

NEWBURY HISTORICAL SOCIETY



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THE SUNAPEE MOUNTAIN HOUSE

George Birse

When the first train from Concord reached Newbury Harbor at the southern shore of Lake Sunapee in September 1871, area residents gathered by the tracks of the Sugar River Railroad to cheer the arrival of a train that signaled an end to the prolonged rail isolation of the lake from the state capital.

Although Concord to Bradford train service began operations in 1850, rails would not climb the 451 foot rise in elevation between Bradford Depot and Newbury Cut for twenty more years. A movement to extend rail service from Bradford to Claremont in 1853 had failed, and when the effort was resurrected in 1866, the prospect encouraged the Claremont Eagle to foresee opportunities offered to the Lake Sunapee region:

“The extension of the road would open to the public Lake Sunapee and its picturesque surroundings and induce the erection of hotels along its romantic shores for the accommodation of pleasure tourists.”

At that time a scattering of inns ringed the perimeter of the lake but no resort hotels were in place to cater to “pleasure tourists.” Speculation had it that when rail service became a reality, Boston financiers would tour the Lake Sunapee shoreline shopping for likely resort hotel construction sites.

Train service between Concord and Claremont began in 1872 and Lake Sunapee became accessible by rail from the west as well as the east, but the anticipated men of capital failed to materialize. As Lake Winnepesaukee hotel construction flourished local concern grew about the lack of building activity around Lake Sunapee. The Northern Advocate (Claremont) correspondent for Sunapee wrote:

“Our charming and natural scenery offers splendid water privileges which are here afforded and as yet not in operation. (Sunapee offers other) inducements to the capitalist to come this way and look over our grounds before making a hasty purchase elsewhere.”

In July 1872 lake area residents heard the first encouraging words concerning resort hotel construction when Nathan Johnson and David Cogswell announced plans to build a summer hotel on a slope of Sunapee Mountain. Johnson was not a Boston financier but a Newbury farmer who in partnership with Cogswell, a Henniker farmer and blacksmith, had purchased a 200 acre tract on Sunapee Mountain in 1859. Their plans were to harvest timber, remove the stumps, then convert the land to pasture. At that time Johnson was a Weare resident and neither he nor Cogswell had plans to move to Newbury.

As the partners cleared the land beginning in 1859, Johnson in particular became enamored with the panoramic view of the lake and surrounding mountains as seen from their property. In 1864 Johnson made the decision to relocate his family and move from Weare to Newbury. The site he selected for his new home was on a northerly slope of Sunapee Mountain below the rim of

Annual Meeting to Honor Alice Lynn Sunday, July 18th, 1:30 PM, Town Office

The short business meeting will include a special presentation to Alice Lynn conferring upon her our first Director Emeritus designation. Come and join us as we honor Alice for her many years of support and dedication to your Society. Other business will include the Treasurer’s report, highlights of the past year and the election of three Directors.

Wild Goose Water from Above

Ron Garceau and “Babe” Sargent
Immediately following the business meeting..

This fascinating view of the entire shoreline has been assembled into a PowerPoint presentation from hundreds of photos taken in 1949-50 with a World War II military camera. You will be amazed at the clarity of the photographs as you re-visit many landmarks now lost forever and you will enjoy hearing the stories and adventures encountered in the process.

Refreshments will be served.

We Remember Newbury

We have tapped into a rich and enlightening resource with a format that encourages attendees to reflect back and share both their own experiences and those handed down by previous generations. The program in May, *Newbury’s Farming Heritage*, demonstrated this again. Thank you to our Committee, moderator, panelists and all of you who came and shared your memories.

We regret the technical difficulties which prevented the showing of the historic photos of farming in Newbury but hope to have them on display soon for all to see.

We welcome your suggestions for future programs so send us an e-mail and let us know what topics you would like to explore (info@newburyhistorical.org).

a plateau over 500 feet above the surface of the lake.

He set up a saw mill that same year and began to construct a farm house, barn, and outbuildings. Johnson hewed a road from the farm that descended for three quarters of a mile before intersecting with the old Goshen Road.

By 1872 the farm was well established. The cleared land proved to be fertile soil for crops and Johnson could count on fifty tons of hay a year for his oxen, cows, horses and sheep. The partners continued to cut a large quantity of timber and drew much of it down the mountainside to Chandlerville Station (Edgemont) just one mile from the farm, for shipment to the Boston market. Coggswell and Johnson had expanded their land holdings over the years and by 1872 owned 365 acres on Sunapee Mountain.

As more trees were felled an even wider vista of the lake and mountainside unfolded. The view of Lake Sunapee from the Johnson farm became renowned in the area and during the summer months local residents would travel up the mountainside and gather at the plateau to survey the countryside from the heights.

As the years passed Johnson accepted a limited number of summer boarders at his farm house. When requests for rooms far exceeded the farmhouse accommodations available, Coggswell and Johnson decided that 1872 would be the propitious year to begin construction of the area's first resort hotel. The advent of through rail service that same year was a major consideration in their decision. The hotel would be called Sunapee Mountain House and be located at the plateau near the farm house.

The planned building as drawn up by Coggswell and Johnson was to be a four story structure 110 feet in length, forty feet in depth, housing fifty guest rooms. The Mountain House would have been a major undertaking had it been situated at the base of the mountain, but to build on a site three quarters of a mile up slope while climbing 660 feet in elevation indeed was a challenging assignment.

By early 1873 the hotel, connecting shed, and stable had been completed. Furniture had arrived at Chandlerville Station and was transported by horse and wagon up the mountainside.

Although neither proprietor divulged the cost of the Mountain House, insurance reports disclosed the hotel to be valued at \$25,000 and the furniture at \$8,000. The town of Newbury assessed the Mountain House, stable, farm house, barn, out buildings, saw mill and livestock at \$5,200.

As Coggswell and Johnson awaited the beginning of the 1873 summer season, a high level of apprehension must have run through their thoughts. They had bet the bankroll that the comfort of rail travel together with the convenient location of a mountainside hotel close by a railroad station would attract "pleasure tourists" in substantial numbers.

In early June 1873 the two proprietors invited six newspaper editors representing publications in Massachu-

setts and New Hampshire to be overnight guests at the Mountain House. The editors were met at Chandlerville Station by hotel carriages, driven down the old Goshen Road to the hotel access road and then up to the plateau.

There they saw the Mountain House and its majestic view for the first time. The editor of the Patriot wrote:

"The view is unlike that from any public boarding house in the state, and commands a variety of beautiful scenery unsurpassed by any house we have ever seen."

The editors were equally impressed by the Mountain House itself. The imposing structure was highlighted by an eight foot wide veranda around three sides of the hotel at the second floor level. A broad stairway descended from the veranda to the grounds below. The proprietors themselves conducted the editors on a floor-by-floor tour beginning at the first level, which embraced a large children's playroom, library, and smoking room. On the second floor were the parlors, sitting rooms, dining room, and Mrs. Johnson's kitchen. The third and fourth levels housed accommodations for seventy-five guests; twenty-five single rooms and twenty-five for double occupancy.

The Patriot commented:

"Spacious halls run through each story of the house, and the rooms are large and pleasant and conveniently arranged for family and single boarders. It is furnished with all the desirable modern improvements."

The editors were not permitted to languish long on the veranda, but were called upon to hike the recently cut path to the north summit. Trails were also in the process of being cut to the south peak and Lake Solitude. At the end of the day Argus and Spectator (Newport) editors Carleton and Harvey concluded: "We think Messrs. Coggswell and Johnson have struck a rich mine on old Sunapee."

The Mountain House became an immediate success, a resort hotel that catered not only to resident guests but also welcomed single-day visitors. It became the focal point for people in the area seeking a one-day outing.

In mid July Coggswell and Johnson invited the citizens of Newport to spend an entire day at the Mountain House. The invitation didn't have to be issued twice. Two hundred and twenty-five people, twice the number anticipated, evacuated the town one Tuesday morning and headed for Sunapee Mountain. Fifty horse drawn private conveyances clattered along the roadways while even more Newporters boarded the 8 a.m. train for the seven mile trip to Chandlerville Station. There Mountain House carriages dutifully awaited the visitors. The drivers could only have been overwhelmed by the sheer size of the descending throng. Some rode, but most walked from the station to the Mountain House.

The Argus and Spectator reported:

"During the forenoon the company found

ample amusement in promenading the parlors and piazzas and rambling over the adjacent grounds. Field glasses and telescopes were in constant requisition, feasting the eye with mountain scenery.”

In the afternoon the more ambitious Newporters hiked the trails while others strolled the veranda deep in conversation with the fifty outnumbered resident guests.

From that day the Mountain House became a prime attraction for people residing along the Concord to Claremont rail line seeking a one-day excursion. It was the forerunner of the Lake Sunapee excursion train era that within a few years would see as many as twenty-one passenger coaches sitting on the Newbury Station rail siding.

The year 1874 was one of increasing popularity for the Mountain House. Guest rooms were usually filled to capacity, with the railroad playing the major role in transporting visitors. It also was the year that the area's second resort hotel, the Lakeview House, was constructed close by Sunapee Harbor.

A pattern of recreational activity had developed at the Mountain House and much of it centered around hiking. In addition to the often traveled trails to Lake Solitude and the two summits, other destinations aroused the curiosity of hotel guests.

One was Indian Rock, said to have been a religious ceremonial site of the native Americans. Located near the old Goshen Road west of the Mountain House, it was an immense boulder that contained a deep depression or pocket that early settlers said was used by the Indians for seasonal ceremonial grinding of corn. A pestle that was part of the legend had long since disappeared. Hikers were content simply to reach Indian Rock after an arduous climb, contemplate the curiosity, then ponder the validity of the legend while hiking back to the Mountain House.

The most ambitious hiking activity was the search for Deacon Asahel Lear's lost cave. In 1864 while assisting with a survey of Sunapee Mountain, Lear came across a cave that he recalled was located high on the mountain on one of the ridges. Over the years others tried to locate the cave but without success. Even so, there was no shortage of attempts by Mountain House guests to rediscover the cave, although the available information on its location was less than meager.

By late spring of 1875 reservations were being received in record numbers despite competition from the Lakeview House. Building and grounds maintenance had been completed, the hotel interior cleaned, and the carpets unrolled and placed on the floors. In two weeks the first resident guests were scheduled to arrive, and transient visitors were expected anytime.

One Friday morning in June, Johnson arose shortly after 4 a.m. and built a kitchen fire as usual to take off the early morning mountain chill. He decided to drive down to the lake for an hour's fishing before breakfast and went outside to

find some mud-worm bait. While digging he glanced toward the hotel and caught a glimpse of smoke rising from the roof. He raced into the building, awakened his family and saw them to safety. Johnson ran up the stairway in an effort to locate and contain the blaze, but the upper floor was so dense with smoke that he was forced to retreat to the first floor. There he and his family were able to salvage a few pieces of furniture. As the flames consumed the hotel Johnson led the livestock from the barn and out of danger, then pulled the carriages to a safe location.

The hotel, shed, and stable were burned to the ground, a total loss. The Johnson farmhouse situated just distant enough from the flames to escape unscathed, was the only structure to survive. Insurance investigators would later conclude that the disastrous fire was the result of a defective chimney. Proceeds from fire insurance policies would amount to \$20,000, approximately 60 percent of the original cost. Faced with such a substantial financial outlay, Cogswell and Johnson decided not to undertake the reconstruction of the Mountain House. Instead they would confine their activities to full-time farming and logging operations on the mountain.

Yet Johnson did enlarge his farmhouse and during the summer months would accept a small number of favored guests as he had done prior to the days of the Mountain House. For a period of several years thereafter the Mt. Sunapee correspondent for the Argus would report upon Johnson farm guest activity with the recurring phrase: "The Mountain House is full."

The Mountain House has been designated a Newbury Cornerstone in accordance with guidelines set forth by the Governor's Commission on New Hampshire History in the Twenty First Century. Cornerstones are sites, structures or a significant occurrence in the history of a town. A prime purpose of the program is to encourage a detailed compilation of documented historical information for the designated cornerstone and endorse the preservation of site or structure in its present state.

The Newbury Historical Society is currently documenting the history of the Mountain House, and solicits additional information relating to the area's first resort hotel.





Newbury Historical Society
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Membership

The Newbury Historical Society belongs to *you*, the members. As always, we appreciate your support and encourage you to renew your membership if you have not already done so. You recently received a special mailing which included a renewal notice. If you don't find this please go to our website (see below) and print a copy. Forms will also be available at our annual meeting. **You are always invited to our Board meetings and to see our collection in Sherman Hall (more about both on the website).**

Thank you in advance for your support.

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