



NEW HAMPSHIRE DIVISION OF HISTORICAL RESOURCES

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RANGE ROADS

Newcomers to many parts of New Hampshire quickly encounter the term “range road.” In some communities, like Pembroke, the town’s highways are still known by names like “Fourth Range Road” or “Eighth Range Road.” In other towns, range roads may survive only as nearly abandoned lanes between parallel stone walls, more frequented by hunters or loggers than by ordinary travelers. In all cases, range roads help to superimpose a grid on the land. This grid is a clue to the planning rationale that governed the granting of the town’s lands in the 1700s.

Many New Hampshire townships have a village, or several. But many of our villages evolved because of need or convenience, not because of a preordained plan. On the contrary, New Hampshire pioneered a form of town plan in which everyone was expected to clear and occupy a farm, not to live in a compact village.

Planners of such towns usually designated a central location for a meeting house, but that site might or might not evolve into a village.



Cross Country Road in Pembroke, NH—a characteristically straight range road.

(Photograph by James. L. Garvin)

Quiet places like Antrim Center or Loudon Center remind us how readily a designated center might give way to a more convenient village site elsewhere.

The planners of most New Hampshire towns repudiated the older New England ideal, seen in Massachusetts and Connecticut during the 1600s, of keeping all settlers together in a village of tiny house lots. In such older communities, most of the land was held in common. Outlying common lands were parceled out as private property over time, but only after the town’s population had outgrown the central lands, near the village. These older towns, based on an English model, are called “nucleated townships.”

By contrast, most New Hampshire towns are of a type called “range townships.” In the range township, all land was granted to private shareholders or “proprietors” before settlement began. Maps were drawn, superimposing a grid of uniform-sized farmsteads across the town’s territory. Surveyors marked out the corners of each lot. Between the rows or ranges of lots, the surveyors reserved rangeways or range roads, which ensured access to each lot.

Often two or four rods in width (a rod is 16.5 feet), these range roads were mapped as perfectly straight corridors of land. As actually built, range roads frequently found their ideal straightness defeated by New Hampshire’s topography of hills, ledges, and bogs. The proprietors of Nottingham bowed to reality in 1727 when they instructed the crews charged with clearing roads that “where there are steep hills or other difficult places in said streets . . . they are to shun them by turning the [traveled] way round them and coming [back] to said streets with the way again.”

New Hampshire's experiment with the range township began when the province began to lay out a tier of grants beyond the western limits of the original coastal communities. In May, 1722, the province issued charters to Chester, Nottingham, Barrington, and Rochester. Although Chester and Nottingham were planned with central villages, the majority of their lands were parceled out in ranges of large farmsteads. Barrington and Rochester dispensed with village lots altogether, simply laying out ranges of large farms.

The range township was perfected by a group of private investors who purchased a large tract of unsettled land in central New Hampshire. In 1746, the Masonian Proprietors purchased the proprietary claim to New Hampshire that had descended to the heirs of Captain John Mason, the original grantee of New Hampshire in the early 1600s. The Mason purchase included all lands in New Hampshire within a great arc drawn with a radius of sixty miles from the sea – some two million acres.

The Masonian Proprietors began to grant townships within their holdings in December, 1748. As land speculators, the Proprietors were eager to encourage settlement. The Proprietors retained some lands in each township, knowing that the efforts of pioneering settlers to clear farmsteads and build roads would add value to the lands they reserved for themselves.

The Proprietors laid out townships that averaged six miles on each side, or 36 square miles in area. They granted all the territory in each township at once, laying out ranges of lots of perfectly regular size, separated by range roads, from border to border within each grant. Near the center of each township, they typically carved out a six- or ten-acre tract for a meeting house, a burying ground, and a training field for the militia. To encourage settlement and qualify the grant to apply for a town charter, the Proprietors required that shareholders build a small house within a year, clear a certain amount of land on an annual basis, construct a meeting house, and employ or "settle" a minister. If waterpower was available, the Proprietors encouraged construction of a sawmill through a grant of land to a millwright.

Some parts of New Hampshire reveal the imprint of the range township more strongly than others. The seacoast area, settled during the seventeenth century, was planned more or less in harmony with the older nucleated township model. New Hampshire's lower Connecticut River Valley, settled largely by people from southern New England, also reflects some of the traditions of nucleated planning. But the rest of the state reveals strong evidence of the range plan. A glance at a U. S. Geological Survey map for the area from Rochester to Lake Winnepesaukee reveals the grid of roads of some of New Hampshire's earliest range

townships. And an aerial photograph of almost any part of the state clearly discloses the checkerboard grid of stone walls and fields in ranges of lots.



Aerial view of a range road in Webster, showing a grid of rectangular lots aligned along the highway .

As regions of New Hampshire were settled, highways were built to connect one town to another, or to the seacoast. These new roads usually bore little relationship to the ancient range roads, and the latter were often neglected, especially if farmers could reach their homes or lands by other routes. Yet these straight corridors remain in our landscape as reminders of a time when New Hampshire's inland settlement was the tenuous hope of speculators and pioneers, not an accomplished fact.

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