

Legends of Early Gilford: Heroines, Heroes, and Rogues **By Diane Mitton**

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An exhausted Hannah Mudgett, staggered into Gilmanton on snowshoes in the evening of December 26, 1761, a year in which the snow was "six feet on the level" according to a Benjamin Kimball of Concord. Hannah had only been married five days when she and her new husband set out from Epsom for the twelve mile trip to claim the homestead which made them the first settlers of Gilmanton. When she was in her seventies Hannah signed a certificate stating, "I, Hannah Mudgettarrived in Gilmanton on the evening of Dec. 26 (1761) ...I moreover state that I was the first white woman who ever set foot in Gilmanton". Historians generally agree that this is a fact, but tradition says that she complained most of the way, claiming that she couldn't go another step. Needless to say, none of her distracters walked all day on snowshoes though heavy snow wearing sodden petticoats and skirts and most likely carrying a pack. Does this qualify Hannah's adventure as a legend? Probably not, but at the very least, she qualifies, at least for me, as a heroine.

The dictionary defines a legend as " an unverified , romanticized or popularized story handed down from earlier times. A character whose adventures, over a period of time, makes them seem larger than life". Perhaps a better candidate as a legend maker is Greene Chase. As Adair Mulligan puts it in "The Gunstock Parish: a History of Gilford, New Hampshire". "Legend has it that Greene Chase and two companions came up from lower Gilmanton to hunt cougar, and found tracks of a very large cat near the foot of the mountain . Chase, recorded as husky and a good woodsman" was mending his snowshoe "when the animal appeared on an overhang just above his head" His companions fled. Chase raised his musket to fire but as luck would have it, the hammer wouldn't work . "He quickly shifted ends of the gun and struck the cat a heavy blow, killing it" and breaking the gunstock in the process. " Word got around when people asked where he had killed so large a catamount. Impressed by his own success, Chase soon moved to catamount country and erected a homestead at the top of Belknap Mountain Road." Hence - Gunstock Mountain, Gunstock Brook, Gunstock Hill, Gunstock Inn and a host of other namesakes. This story has all the makings of a legend, but Daniel Lancaster, author of the History of Gilmanton didn't like it. His version says that some hunters, felling a tree were unfortunate enough to break the stock of one of their guns near the brook. While Chase's story is not verifiable, Lancaster's is not exactly a story that would inspire the naming of a mountain nor the creation of a legend.

Another figure of legendary proportions from Gilford history is Natt Davis. His colorful tale starts when he was still a young man of unruly habits. The story goes that having run away from home, he ended up as an overseer on a southern plantation where he got into trouble by killing a slave. According to an article by Kathi Caldwell-Hooper in Network Publications, July 1992, his father, Eleazer Davis, who in 1799 owned the undeveloped (Governor's) Island, paid his

way out of his troubles and brought his home, but being very angry he told him, " Natt, you h'aint good for nothing at all, but there's that there island , so you go out there and live or starve, an' if I catch you trying to run away ag'in I'll have you locked up, and maybe you'll be hanged, consarn ye." There is some doubt as to the truth of this tale. A good story, but unverifiable. Natt was "crafty" and a "smooth talker" and he was able to take the unsettled island and turn it into a profitable farm. Another tale told of Natt says that he was "a giant in stature and prided himself on his physical strength which however, was reserved for exhibition purposes mainly. But once he was taken down considerably" He always had a large crew of men working for him and once when he was away, a 'poorly consumptive sort of man " came along and prevailed on the one in charge to hire him to help cut and pile logs. When Natt returned he looked over the new hire and asked the boss if had been robbing a graveyard. The newcomer overheard Natt's derogatory remark and taking exception to it challenged him to a test of strength by lifting heavy pieces of timber. Natt couldn't refuse the challenge and wouldn't let up as long as the stranger urged him on. "As a result, the stranger, who proved to be a phenomenon of strength , notwithstanding his appearance, so used up Natt before night that he nearly died and ever after declared that he never did get over that day's 'tussle' with the man he first took to belittle as no better than a dead one."

Davis was of the Millerite persuasion, a religious group that believed that the world would soon end. Natt was able to convince many of his neighbors that when the end came, the chosen would be departing from his farm. Obviously, the appointed hour came and went without event, but " somehow Natt, with his persuasive ways, talked his way out of the situation." For all his bluster, he apparently became a solid citizen, a man that Eleaser could be proud of. He was a charter member of the founding of Gilford Academy, a representative to the General Court (state legislature),and a successful farmer. A legend in his own day and a man whose life is a story for history to enjoy.

Gilford's Thompson-Ames Historical Society invites you to share your family stories with us. Every family has a story worth telling and it is important that they not be lost. Call us at 603-527-9009, email us at thomames@worldpath.net or write to us at P.O. Box 7047, Gilford, NH 03247.