

Meetinghouse Has a Rich History Behind it

2009

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Gilford Village is privileged to have several buildings of historic value that are presently under the care of the historical society. One of these is the Meetinghouse on Belknap Mountain Road.



*The Thompson-Ames Historical Society
Union Meetinghouse*

This Meetinghouse was constructed in 1834, jointly, by the Universalists and Christian Baptists as the Union Meetinghouse. Pews were sold to pay for the construction. Of course, this meant that a family owned a particular pew and no one else was permitted to sit there! Universalist congregants would attend services in the morning and the Christian Baptists in the afternoon. The building was vacated in the 1850s and was empty until 1863. At that time Captain Benjamin Weeks purchased and restored it.

In 1874 the Methodist Episcopal Church acquired the building. In 1889 Gust Copp, who owned a sawmill on Gunstock Brook, remodeled the building in the Carpenter Gothic style. He added paired stained and etched glass windows, a belfry, created a domed alcove and painted the exterior. By this time the rafters had begun to sag and caused the walls and ceiling of plaster to crack and crumble. Mr. Copp beautifully rectified this by preparing local hemlock at his mill and creating the wonderfully artistic wooden wall interior that exists today. In the ensuing years this building remained empty for long periods of time changing ownership and occupancy several times.

In 1943 George P. Ames, a Gilford native living in Manchester, purchased the former Methodist building for the purpose of a historical building with the provision that

a society be incorporated under the name of Thompson-Ames Historical Society to honor his maternal/paternal lineage. The inhabitants of Gilford, not willing to look a gift horse in the mouth, readily agreed to this stipulation Mr. Ames then deeded the building to the Society on November 18, 1943.

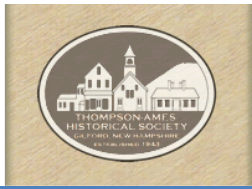
At this point you may be wondering if this Meetinghouse is in active use. OH, INDEED IT IS! This is where the Society holds some of their meetings, presents programs that are open to the public, and where a number of authentic displays are housed depicting some of the daily living environments and activities of people living in the 1800 and 1900s. Each year the third grade students from the Gilford Elementary School visit these displays, as well as those in the other two historic buildings, as part of their scheduled study. The students are, almost without exception, enthralled with all they see and learn about during these study tours. Docents volunteer to interact with the students and their teachers in small groups, explaining the various items, their purpose, etc. The more questions the students ask, and they do ask questions, the more they learn and remember!



As you enter the central room, if you look straight ahead in the center of the back wall you can see what appears to be an alcove. In actuality this wall is flat; the clever artistic workmanship of Gust Cobb created this illusion. With just a bit (well maybe more than a bit) of restoration the

wood backdrop of this room would radiate with the warm, rich glow it originally possessed.

Looking around you will see, along the outside walls, displays of the 1800 life style. A military display containing Revolutionary and Civil War guns, bayonets and several swords are displayed. One such sword honors the inauguration of Franklin Pierce (a New Hampshire man) and the 14th United States President. Journals, bibles, flags, banners, and a portrait of Charles William Hunt, MD who was an assistant surgeon of the 12th Regiment of NH Volunteers during the Civil War are also on display along with several other items of that time.



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There is a Town Hall area that includes excerpts from Gilford's (1947-1982) town clerk's personal scrapbook, a Masonian map, a ballot box, as well as portraits of Gilford's first town clerk, William Blaisdell and Selectman John Smith along with Mr. Smith's family bible and branding iron.

Many outdoor activities available during the 1800s winters are depicted in the Recreation area. Included are a pair of handmade (1878) ice skates, ice-fishing gear, several sleds, skies and even a fur foot warmer large enough for two feet! Imagine riding in a sleigh wrapped up in warm blankets and this fur bootie on your feet! Evidences of the Gilford Outing Club are also on display, i.e. a trophy, member passes, etc.



The Victorian Room display is my favorite. Lots of family portraits, a doll carriage and dolls, a horsehair sofa, and a scrapbook of greeting cards are some of the items on display. There also are framed wreathes of intricately woven human hair and some of wool. Also in evidence is a large square safe.

A Church Corner is displayed with an extensive collection of books that were left behind by the Methodists. An "altar" with a chalice and some other small items, a church pew, and a bible so old it looks as if it would crumble if you just touched it!

Of course, these historic areas would not be complete without a School Days display!



Actual school desks from area one-room schoolhouses are shown. There is a blackboard, several school books, a 48 star flag, George Washington's portrait and two dolls dressed in clothing that would have been appropriate for the times.

Lastly, but certainly not least, is a Farm display. Gilford for many, many years was essentially a farming community. To this day, there are several working farms in our community. A local farm sign, a plow and a corn shucker are shown along with a machine that was used to cut the corn stalks for silage use. An oxen yoke and horse collars show how animal power was harnessed to perform many of the farm chores. A cheese press, a butter churn, a milk separator and milk bottles are also in evidence.

This truly is a marvelous building. The Thompson Ames Historical Society is always excited about sharing our many treasures, not only with the young students but, with the community at large. For those of you who may have put off attending our programs due to the need to answer calls from Mother Nature, you will be pleased no, THRILLED to learn that a bathroom has been installed. Oh, yes, it is indoors, and not of 1800s vintage!!

The Society can be reached at Thomames@metrocast.net to express any comments and our web site can be visited at gilfordhistoricalsociety.org.