



Solid Forge of History

George W. Bingham of Gilmanton demonstrates part of the technique of using the hand-operated forge on exhibit in the museum of the Gilmanton Historical Society. A gift to the society by Dorothy Osborne, the forge was used as part of a

float in the town's bicentennial parade. The society's museum, of which Bingham is curator, is located in the old Gilmanton Academy building.

Academy Now Houses Town History Display

By JOHN ZANES

GILMANTON — The choice of subject to be pictured on the bicentennial medal was easier for Gilmanton than it might be for many towns.

Across a broad range of years and a wide stretch of land, Gilmanton Academy stood, for many people, for Gilmanton.

The concept of the academy was voted in 1792 by the town, the charter issued by the state in 1794, and the first classes were held in 1797. From that day to this the Gilmanton Academy passed through a number of incarnations.

The facilities were twice destroyed by fire and twice rebuilt. The last class graduated in 1910, and the official end of the institution came in 1950, when Hattie P. Kelley, who had been Hattie Belle Page when she attended the academy early in the century, acting as clerk of the Academy Board, signed the last minutes, and received a receipt for the academy bonds, turned over with lands and building to the town.

Disaster and lack of attention made inroads of the records of the institution, and the complete story of the academy and its history has to be conjectured at some points. In some ways the importance of the structure to the town is as significant as when the old maps identified Gilmanton Corner as "Academy Village."

Nathaniel Hawthorne named the academy as the place that provided his character David Swan with his education, and Dartmouth once accepted graduates in good standing without examination.

For a number of years the building served as a district school, the two main classrooms housing four grades each. Graduation ceremonies were held for students completing the eight grades.

The formal educational role is now history, but the old building still has a part in

education. It is used by the Gilmanton Historical Society, and in what was once an academy classroom, and later the classroom for the upper four grades, George W. Bingham has established a museum.

An old hand-operated forge stands close to a case of papers and memorabilia associated with Nahum Wight, whose home was across from the building that was once the Peaked Hill Grange Hall.

Memorabilia of Dr. Curtis Hidden Page, Gilmanton's outstanding man of letters, is on exhibit, as are two large paintings, part of a set of four, copies of a series done by John Cole representing the stages of life in the best ornate tradition of American Victorianism, hang on the wall. They were part of the decor of the academy, many years ago. Pictures, papers and old tools round out a tangible display of the historical life of the town and area.

Bingham, who owned radio stations in New York, started out to look for a salt water farm as a retirement home, and checked out possibilities on the coast from Maryland to Maine. Not satisfied, he wrote to a number of New Hampshire realtors, and a response from Doris Lord brought him to see the Carlson farm at the top of Frisky Hill. The salt water farm lost out to the hills.

"The day that I set foot in this place, it seemed to me that history wasn't far away," Bingham said. His own enthusiasm for history involved him in the history of Gilmanton, and, four years ago, in beginning the museum in the academy building.

Bingham would welcome additions, both in the form of material particular to the town and its people, and those artifacts of the past that lend substance to an understanding of the history of the area.

The educational aspect of the old academy building is not entirely history.