

## **The Dover Historical Society**

### **A Short Sketch**

By the 1940's Dover's population had sunk to its lowest ebb since 1790. The three villages, which made up historic Dover (Dover, West Dover & East Dover), had shrunk to West Dover & East Dover. There were no paved roads. A telephone call from East Dover to West Dover was long distance. All telephones were crank phones and everyone was on eight-party lines. The telephone operator acted as answering service, confidante, and alerter of community disasters. During storms it was not unusual for electricity to be out for three to four days at a time. The winter road crew consisted of three married men and selectmen were also expected to plow the roads. Today's Route 100 was then Route 8 and was dirt in the summer and mud in the spring. The schools had shrunk from 9 school districts, each with its own superintendent, to two one-room schoolhouses one in East Dover (behind the Baptist Church) and one in West Dover (beside the Congregational Church in the building which now houses the Town Offices). The population of East Dover consisted of a close knit community of permanent residents on small farms revolving around the Baptist Church, the store, the post office and the sawmill & rocker factory together with a small group of "summer folk" scattered throughout the community and on Cooper Hill. West Dover was similar, with a small but dwindling core of permanent residents mostly on small farms clustered around the church, school, library, general store, & post office. West Dover also had a sprinkling of summer people, most notably the "Handle Colony", which included the Roosevelts, who had been coming to the Deerfield Valley since the 1870's. By the early 1950s, just before the arrival of Mt. Snow, East Dover was the more active of the two communities having established the first Volunteer Fire Company in town in 1948. The school in West Dover had been closed due to lack of sufficient pupils.

When Mt. Snow arrived in 1954 things began rapidly to change. Properties began to change hands at a great rate, the old houses in West Dover (and a smaller number in East Dover) were gobbled up and the contents of their attics, barns and closets disappeared. Old families sold out to developers and once again, as in the late 1700s and early 1800s, intense commercial development changed the character of the land. Some of it was ugly and led directly to the development of Act 250. Sewage flowed in our streams and down our hillsides; urban sprawl of dubious taste began to form along our roads. But it also had its good side. There was now employment in Town and the steady drop in the permanent population began to reverse itself. West Dover was no longer a ghost town in the winter. Where in earlier years East Dover had dominated town discourse, now West Dover was the engine that drove the town. A single new elementary school was built on Dover Common in 1957 (now the Dover Free Library). By 1971 that was no longer big enough, and the current school was built atop Dover Hill.

In the sixties and seventies, many residents, both permanent and seasonal, began to worry that the history of the town was being lost in the flood of new residents and commercial and residential development. Old papers, records, diaries, clothing and artifacts of life in the 1700s, 1800s and early 1900s were being lost. The publication of the Kull book, *The History of Dover*, in 1961 (now reprinted) was part of an effort by many concerned residents to preserve their heritage in town. After much discussion, people from both East and West Dover came together in 1975 to form the Dover Historical Society. The goal of the Society was to gather and preserve the town's history for future generations. They received their charter from the State of Vermont (and the IRS) as a non-profit institution that same year. However, while meeting and working to collect items related to Dover's past, they had no place to store, preserve or display them. Many were stored in member's barns and attics--but many were also lost as people died and their belongings disappeared in area antique shops and flea markets.

This situation was remedied in 1986 when the Society was given the Harris House in West Dover Village to use as a headquarters and museum by the Greenewalt family of West Dover. Mrs. Greenewalt had spent many summers in West Dover with her aunt, and was vitally interested in preserving a glimpse of the way life used to be in town. The work on the Harris House began. The house, which had been constructed as a residence and blacksmith shop (one of two in the village) in 1820, had been badly abused in its last years as a ski dorm. Its foundation had partially collapsed, it was 18 inches off its foundation, the roof was shot, and the wiring and heating systems were a horror. It has taken many years and hard effort by the members to raise the money necessary to restore the house to some semblance of order. Unfortunately, due to money constraints, it could not be "restored" to 1820s vintage but the modern refurbishment has left a hint of the past. It is now a definite visual and cultural asset to the historic district of West Dover Village and to the Town as a whole.

The taxpayers of Dover also had a big hand in this enterprise. Due to the persuasive arguments of Marion Bartlett at many Town Meetings the town gave the society a little less than half the money it has taken to rescue the building. Fundraising, grant applications, and donations by friend and members have made up the rest.

In 1999, on the 24th of May, the Society opened its Dover History Center in the first floor museum area of the building. The display covers many artifacts from many periods of Dover history and includes a nine-foot map displaying Dover history from 500 million years ago to the passage of Act 60 in 1998. Interior displays include a school display, a military wall from the revolution (British red coat, militias of the mid-1800s, Civil War, World wars I & II, ration books) to Vietnam & beyond, a winter wall, farm implements, fire company memorabilia, 1800s child's clothing, an East Dover four'o'clock stove, the Sage family quilt, an 1840's piano, a locally made spinning wheel and crib, church and theatrical displays, a collection of locally woven palm hats and items from the 1800s, a kitchen display with an early 1900s Glenwood Stove, and other items too numerous to mention. An interesting feature of the museum is that one wall has

been left open so that the visitor can see how an 1820's house was constructed. The items in the History Center come from both East and West Dover. The Harris House was originally open every Wednesday (10-12 & 2-4) in the summer & fall. Presently, hours are 10-5 Saturday and Sunday, Memorial Day through mid-October. The addition of handicap access was partly funded by a Vermont State grant through the Cultural Facilities Improvement Program.

In addition, the Society has annually offered free summer programs in June & July and at its quarterly meetings the third Thursday of November, February and May.

The Officers and Trustees of the Society have additional plans in progress. A basement display of tools and farming implements, maple sugaring items and transportation items is progressing. The outside area behind the Harris House will be used to display a horse drawn sleigh and mowing machine as well as ox drawn sleds used to haul rocks and maple sap. The upstairs of the building exhibits an 1800s bedroom display, a military room, a research room, and cedar lined clothing storage room. The downstairs wall area currently housing the military display will be devoted to a display of historic photographs, drawings and documents. Last but not least the Society has republished the out-of-print History of Dover. As part of this effort they are planning a new volume of the history from 1960 to the year 2000 which may include photos of all permanent residents in front of their residences if enough people volunteer to help. We also hope to work with the school children on a program about the former schools in Dover.

But all of this takes money. The Society is now engaged in a major fundraising effort to secure the funds to carry out all these plans. Funds are being solicited from individuals, corporations, foundations and state & private agencies dealing with historic preservation. In addition to capital improvements, the Society must cover basic building maintenance, heat, electricity, telephone (security system) and insurance. The society has one part-time employee -- all other staff, including curator and docent and trustees -- are volunteers. The Society has members from both East & West Dover and seasonal residents or former residents. It is hoped that as people discover this community asset new members will join and swell the ranks of the volunteers. The society is especially looking for new corporate member/sponsors to add to the faithful community members, generous visitors and Town of Dover taxpayers who currently support the society.

Donations to support the planned programs of the Society are fully tax-deductible and should be sent to: The Dover Historical Society, 103 Route 100, East Dover, VT 05341-0053.

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