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HISTORY

Gilmanton: An historic hotbed

Two-hundred-year-old, white-washed homes. Stately elm streets and quiet, scenic backroads. All this and much more describes Gilmanton, a rural village near Laconia. The picturesque town has known a long history, retained even today.

Whether a blessing or a curse, most people know Gilmanton as the setting for Grace Metalious' widely read novel *Peyton Place*. Tourists find it odd that this totally New England, totally tranquil village so steeped in history was the hotbed of humanity and gossip that pushed *Peyton Place* to best-seller status.

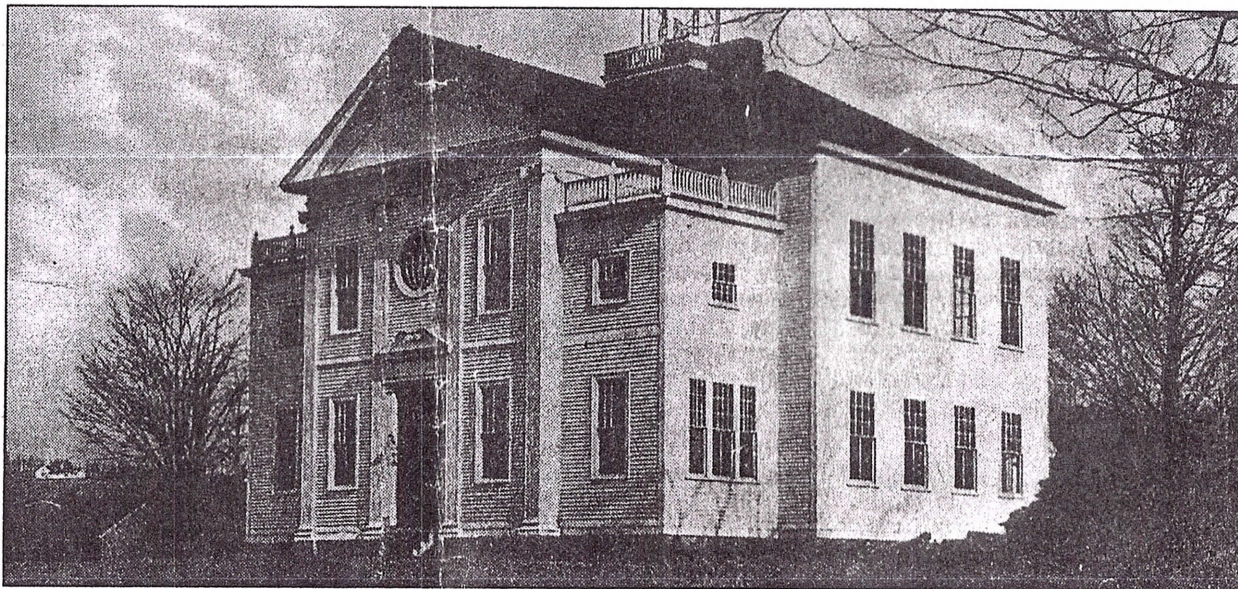
The beginnings of Gilmanton were very different from the *Peyton Place* years; indeed, if its founding fathers had foreseen the journalism of Metalious, they would have been shocked by her written words.

The town that was to become Gilmanton was incorporated in 1727 and a charter was signed the 20th of May by his Majesty's Colonial Governor John Wentworth.

At that time, the Lakes Region as a whole was unsettled country, full of wild animals, thick forests and sometimes unfriendly tribes of Indians.

Still, as with all land in the new country, men were eager to stake a claim and reach for a better life.

In the case of Gilmanton, the land was granted as pay for 24 members



Gilmanton Academy is one of the town's most historic buildings

Courtesy photo



KATHI CALDWELL-HOPPER

Winnepesaukee as a rendezvous for scouting parties, and any smoke seen at likely settlements was an easy target for attack.

By October 1748, a peace treaty was signed and the French and Indian war parties retreated to Canada. Now the Gilmanton proprietors could resume settlement.

Another snag in their plans happened around this time, when the deed of John Tuffon Mason of Hampshire County, England (it is said New

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were the Mudgett brothers, John and Benjamin. After building houses, they returned to bring their wives to Gilmanton.

There is an amazing story, according to "The History of Gilmanton" by Daniel Lancaster, of Benjamin Mudgett and his wife, Hannah, traveling on showshoe in deep snow and under very cold conditions, to arrive in Gilmanton from Epsom.

They arrived at their new home on Dec. 23, 1721, after a journey

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of the Gilman family and 153 other men who fought in defense of the colonies.

The conditions of the charter were: proprietors must build 70 dwelling houses and house a family in each within three years of charter. Also, they must clear three acres of ground for planting; each proprietor must pay his portion of town charges; a meetinghouse must be built for religious worship within four years.

The members had to build a house or a minister and another for a school. All these conditions were to be met, if the peace with the Indians lasted the first three years of settlement.

If any settler defaulted on those conditions, he would lose his share of land.

As to why the town was named Gilman, the name Gilman appears time and time again in early records, and the family, originally from Exeter (indeed, most of the proprietors were from Exeter), had fought valiantly in wartime. Because of the fear of Indian attacks, the original conditions were not met, and it wasn't until 1749 and 1750 that settlers came to town to pick out lots and stake the land. Even then, these men did not stay long for many reasons. They came over and over again, through the

years to follow, the settling of Gilman was a stop and start affair, due largely to the dangers of warring Indian parties. Town meetings for Gilman were held in the safety of Exeter, where most proprietors still lived.

If Governor Wentworth had given much thought to the land grants, he would surely have chosen a more populated area to gift land to these proprietors.

While they may have fought valiantly in wartime, most Exeter residents hailed originally from Massachusetts or England. Massachusetts was already more populated, with such seacoast cities as Boston offering a taste of the finer life in England. The grant of land in Gilman may have been very unsuitable for the Exeter men.

In 1730 a committee of proprietors petitioned the governor to allow longer time to settle the town. In 1731 Edward Gilman and others traveled to Gilman and marked out boundaries.

They didn't stay long, as the French and Indian wars were about to begin. The entire Lakes Region, and Gilman was part of this area, was a very dangerous place for English settlers to be. The French and Indian war parties used nearby Lake

Hampshire gets its name from Mason's home county) was brought forth. Mason held huge amounts of land in New England, and mostly in New Hampshire. He had transferred his claim of the Gilman area land to friends in Portsmouth.

This could be a real problem for everyone, it was felt. Once again, the proprietors refused to till the land and settle in Gilman, when the land might not really belong to them.

Old records show the dispute settled in 1752, and all seemed well for settlement of Gilman. Once again, plans were shelved when the old French and Indian wars resumed. The wars were mostly about who owned what land, and English settlers were being butchered at the hands of war parties.

Unlike the previous war, the English decided to become aggressive to end the fighting. They staged attacks on unsuspecting French forts, and among the soldiers who fought bravely were men from Gilman and Exeter.

After much bloodshed, the war was finished once and for all. Progress in settling the new town finally took hold. By the summer of 1761, proprietors had selected, cleared and begun building on their land. Among the first to live year-round in Gilman

was Hannah Mudgett, who showed a remarkable distance from Epsom in one day. Hannah was the first white female settler in Gilman. Soon John Mudgett arrived with his wife, and a friend, Orlando Weed, followed with his wife.

Hannah Mudgett lived in Gilman until there were about 5,000 settlers. How different it must have seemed in comparison to her first winter in the wilderness of Gilman! She lived her last years with a son in Meredith and died at the remarkable age of 95. Her son, Samuel, was the first male child born in the Gilman.

In 1762 more families arrived and by 1767 45 families lived in Gilman. Soon town meetings were held here instead of in Exeter. A physician arrived in 1768 and a minister also about this time. The town was growing, new and interesting people settled and built homes in the town. Years sped by, progress marked many areas of the town.

The town saw settlers and citizens come and go, and with them, their hopes, dreams, and their good and bad deeds. And Grace Metalious, living in the scenic, tranquil town of Gilman, turned fact to fiction in her novels, and a town that had struggled so many years to see settlement was suddenly of national fame.