

# DALTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## NEWSLETTER

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## The Sumner Family

We reported on the Sumner Family in earlier newsletters in the spring and fall of 2013. Here, we'll continue with more interesting news of our "Lumber Baron" and his family.

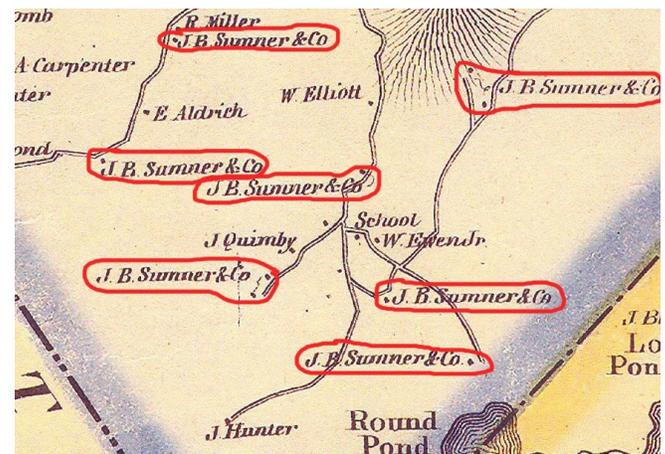
In the Spring 2013 newsletter, we described a fire in 1858 that destroyed the original Sumner House, an inn owned by J. B. Sumner. Per the "New Hampshire Patriot and State Gazette" newspaper in Concord, dated May 26 of that year: "About two weeks since the noble structure in Dalton, built by J.B. Sumner, Esq., partly as a mansion house, partly as hotel, occupied by Capt. Sumner as residence and known as the "Sumner House", being at the time under the charge, as landlord, of Mr. Horace Fabyan, of White Mountain reputation was totally destroyed by fire."

Horace Fabyan had been in the hotel business since around 1836, operating taverns and hotels in early tourist towns such as Conway and Carroll, New Hampshire. Not only did Mr. Fabyan suffer the loss of the Sumner House under his management, but in September of that year, his wife died, followed by the death of his daughter in November.

Ten years prior to this, in May 1848, a fire destroyed a barn owned by Mr. Sumner. He lost 14 cows, a yoke of oxen and three horses, along with hay and grain. Because Sumner was a lumberman, it was likely that the oxen and horses were used for hauling logs.

By 1861, when the Coos County Map was produced, it showed about 23 buildings in Dalton with J. B. Sumner & Co.'s name attached to them. We can only imagine that he employed many men in town who might have lived in his houses while cutting timber on Sumner's properties, which consisted of nearly 10,000 acres.

Because he had purchased most of his property around 1821 as "unsettled land", it was likely that there were few dwellings already built, so Sumner either constructed, or directed others to build homes for his workers.



Just a few of the buildings owned by J. B. Sumner & Co. in Dalton, 1861.

In the spring of 1823, J. B. Sumner was anxious to start his logs into the high water of the Connecticut River. He wrote to his uncle, David Sumner in Hartland, Vermont: "Our logs are marked with the letters J.B. on the side of the logs, chopped on with an ax, likewise a hack or chip is taken out at the right hand of the letters...hope you will not let any of the logs get by." The logs were to be floated southerly along the river to the mills at Hartland. Marking the logs would distinguish them from those of other lumber companies.

James B. Sumner married his first cousin, Catharine Abigail Sumner in 1837. They had four children, all born in Dalton. Frederick Augustus (named after Catharine's father), was born in 1838, but drowned in 1844.

Their second child, Catharine Abigail was born in 1841. She was often called Katy. She married William Howard of West Fairlee, VT in 1865. Son, James Breckenridge, Jr. was born in 1843. He became a doctor. The last child, Pauline, born in 1847, was always a sickly child, and died at age 7. Known as Polly, or more often, Popy, one relative of some Dalton folks who worked for the Sumners described Pauline as "mentally deficient".

## Sumner Family (continued)

Catharine (Kate) Sumner, James' wife, wrote letters often to her aunt, Wealthy Sumner in Hartland, Vermont. She described her situation as being very depressed, and always felt the "company" (lumbering business) was a difficult one, and many times mentioned a lack of money or resources. She talked of the partnership between her husband James, his uncle David Sumner, and his cousin James Wyse. It seemed Mr. Wyse may have failed to share the wealth with his partners like he should. There was discontent and a lot of mistrust. In later years, a lawyer for the company estate also suggested James B. Sumner used company funds for his personal enterprises, such as the hotels and steamboat.

On April 23, 1855, a letter was written by Jimmy Sumner, at age 11 to his cousin in Hartland, Vermont. He described the long cold winter, then "The ice came down in such quantities that Papa was alarmed about the dam." He then dated the next paragraph "May 11th", which was about two and a half weeks later.



The second Sumner House, built after the first one burned in 1858, and before it was shown as a lithograph on the 1861 County Map. Date of photo and identities of the people are unknown.

He then said "I was interrupted in writing my letter by going out to work. I was obliged to go and drive the rivermen when they went down with the rafts, back to the head of the falls, and I got a half dollar a day and a brown sore face." He later stated "I had not been home three hours and my hands are so stiff that I cannot write."

Imagine, being 11 years old, and driving a horse (or horses) and wagon by yourself along the County Road (Route 135), likely all the way to Monroe, where the Fifteen Mile Falls ended, to pick up his father's rivermen. Because his letter was paused for so long, he must have made the trip multiple times. The river drivers had to take advantage of the high water to float the logs downstream, a job not for the faint of heart. The Fifteen Mile Falls were some of the most dangerous rapids along the Connecticut River, before the big dams were created.

We also wonder about the condition of the County Road during the springtime, being very muddy and rough, probably with washouts from spring runoff. It was no wonder his hands were stiff, and apparently his face was sunburned.

Jimmy's letter made no mention of his younger sister, Pauline, who's poor health finally caused her death on February 21st.

After the fire of 1858, when the Sumner House was destroyed, the family apparently moved into another house, probably one which was owned by J. B. Sumner. It was small and cold, as Kate described it.

Kate Sumner wrote to her aunt in January 1859, that she would like some seeds sent to her, as she had lost hers in the fire. She desired corn, beans, squash and thyme seeds. She apparently received the seeds, however, by January 1860, she once again was inquiring of her aunt to send her more seeds, as they suffered a "killing frost" during the summer, and her vegetables perished.

Mrs. Sumner was no stranger to hardships. Just a few months later, August 1860, she wrote a letter to her younger cousin, David, where she says "Do not mind my writing, I have been very ill, & had my hand amputated & now have only three fingers to write with." She did not say what caused such drastic measures. Was it an infection, or severe injury? We wonder where and how the surgery took place. Was there any anesthesia, or pain relief?

Then, in December of 1860, another fire consumed the J. B. Sumner & Co. sawmill, as well as several "dry houses" filled with lumber.

## EARLY ROADS AND TRAVEL

Settlement in Dalton was slow compared to some of the neighboring communities. Moses Blake was our first settler, arriving before March of 1785, when his daughter Bathsheba was born, according to Dalton town records. The deeds for Mr. Blake's 249 acres were recorded in Grafton County in 1787, and indicated Blake was "of Dalton". This was prior to the 1805 division of Grafton County, and establishment of Coos County.

Blake became acquainted with the proprietors of Dalton and Littleton, who offered land in exchange for cutting out a road between Haverhill and Lancaster, enough for a one-horse wagon to pass. Blake took up the offer. By 1793, a road description was laid out through Dalton and Littleton. One can only imagine how primitive this road must have been, with the only tools available being axes and shovels, and if he had possession of oxen to assist him. It isn't known if he had any other persons to help with this seemingly daunting task.

After the first Town Meeting in 1808, Dalton's Selectmen got busy recording the surveyed descriptions of several public roads, including Union, Simonds, Big Hill, Blakslee and Buck Roads in 1809.

It is obvious, based on the residents' names in the road descriptions, that they had already been using these roads to travel to and from their farms. The purpose of the highway descriptions was to establish the roads as public, compensating the landowners whose property fronted the roads.

Without any proper highway equipment or organized "road crews", landowners were expected to maintain their roads and submit bills to the town for payment. One such record shows a payment of seventy-five cents for one day's work to Nathan Wilder, who worked on the bridge near P. Cushman's. The work was done in October 1820; payment was made in February 1821. If a farmer used his oxen for roadwork, he would be compensated with additional pay.

A Selectmens' record from 1847 established no fewer than 22 highway districts in town.

In 1888, a newspaper article mentioned a possible warrant article to purchase a "road machine", today's equivalent of a grader. Of course, it would have been horse-drawn.

An early road grader in Dalton, 1940's. This could be a piece of equipment purchased in 1903.



### From a letter written by W. F. Dodge of Whitefield, on Mountain View House stationary, August 1889 to the Selectmen of Dalton:

"You must be aware that the road leading past Mr. Lowry's house in Dalton is unsafe for travel day or night. We have been obliged to drive round by Whitefield Village and so make the Dalton road by that way several times this summer as our guests feared to ride over the road and our drivers said it was unsafe. We shall try to get the road indicted at next court if not repaired."

The Mountain View House, the Sumner House and possibly other places of public lodging took guests on scenic tours. Dalton Mountain was a popular place to visit.

## ABOUT THE SOCIETY

The Society's officers are as follows:

President: Terri Parks; Vice President: Gary Boyle; Treasurer: Jean Abbott; Corresponding Secretary: Terri Parks; Recording Secretary: Doris Mitton

Historical Society **meetings are held the second Saturday of each quarter (Jan., April, July, Oct.) at 12:00 noon at the old Dalton Town Hall**, 741 Dalton Road, Dalton, New Hampshire. Our meeting/display room is in the downstairs rear portion of the building, and can be accessed either from the main floor, using the stairs, or directly through the rear doors, which are wheelchair accessible. Hours are by luck or appointment.

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