

HISTORY OF THE TOWN OF POWNAL, by T. E. Brownell, Esq.

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The original limits of this town are thus expressed in the charter of 1760: South on the Massachusetts line, west by New York line, north on Bennington, and east on Stamford by the name of Pownal. Pownal was the name of one of the proprietors, but he never resided in the town. Thompson, in his "Tory's Daughter," gives this name to one of the party who were traveling in 1775 from Bennington to Windsor. He may have been a man of some influence in those early days. The first settlers came from two directions. The lands along the Hoosick River were occupied by the Dutch from New York. At a town meeting held June 28, 1760, it was voted to give a man by the name of Kreiger a single "right" on account of improvements which he had already made at a place near the present residence of Mr. Silas Paddock. The rocky bluffs east and south of the village of North Pownal are called after the name of this first settler, "Kreiger rocks." He has no descendants in town. The rocks only perpetuate his name. Another settler occupied what was afterwards known as the "Deal" farm. His name was Hogle. He was killed by the Indians who passed this way from the Mohawk to Massachusetts and Connecticut. His widow returned to Albany, married a man by the name of John Vondeal, and returned to the place where her former husband was killed, and repossessed the lands she had before vacated. Here they remained and died, and their son, Peter Vondeal, succeeded them. The other direction from whence came our first settlers was Connecticut and Rhode Island. Those from Rhode Island settled upon the side hills along the east side of the Hoosick Valley. Those from Connecticut selected the Pine ridges east and north of the center of the town. They did this on account of the large pine trees which grew in this locality, because they thought that the soil which produced such excellent lumber must necessarily be very rich. The Green Mountains are on the east border of the town. Petersburg or West Mountain on the west side. Between these two ranges the topography of the country is that of an inclined plane from the river to the Green Mountains, its level surface broken by frequent hills and rocky ledges, so that to a bird's eye it would have the appearance of a great basin, with the river at its lowest point.

The word "Hoosick," a perversion of Hoosac, and Indian name, means "Great Basin." The Walloomsac River, rising in the southeast part of Pownal, flows northerly along the foot of the Green Mountains until it reaches Bennington, where it turns its course to the west and unites with the Hoosick at Eagle Bridge, N.Y. The Hoosick River furnishes one of the best water-powers in the State. On this stream are now located a knitting-mill owned by Solomon Wright at the village of Pownal, and a large cotton factory owned by the North Pownal Manufacturing Company at North Pownal.

The experience of the first inhabitants of Pownal of course included a great deal of deprivation and hardships. The Indians troubled them at first, and they had to flee to Fort Massachusetts for safety. Then New York threatened those who held rights under the charter of New Hampshire. The owners of a mill near the present site of the McComber Mills were obliged to transport their machinery into Massachusetts to avoid its capture by the New Yorkers. After the charter it was several years before any mill was built, so that in November, 1763 the inhabitants in town meeting voted to pay any one the sum of sixty dollars who would build by the 1st of May next following a corn-mill or a saw-mill. They used to go to mill on horseback by a path through the woods to Albany.

At the time of the Revolution Pownal had a well organized town government. When Bennington battle was fought a number from Pownal participated in it. Some were Tories, but the most of them were patriots and fought under Stark. Captain Angel was a Revolutionary soldier, and after the war drew a pension. George Gardner held a commission under the Crown as justice of the peace. Benjamin Grover preached the first sermon in town. President Hopkins used to say that in the first settlement of Bennington county applicants for lands were largely disposed of according to their religious views. The Congregationalists were mostly settled in Bennington, the Baptists were sent to Shaftsbury, the Episcopalians to Arlington, and all who had no creed were sent to Pownal. This is no doubt an exaggeration, but otherwise there is some truth in it, and Governor Hall in his "Gazetteer" history of Bennington writes of Samuel Robinson, the largest land proprietor among its early settlers, when persons came to purchase lands if he found that their creed was not like his he sent them to Shaftsbury, in which he was also a proprietor. By this it would seem that Shaftsbury instead of Pownal, had a diversity of religious belief, a character which that town did not long possess, for it soon became to be a distinctive Baptist community, from which there went out

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in several of the adjoining towns. Whatever was true of Pownal during its early Colonial days it may be remarked that its people did not remain long without a creed, and a creed, too, that could not be condemned for having no certain dogma. The first church was a Baptist Church and was built of logs and stone in what is now the garden of I.F. Paddock, Esq. This must have indeed have been quite early, because the frame church at the Center was built in 1789, two years before Vermont was admitted into the Union. This church at the Center was a large square building standing in the middle of the "green," and in this respect resembled most of the churches of that day in all of the country towns of New England. It had old-fashioned pews and a gallery that extended around three of its sides. Its pulpit was reached by a flight of stairs, and over the preacher's head was suspended a sounding device which resembled a wooden bowl, and was large enough for the bottom of a p. chy, and its shape answered the purpose. In this church were held all the funerals, and though the average Sunday congregation was small, on these occasions the house was filled to its utmost capacity. Many were the local preachers who sprung up under the shadow of this church. Here Elder Leland, the famous preacher of Cheshire, Mass., who carried to Washington and presented to President Jefferson, "the big cheese," was wont to preach. Often did this strange eccentric man, who carried his bible in a little green bag, lead forth from this church his procession of converts to the middle of the river, and in presence of a crowd of spectators upon its bank, fulfilled the requirements of his church, by performing upon such believers its initiatory right of immersion.

But it was hardly possible from the nature of the case that such a town as Pownal could always be given over to one sect of religious doctrine, if, in any degree, the saying of President Hopkins was true. Opinion, as soon as it begins to form and take expression among such a people, is not apt to be uniform; and so as soon as the Methodists began to spread in this country, after the preaching and death of Whitfield, it was not long before that sect found a lodgment Pownal. Poor at first, but lacking nothing in courage and enthusiasm, these humble believers held their meetings in school-houses, and private dwellings whenever the former was denied them. Controversy ran high, of course, because a territory which had held exclusively so long by a denomination so full of combative elements as the Baptists were in those days would not be surrendered to such invaders without resistance. The war of words was bitter in the extreme, and at that time the language of preachers of either sect was not remarkable for elegance of politeness. One illustration will answer to show the nature of these debaters. The average itinerant Methodist preacher

in the early part of the present century was, to say the least, rather crude, and one also with whom noise had to play an important part, to make up for so many deficiencies. There had been several meetings in the southern part of the town, held by the Methodists, and not a little was said in derogation of the Baptists. The challenge was rapidly accepted and a meeting appointed for Sunday evening, in a school-house. Elder Bennett, a local Baptist preacher, was chosen champion for the occasion. The house was packed, and the preacher did not waste the time with a long introduction. "It is my custom," he said, "always to lay in for the use of myself and friends a good supply of choice cider, yet it cannot be said of me that any stranger ever went away before renewing his strength by a plentiful draught from the well-filled pitcher. And this, my friends, affords me no illustration fitted to the subject under consideration. Whenever I take my pitcher and go down cellar for the usual supply of cider I find that those barrels which sound the loudest have the least cider. So it is with these Methodists. There is too much noise and too little sense." Time, however, settled these disputes, and now two steeples from as many churches, one Baptist and the other Methodist, point upward to the same heaven, near the scene of their former contest. But another and still more serious shock was awaiting our Baptist brethren, and this time the evil which was to disintegrate the church had its origin among its own members. In the autumn of 1840 Miller, the evangelist, visited Pennington, and from the pulpit of the Baptist Church in that place proclaimed the startling prophecy that in 1843 the world was to come to an end and time be no more. Everybody was excited, and while some ridiculed, many thought it was possible, although this period of prodigies, passed by without the world having experienced any extraordinary convulsion. The effects of Miller's preaching was to disseminate among the Pownal church such a heresy that the Association of Baptist Churches of this vicinity saw fit a few years afterwards to exclude it from their body. Not many years ago it was restored to membership, but its orthodoxy is reduced by the "Second Advent" tendencies of some of its members.

John Miller was a captain in the militia during the last war with Great Britain, and was present at Plattsburgh September 11th, 1814. Judge Danforth, of Pownal, Vt., who was also captain of militia at the same time and place, used to tell the following anecdote of Captain Miller. Sometime when in camp a Southern officer apprehended that he had been insulted somehow, and challenged Miller to fight a duel. There was no alternative than to accept the challenge or be branded as a coward. Miller was no duelist.

nor was he skilful in the use of the pistol. In his trouble he consulted with Judge Danforth, who advised him to choose the broadsword instead of the pistol. "Choose that and he will refuse to fight you. You are much larger than he, and will have the advantage with that weapon." Miller chose the broadsword, and, as had been anticipated, the Southern upstart declined to fight, and was drummed out of camp a few days afterwards for cowardice. This Judge Danforth was for many years town clerk of Pownal and was in many respects a remarkable man. He lived at a time when a great deal of litigation was carried on in the justice courts, and he did much business before those tribunals, where he was allowed to enter as an attorney. In those days Elfred Spencer, ---- Royce, who afterwards moved to Rutland, and Judge Pierrepont Isham commenced the practice of law in Pownal. These men who afterwards became prominent lawyers frequently testified of Danforth's ability to manage a lawsuit. Danforth was also a Democrat of the "Jackson" variety and was regarded as a very good debater in political disputes. When Abolitionism first began its career he defended slavery as a divine institution, but latterly, near the close of his life, he confessed that he never believed in his own argument but resorted to it as a device, in the absence of a better device. In his old age, having lost his property and there being none of his relations willing to give him a home, he was for a brief period a public charge. Then he was suddenly removed into a respectable family, where his every want was supplied and his every comfort provided. Who was the author of this timely aid could be for a time a mystery. But at last it was revealed that the secret friend who was causing all this to be done for the old man was none other than one to whom many years ago, when a friendless boy, Danforth had given shelter and support; but who now being a man, was both able and willing to render needed assistance to one who had helped him when he too was dependent upon charity.

When Judge Danforth was comparatively a young man and was living at Pownal Center, a boy who had been unfortunate and had fallen into sin came to his door and begged to be taken in. He stayed with him through the winter, and during that time Danforth, by his discerning mind, discovered in the youthful outcast properties which, if properly cultivated, promised a useful manhood. In the spring, when the time had come for the stranger to take leave of his benefactor, Judge Danforth gave him the parting advice of a friend, and admonished him to repent of his sin and at once to begin to lay the foundations of a character which would be sure to secure him future confidence and success. That counsel was heeded, and thus in his old age the bread

which he had cast upon the unsteady currents of a prodigal's life returned at last to bless and support him when destitute and friendless himself.

We now come down in our history to 1850. At that date a new church edifice, with an *academy* in its *basement*, was completed, and a flourishing school was already in operation. A new religious organization had been formed, but yet had no name. On the 3rd of March a meeting of the proprietors was held where what had been undertaken as a Baptist adjunct was voted to be a Congregational Society, and in May, 1851 a Congregational Church was formed, President Hopkins preaching the *dedicatory* sermon. Of course many of the details in these proceedings are necessarily omitted, and imagination must supply its peculiar scenes or episodes, for it is not *possible* that such an event as the forming of a new church, with a separate and different creed than the old could have happened so quietly and without incident as this brief statement of the affair would imply, for there is a natural law of ideas to which sectarianism is also subject. Each great sect in its being and history have had always its offshoots *represented* somewhere among the minor sects, which were related to it as branches to the main trunk, and between them there is a common dogma which is the substance of sympathy between them, and which determines the degree of their relationship. From so leading a sect as the Baptist, if, in the course of events there is to be *any* breaking off from the main body, that breaking off in its new and independent life will retain and continue *some characteristic* which will indicate its source and origin. And so there is no difficulty in tracing Campbellism and Millerism back to their first parents. But when the divergence is so broad as that which exists between the Baptists on the one hand and the Congregationalists, on the other, a divergence so broad as to obliterate in the offspring a principal and characteristic dogma, we must look for causes as radical and unusual as are the changes produced. Now there are two causes by which so great a change in church creed ---- a change so contrary to the laws governing such movements --- became even possible. The first cause appears in the statement of President Hopkins already alluded to in regard to the state of religion among the first settlers in the town. This condition of "*free* thought" afforded more liberality, no doubt, in feeling and disposition, which left the individual with *fewer* restraints of habit. Another cause which explains these things was the influence of Williams College, which *has even been*, as it is now, a leading exponent of Congregational views such as prevail in New England. The professors of Williams often preached in Pownal, and her students fought its school, and although *denominationalism* was not directly promulgated, they left behind them a *sentiment*

ment which remained in many minds, and which, although latent for many years, at last became sufficiently strong to influence their choice. And so when the time arrived, taking offense at the selfishness of those with whom they had been so long nominally associated, it needed but a suggestion to persuade them to repudiate the old church and to unite in a new church, standing upon a new creed. In this way it happened that Congregational orders had their beginning in Pownal. Strong ideas subsisting under strange circumstances, but ideas which have not failed to produce their own appropriate and salutary results.

Two men appear in connection with this history whose public career have made interesting what otherwise would have been of no account. I refer to President Arthur and President Garfield. It seems that soon after the organization of the church described, by virtue of a resolution extending the use of their edifice to other denominations, when not occupied by themselves, the Baptists, feeling grieved by the course of events, availed themselves of the courtesy, and securing the aid of Rev. Mr. Arthur, father of the President, who was then preaching at Hoosick, they began to hold meetings at five o'clock Sunday afternoon. No sooner admitted within their house than the Baptists commenced the discussion of baptism, seeking to show by Scripture and otherwise their own peculiar views, as they equally sought to ridicule and condemn the practices of their opponents. Disputation waxed warmer, until argument and forbearance had degenerated into invective, and invective had still further descended to blackguardism and abuse, when those who had been invited to come quietly and in peace into their house of worship were forcibly ejected and the doors closed against their further admittance. During this period excitement was wild. Everybody tried to be a theologian. Never were the Scriptures searched so diligently before. "Peters on Baptism" was learned by heart, and his Greek phrases quoted by those who had never studied that language. Groups of men stopped on the sidewalk and talked theology. The laborer in the cornfield leaned on the hoe handle, and with his index finger in his palm dissertated learnedly on the original meaning of baptism. But after a while the excitement abated and the sound of disputation was heard no longer upon our streets and highways. The author of the "Life of President Arthur" tells us that his father, who was a principal preacher on these occasions, was of Irish extraction. If true this will explain how he came by his native wit and humor. Of ready utterance he excelled in those qualities which made his sarcasm most effective, and being quick to discern his adversary was not invulnerable, he struck without pity, no matter how deep the wound his blow produced.

President Arthur had then just graduated from Union College. One day when his father came up to preach, he came with him, and then made arrangements for teaching the school in the academy. He taught school four or five terms, and was teaching during the dispute between these two sects. He proved to be one of the most successful of teachers. His pupils, from the youngest, loved him with a warm affection, and the memory of those days still lingers pleasantly in the minds of all those who are now living. His eye was the most expressive of his features, and it was in this way he governed his school. He attended church and heard his father preach, and although his sympathies might have been with those whose cause his father espoused, yet so proper was his demeanor and so discreet his speech that those who disliked his father most respected the son none the less.

A few years afterward, President Garfield, then a student in Williams College, taught writing school in the same room, and sometimes heard classes recite in Latin. He, too, had a peculiarly expressive eye, and one looking into it would know that beneath was an honest, strong nature, a nature incapable of falsehood and duplicity, as his intellect was incapable of false reasoning. Had these movements extended over the whole State instead of being confined to one of its smaller towns they would have formed an important epoch in its history, but notwithstanding the narrow field of their operations, they yet truthfully illustrate in kind both the means and progress of human thought during the past century. And almost contemporaneous with these changes have occurred similar ones in the political thought and feelings of our people, which would be equally instructive, how men in communities have gradually reached convictions which ultimately have led the whole people successfully through national revolution up to national reform.

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Mead Brownell, son of the writer of this article,
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