if the Captain also used scows in his work. During his busy career here at his New Meadows residence he could look down below onto his shipyards and his lumber business, making sure that everything was under control.

Not only was there a sawmill here, but there was a gristmill, as well, here at New Meadows. The first one... was established in 1753... Besides carrying on his mill business here at New Meadows, Capt. John Peterson... started in building ships... They were constructed in two different shipyards. One was located just “below the dam on the west side of the cove” while the other site was nearer the “upper end of the point in New Meadows river.”

Benjamin Brown had run a ferry across the river up to 1792, from a point of land just below Capt. Peterson’s residence... Peterson... maintained a ferry at this point until a bridge was built, which was somewhere about the year 1796...

The Peterson house was also used as a Custom House. With the packet vessels sailing up and down the New Meadows River, loaded with people and merchandise, it makes sense that it easily would have been one.

It was Captain John Peterson who was the prime instigator and principal stockholder in having a canal built from the upper head of the New Meadows River across what was formerly called the “Stevens’s Carrying Place (then a meadow) to Welch’s Creek (near the old Crawford graveyard). This came out into the Kennebec River “about a mile and a half below the Chops, and about the same distance above the mouth of Whiskeag Creek.”

On June 17, 1791 an act of the General Court in Boston (Maine was then a district of Massachusetts) took place for incorporating the following men to have the canal built. These gentlemen were to see that the channel was kept open from “the head of New Meadows river to Merrymeeting bay, under the name of the Proprietors of the New
Meadows Canal.”... These men were not only to see that it was kept open for boats and rafts to pass through, but they were to see that tolls were paid whenever vessels made use of it, as can be seen by the following: “For every boat of the burthen of one ton the sum of nine pence, and in the same proportion for vessels or boats of greater or less burthen, not exceeding six shillings for any such vessel or boat. For every thousand feet of boards in rafts four pence half penny; and in the same proportion for all other kinds of lumber.”

Being just a meadow land the digging couldn’t have been too hard, but when they got to the end near Welch’s Creek they ran into problems, for the men faced a ledge which had to be blasted... It was unfortunate that this canal did not prove successful, the reason being that the tides were not high at the same time at both ends. The New Meadows tide seemed to be full about “two hours” before the Kennebec was, and it “filled the canal to the depth of three or four feet, and even ran over the summit and down towards the Kennebec, making it hard work to get logs up to the summit.” Later the Kennebec tide would be in, and they then balanced, but “there was little or no movement of the water in either direction.” Of course, coming in first the New Meadows side went down first, and this made it of no use. It could be used each day for about three hours, and this wasn’t always to be fully relied upon. It lacked locks, and all evidence shows that the men should have dug it much deeper at the upper end even though it would have cost quite a bit more. However, by 1800, or earlier, business seemed to be moving more toward Brunswick and Bath anyway....

Capt. Peterson immediately established himself a big shipbuilding business with the yards not far away, where he continued building vessels until around 1809. An Embargo Act had been passed in December 1807 ... in order to protect our American ships from British and French attacks. ... Even though an armed cutter had been placed in the river to enforce the embargo, there were certain sailing vessels that managed to succeed in slipping by it without misfortune....

In the early days of about every town in New England there used to be stone wall enclosures which were called pounds. In those days cattle would roam around, as there were then no fences to confine them, and the pound officer had the task of putting these stray cattle into these enclosures, and “here the unruly animals were brought to order for many a year.” Brunswick’s first pound was on what is today the Harding Road....Originally its stone walls were about eight feet high and a strong gate was hung at one corner. It was about twenty feet square. Only after the owners of the cattle could identify their farm animals, and paid a fee, did the pound officers let the picked-up cattle be turned over to their owners....

Mr. Adams continued to live at his New Meadows homestead until he died there on April 2, 1880, aged 65 years....Mrs. Martha Adams was left not only as a widow once again, but with the care of trying to pay off the mortgage on the farm. [It was] suggested to his widow that she try selling shore dinners to people to earn money....She made the first lobster stew and shore dinner.
In those days clams were in great abundance and weren't polluted like many of them are today. Fred W. Larrabee dug the clams for the first meal that was served at the original Iven House on the New Meadows River. He was paid 25 cents a bushel for them, while with the lobsters he received one cent apiece. Another person said he would get fifteen cents a bushel and forty-five cents a barrel. Lobsters could be obtained in any quantity for fifty cents a hundred.

At one period in the Nineteenth Century granite was being mined on the western side of Howard's Point. It was then loaded onto sailing vessels at the old stone pier on this same site and then shipped to Portland, Boston, and various destinations. It was at sometime during the latter 1800 period that one particular sailing vessel had been loaded down with Maine granite at Howard's Point and set sail for her destination. After pulling out from the pier she sailed down the New Meadows river without any trouble. The crew did not know it then, but disaster was ahead for them. When the ship got down near the mouth of the river at some spot from Cundy's Harbor on the load must have shifted for the vessels capsized and sank. The water had to have been rough at the time in order for this to have happened.

...Lime used to be burned in this area and then shipped from this same pier. Rev. Samuel Woodward had a quarry, and his kiln was near the New Meadows Baptist Church. There were many more in the area....

Mrs. Ring and her family would...come to their summer residence...where they stayed until late October or until it got too cold to stay any later. Johnny (her son) can recall taking bed warmers upstairs where the bedrooms were not heated then, and it would get rather cold before morning. The residence was then heated by a coal furnace, and one of the many tasks which he had to do was to take out the cinders and spread them in the driveway. Another one of his chores was stacking the wood....

We could continue on indefinitely mentioning many of the historical events that have taken place in this area, as well as the well known ferries, bridges, roads, cemeteries, etc., that at one time were in existence here in East Brunswick. Part of the original cemeteries are still there. However, it would get tiresome for the reader if we wrote too much. We hope that this will prove profitable to those interested who have been reading this. If so the writer is satisfied.