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A plaque placed at Peterborough's Settler's Rock commemorates the arrival of Thomas Morison in 1739.

When it all began

Earliest settlers from Massachusetts made their way to Peterborough in 1739

By GORDON PEERY

As 2010 draws to a close, the Peterborough Historical Society has had a few inquiries about the fact that the town was incorporated in 1760, which would make this year the 250th anniversary of the town. While everyone likes an occasion to celebrate, we'd like to clarify what this actually means, and why we will patiently wait until the year 2039 to break out the fireworks and champagne.

Colonial settlements in this part of New England had two distinct components: proprietors (to whom the land had been originally granted by the king), and settlers. It was ultimately the role of the proprietors to sell lots of land to encourage settlement, but also to provide some basic resources for settlers such as roads, schools, a church and minister (today, excepting the church and minister, this would be known as the municipal infrastructure). The townspeople were merely responsible each for their own land.

The original proprietor of this part of New Hampshire was John Tuft Mason, who subsequently sold his interest to twelve citizens of Portsmouth, who became known as the Masonian Proprietors. There was considerable confusion involving surveys and deeds, some of which were not filed (by the proprietors) for years, to the consternation of settlers who had purchased lots. Settlers offered complaints and requests for services, much the same as our modern citizens engage with our selectmen, the difference being that none of the proprietors, to our knowledge, ever set foot in the town, let alone lived here. By the late 1750s, the residents of the town had become fed up with the proprietors, and they petitioned the provincial governor, Benning Wentworth, to incorporate. This would end terminate the responsibilities of the Proprietors, which would then be assumed by the citizens of the town, who would form their own government.

The full request for incorporation is too lengthy to be included here, in part because it is written in the ornate and excessively wordy language common at the time. But here is a short excerpt that is relevant to the topic of the town's anniversary:

"...whereof a number of People Immediately went on said Tract of land and began a settlement which we have Continued Increasing ever since the year 1739, Except Sometimes we left said Township for fear of Being Destroyed by the Enemy who Several times Drove us from our Settle' soon after we Began, and almost ruined many of us. Yet what Little we had in the World Lay there, and we having no where else to Go Return'd to our Settle as soon as Prudence would admit..."

The earliest settlers were not in a position to document their actions in detail (and that which was documented has often not been preserved). But the accepted lore is that in 1739, Thomas Morison and a companion (whose name is not certain) arrived from Townsend, Mass., and chose a spot along the "Great River" (the Contoocook) to set up camp. The spot was marked by a rock, against which they built a fire and set food to cooking while they went out to explore. Returning to their campsite, they found that their camp had been raided by Indians, who took every bit of food. Morison and his companion retreated back to Townsend, but he later returned to that very rock, and eventually became one of the first permanent settlers in the town.

The Charter of Incorporation for the town was granted by Wentworth on Jan. 17, 1760. But as noted in the petition for incorporation, 1739 was really when it all began, when the spirit of Peterborough was first ignited. We can be sure that this spirit will be vibrant and well worthy of celebration in 2039.

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