

BETHLEHEM
NEW HAMPSHIRE,

BETHLEHEM NEW HAMPSHIRE,

A Bicentennial History

(Updated 1999 Edition)

edited with introductory chapters by

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and 1974–1999 update by

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and written by the people of Bethlehem
with dedication to Hattie Whitcomb Taylor

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TOWN IMPROVEMENTS

During the 1870's and 1880's, possibly in reaction to the shame and guilt resulting from the destruction of the Civil War, Americans began to take a closer look at their cities. America's rapid growth had brought unprecedented prosperity but in its wake came the growing pains — pollution, slums, urban sprawl and, for some, poverty. A "City Beautiful Movement" was launched and all across our nation cities and towns built public parks, improved roads, constructed more attractive municipal buildings and worked toward the improvement of urban life. Bethlehem was influenced by this national movement, for the men that ran the big hotels knew their economic future lay in developing the village in ways that would add to the beauty and comfort of the tourist industry.

On September 6, 1875 a public meeting was held to consider the subject of "general improvements." Governor Henry Howard of Rhode Island was elected chairman of the meeting and Frank Fay of New York was secretary. Among the subjects discussed were sidewalks, drainage for sewage, shade trees, street lamps and street cleaning. Most of the discussion reflected the interests of the hotel managers, for few of the improvements were of actual benefit to the farmers or natives. It was obvious, however, that all Bethlehemites would profit from an improved Bethlehem. Markets for agricultural products and jobs during the summer would be guaranteed if the town continued to attract tourists. An Improvement Association was formed to promote the beautification of our village. The energetic Henry Howard was elected President, and the Vice Presidents included Isaac Cruft, James Turner, Isaac Quimby, Joseph Plummer, Willis Wilder, James Kidder and Frank Fay.



The James Kidder house (left) about 1875, now owned by George Tucker, showing the wheat field between the school house and the Tucker house. Main Street looking west (below) prior to the improvements made in 1875 as a result of a civic action group.





The results of poor town planning as witnessed by this road washout of 1874 prompted the town's hotel owners to form an Improvement Association.

The committee was quite active in its attempts to improve the general condition of the town. The previous summer, 1874, the results of poor town planning were clearly seen. Heavy rains washed away the road leading to Littleton, in some places to a depth of ten feet. The road from Mt. Agassiz and Wallace Hill Road were likewise damaged. The road "around the heater" was so bad the road had to be entirely rebuilt. The hotel managers were dependent on good roads in addition to an attractive village for success in their business ventures. Accordingly, they went to work to improve the town. Apparently, however, the attempts of the Improvement Association were not always appreciated.

In 1876 Governor Howard purchased out of his own funds a \$250 sprinkling cart, wrongly assuming Bethlehem selectmen would appropriate the \$4 a day it would cost to water down the streets. Today, the age of paved streets and motor cars, we forget what an improvement a sprinkling cart would be. Since all of the transportation within the village was powered by animals, the amount of manure on the streets was quite large. Sprinkling the streets not only kept the dust down but helped clean the streets, and this improved the health of the town.

The failure of the selectmen to appropriate the funds caused the following comment in the Lancaster Gazette of August 1879: "Our Bethlehem neighbors are getting a good raking from all sides about their dusty streets. But they seem to have the devil's luck and their own, for people flock to the village notwithstanding the dust. When once there, however, they get such a choking that many hurry off never to return again. The Bethlehemites had a water cart bought for them a year or two ago, but they are too lazy to put it to use. Rather than let it rot they had better send it over here and we will take care that its wheels do not get rusty; or, say the word, Governor, and we'll willingly go and get it."

Closer to home, the August 17, 1878 *White Mountain Echo* jolted many a Bethlehemite with its editorial comment: "But magnificent and picturesque scenery is viewed at a heavy discount when seen thru' clouds of dust. Bethlehem may rest assured that its greatest enemies are its own citizens." A month later the *Echo* harshly noted: "It is hard for them (Improvement Association) to contend against the apathy of the do nothings and hindrance with which the latter beset their path."

The problem of the water cart was finally resolved by having each hotel contribute a

dollar a week for the sprinkling and that proved so successful that a larger sprinkler was acquired by the selectmen in 1883. Two years later the *Echo's* attack mellowed because, "The sprinkler now regularly perambulates the streets of Bethlehem on dry days to the great joy of pedestrians and carriage folk. It is continually on the go and does not require the injunctions of the cop 'to move on'."



When the town did not at first use the water cart given to them as a gift, the *Echo* noted: "Bethlehem may rest assured that its greatest enemies are its own citizens."

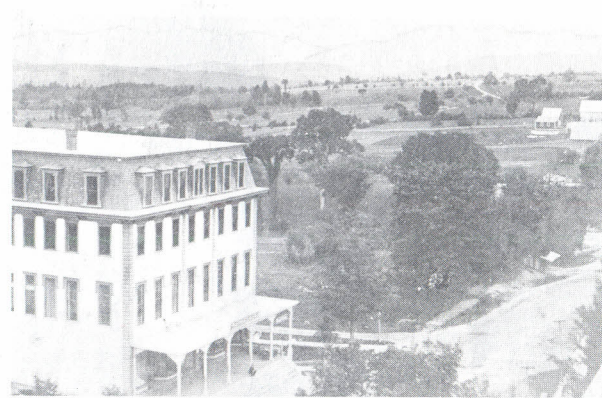
The Improvement Association was responsible for the first sidewalks in Bethlehem. While four or so miles were laid by 1880, they were constantly in need of repair. The *Echo*, never afraid of a fight with the selectmen, noted in August of 1882: "We have heard during the past week of three ladies who have fallen at different places on the plank-walks of Bethlehem, owing to loose boards tripping them up. It is the imperative duty of the Selectmen to have the sidewalks immediately overhauled. They did good work in this respect at the beginning of the season, and we regret to be necessitated to chronicle these mishaps."

Lack of action by the Selectmen produced a comment a month later: "We regret to have to state that complaints have been made to us during the past week of ladies and gentlemen having fallen and severely injured themselves, through the negligence of the Selectmen of Bethlehem to keep the sidewalks in thorough repair. One of the ladies, who has received severe contusions of the face, has, we learn, placed the matter in the hands of an eminent lawyer of the state, with instructions to sue the town for compensation for the injuries she has sustained. When it is found that it becomes more costly to neglect than to repair the sidewalks, it will perhaps become safe to walk upon them."

The following year, 1883, additional walks were laid up to Strawberry Hill and older walks were repaired. The repairs did not progress very well, however, for by the end of the season the *Echo* began running stories on the beauty and low cost of cement sidewalks. By the 1920's things improved and most of Main St. was well graded and paved with cement.

In 1887 the Improvement Association encouraged the town to line Main St. with 60 kerosene lamps, which were used only during

The Cruft Block (right) before its fifth story was taken down in 1893.



One of the more dramatic changes to evolve from the Bethlehem Improvement Association was the filling-in of the "hollow" on Main Street. Prior to 1878 Main Street, between Agassiz Street and Parsonage Street, was more hilly than today.



the summer season. The previous year, 1886, the Maplewood installed electric lights through a portion of its buildings, possibly making Bethlehem the first town in the North Country to have electric lights. In 1895 five men formed the Bethlehem Electric Light Co. and hired George Turner as its manager. They built a wooden penstock from a mill dam and constructed a generator. Houses and hotels were wired and the current, which was on from dusk to midnight, was available at the annual rate of \$3.00. In 1896 the power house was increased and the town replaced the kerosene lamps with electric lights which they kept on all night. In 1908 electric meters were installed.

About 1916 the company changed hands, ran into financial problems and finally went bankrupt. Through the efforts of Mr. Turner, Mr. Glessner became interested in the company's operation. Appointed by the court as a receiver to run the business, he gained a majority of the stock but died before he finally reorganized the company. The Public Service Company bought out the company, compensated its stock holders, and provided an improved electric service to the town. In 1957 the town replaced the electric lights on Main Street with larger fluorescent lights which provide four times the previous illumination.

Both the Selectmen and the Improvement Association were proud of the development of the town. Everyone could appreciate the *Echo's* humor directed toward a thoughtless summer visitor: "A stupid ass on two legs, while passing Ranlett's Cafe at Bethlehem a day or two ago, took pleasure in lopping off a limb from a shade tree recently planted there. It is in this way that improvements are sacrificed to the mischievousness of some idiots. Really a donkey on four legs could not have behaved worse." Another comment of the

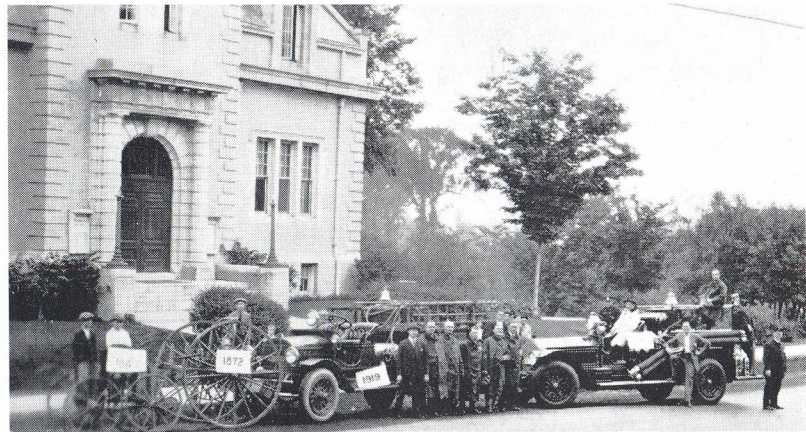
Echo's July 29, 1882 issue may not have been appreciated by as many people: "The Selectmen of Bethlehem are responsible for a nuisance which they can readily abate. A shanty for the illicit sale of liquor may be found in the wood, within a few rods of some of the principal boarding houses and almost close to the roadside, rendering it not alone disagreeable, but absolutely dangerous for ladies and others to drive past, owing to the boisterous behavior of some of the habitués of the den. If the nuisance is not removed immediately, we shall speak more plainly."

While the *Echo* was constantly badgering the Selectmen about details concerning the town, it should not be forgotten that most of the problems were corrected because of the basic decency of Bethlehemites and not the satire of a critical journal.

Another development of the Improvement Association was the construction of the town's reservoir which was started about 1878. A joint stock company was organized, called Crystal Springs Water Works, and water

mains were laid from various springs in the town to the center of the village. From the town's very beginnings one of the major sources of water came from the Blandin Springs on Lewis Hill. Mac Stevenson, throughout the years, has been careful to guard the town's rights to this valuable water source.

Several miles of water mains were laid by the spring of 1879 and the force of the water in the fire hydrants could send water 50 feet above the roof of the Sinclair Hotel. In 1895 a pond near the Prospect House was acquired and water was pumped from there to a reservoir on Strawberry Hill. During the Depression a 1934 WPA project resulted in Bethlehem having the longest water line in New Hampshire. The 17½-mile line which cost \$45,000 brought water from the Gale River on Mt. Garfield and the Zealand Valley stream to the east of the town. A larger reservoir was also built on Strawberry Hill in 1939 with a reserve capacity of 1,300,000 gallons.



The Bethlehem Fire Department in 1925.



"Oh! With PLEASURE
*"I calculate you young gents wouldn't mind
 ridin' inside to commidate two ladies!"*

A cartoon from Harper's Weekly makes fun of
 White Mountain tourists.





Main Street looking west about 1880. Houses pictured are: left, Jerome Bean, Fred Seymour, Burt Therrien, Sewell Winch, Plummer, and Sinclair Hotel; right, Joseph Kidder, Dr. Wells, Avenue House, Squire Kinney, Caleb Bowles, Shute's Blacksmith Shop, Jack Whalen, Isaac Quimby, John Blandin, and the Methodist Church.

RECREATION

Recreation has always been an active part of Bethlehem life. Its pure air, mountain trails and open fields have attracted people here for decades. The hotels encouraged the development of amusements, particularly coach rides to the mountain sights. In 1885 the Bethlehem Amusement Association was formed but it had a short life. Under a blue and white flag with the letters BAA they organized sports activities, built a town ball field and encouraged the development of sports. For many years the hotels supported semi-pro baseball teams which played on a ball ground near Prospect Street. The ball stand that burned down in the 1930's was replaced with a Memorial

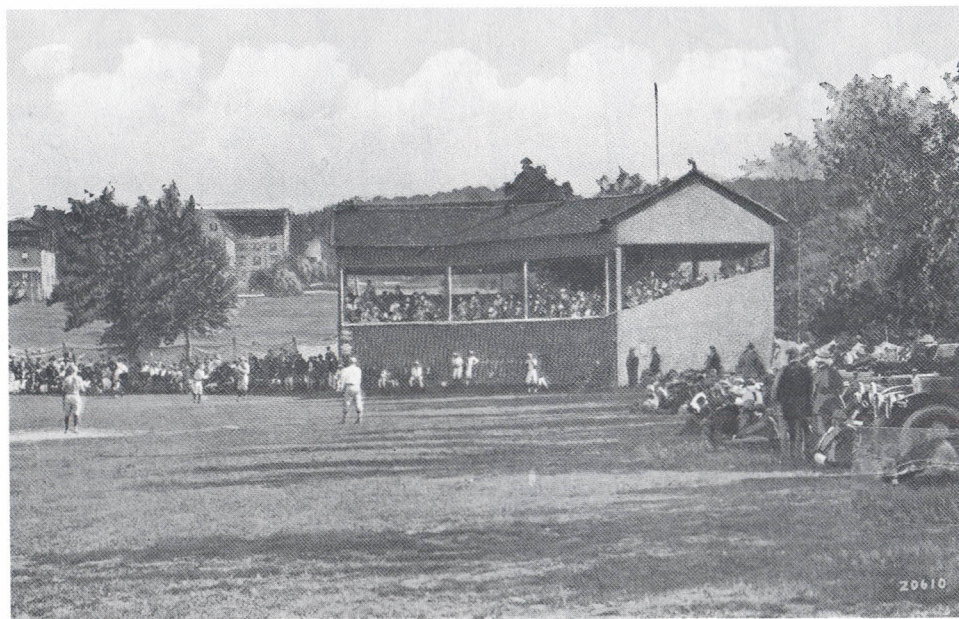
Field in the summer of 1949. Located at the end of Elm Street, it had lights for night games.

In 1899 Fred L. White formed the Bethlehem Park Association, built a club house on the end of Park Avenue, and developed a nine-hole course. In 1909 the course was enlarged to 18 holes and golf became probably the town's greatest amusement. In 1912 a new club house was built on Main Street near the Highland Hotel, on the site of the Bellvue House that burned in 1900.

In 1949 the town acquired the Country Club and it still operates as a public course. Maplewood had its own golf course which remained active even though the hotel burned down in 1963. Acquired by Neil Chase in

1973, it will be used to support the activities of his extensive golf and tennis summer camp for young people. The Maplewood club house, known as the Casino, provided various kinds of amusement including bowling and dancing.

Another casino located on Main Street across from the Post Office had bowling lanes and billiard tables. Harry Goodwin, its manager, kept some of the local boys, such as Ted Gardner and Alfred Huntoon, jumping as pin boys. In front of the casino was White's Souvenir Store. Later the front part of the casino became a garage operated by Frank Bailey. Al Reid recalls an exciting morning when "Blackjack" Pershing had his car repaired at the garage. In 1930 the garage and casino burned down and the area is now used by Sanborn's garage.



The grandstand and grounds in the 1920's. In 1907 Joseph Kennedy, father of President John F. Kennedy, played baseball for a semi-pro Bethlehem team. Kennedy and the other players were individually roomed and boarded at the various hotels.

This grandstand burned down.

The first moving picture shows were held in tents until 1913 when Arthur Dexter opened a theatre on Main Street opposite the present Littleton branch bank. The second theatre was built on Main Street on the site of the Jefferson Spooner House that burned down in 1884. Opened in 1914 by Karl Abbott and Millard Clark, it still has its original name, Colonial Theatre. Opposite the Colonial is the Eaton Block, built in 1877 by C. N. Jones.

First Jones and then C. B. Eaton ran a summer souvenir business in the building. Part of the block is still used during the summer. In back of the Colonial Theatre, B. H. Pierson had a saddle horse stable for several years but this sport is currently not available in the village. Through the years the town has supported a brass band, the first being organized in 1888. The band held concerts during the long summer evenings and marched in parades.



The Bethlehem Little League Baseball was started by Richard Leone, Norman McCulloch, Clayton Sanborn, and John Stevenson in 1960. The first year they played three games with Dalton, N.H. The following year Bethlehem had grown to two teams and Franconia joined the league with one team, with Dalton dropping out. This group has grown every year and today there is a 6-team league — two from Bethlehem, one from Franconia, and three from Lisbon. The first year the uniforms were furnished by town businessmen. Now the program is supported by the Town and by private donations. The highlight of every year is the traditional Memorial Day ball game between the two Bethlehem teams. Out of this program boys have played in the Babe Ruth League in Littleton, and on local high school baseball teams. Many of the youngsters to play on the first Bethlehem teams have grown up and are now coaches and assistants in the program—
and so it continues!

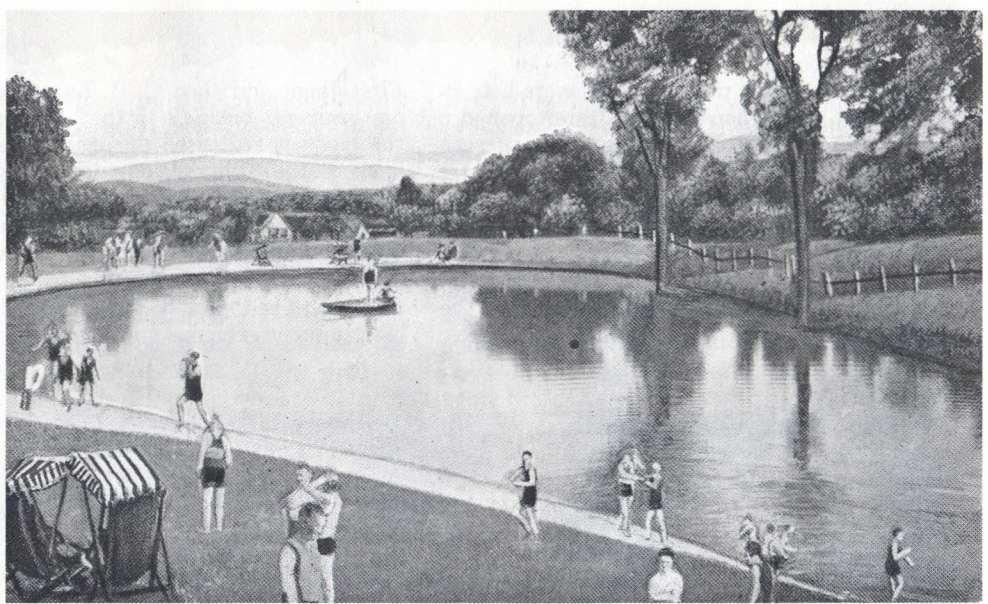
The Bethlehem Public Library was founded in 1877 and was known as the Kenny Library. It was located in the old Methodist Church and is said to have been started by a Mrs. Presby of Littleton with \$1.00 and one book. The library was later moved to the Cruft block and renamed the Bethlehem Library Association. It was financed by subscriptions and donations, with an occasional fund raising event. There was a 2c per day per volume charge which also helped support the library.

In 1913 the library was moved to the new town building, three trustees were elected, and public money was raised for its support. By 1920 there were six trustees serving, and in 1964 three more were elected for a board of nine. There are approximately 10,000 volumes owned by the library with another 3,600 volumes borrowed yearly from the State library. The yearly circulation is about 6,000 volumes.

The Bethlehem swimming pool, completed in 1939, was built as a joint venture between the WPA and the town. Sixty feet wide and 105 feet long, it has a maximum depth of 11 feet. Now over 30 years old, it is constantly in need of repairs which it often does not receive. The pool replaced a swimming pond that was quite popular and attractive.

The town has many clubs and organizations and histories of these are presented elsewhere in this book.

The pond (above right) was located on the site of the present swimming pool which was constructed in 1939. A Bethlehem tennis match (below right) in the early 1900's on the Upland Terrace Courts.







STAGE COACH DAYS

The long summer days were broken by exciting rides through the countryside. These stagecoach rides were probably the highlight of any visit to the White Mountains. They would leave the hotels in Bethlehem, drastically overcrowded by present standards, and lead merry chases to the popular sights. Some of the popular local drives were the Cherry Valley Road and to Bethlehem Junction. "Around the heater," a route formed in the shape of an old flat-iron, was also popular. Beginning on Main Street at the Sinclair, the tally-ho coaches would drive westward and go left over Lewis Hill Road and back down again to Main Street via Agassiz Hill Road.

Originally Agassiz Street was known as Railroad Street, even before Bethlehem had a railroad. Legend has it that a very early resident, who was unpopular, was run out of town over the hill to Franconia. The event must have made an impression for the road was known as Railroad Street for years.

Drastically overcrowded by present day standards, the Abbot-Downing coaches that carried White Mountain visitors could seat fourteen people on top of the coach and nine inside. In this drawing (left, page 89) "veteran whip" Enoch Davisson, the great grandfather of Charles Davisson, a summer resident of Whitefield, is leading a tour of young people while an elder chaperone takes in the view from inside the coach. Right, the Turner coach, carrying thirteen persons, departs to view the sights.

In 1886 Isaac Cruft, proprietor of the Maplewood, constructed a road around the Gale River following Swazey Lane and curving around Mt. Cleveland, eventually coming out on the present Route 142. Picnics and clam bakes were held near the river and present day snowmobilers still roar over portions of the original trail, which is now mostly grown over. Another popular trail was developed on Round Mountain in 1879. Round Mountain changed its name to Cleveland in the spring of 1893, to honor the newly elected president. A bridle path to the summit was completed by Sam Varney, the mountain's owner. A few years later, in 1886, a wider road was built and an observatory was erected on the summit. Varney also built a foot path which branched off the Mt. Agassiz Road about one mile from Main Street.

Ted Gardner recalls that one of the best views in Bethlehem, if not the entire north country, can be seen from the top of Mt. Cleveland. It surpasses the views from Mt. Agassiz because it is higher and in front of Agassiz and thus has a view of the Gale River Valley in addition to the sweeping mountain ranges. Currently owned by Nick Howe, the mountain has a unique distinction which will be found by reading the chapter, *The Uppermost House*.

Some of the "veteran whips" or drivers of the Bethlehem coaches were Will Noyes, Ed Cox, Sime Connery, Curtis Clark, Jerry Johnson, Sam Allard and W. E. Sanborn. In spite of the heavy loads and daredevil antics, it is amazing how few accidents occurred in those days. Only two accidents seemed to have been passed down to us.



The first occurred on the back side of Lewis Hill Road where it intersects with the road to Franconia. Two coaches were on the run from Crawford to Plymouth, the first with a heavy load of young people. A young lady who saw the gaiety of the crowd in the first coach changed to that coach, which proceeded over Lewis Hill Road, then down the steep incline leading to the Franconia Road. The pole strap broke, forcing the heavy coach upon the pole horses which were unable to hold the load back and thus they began to run. The experienced "Whip," Jerry Johnson, was unable to operate the foot brake and when he came to the sharp turn at the foot of the hill the coach overturned. The passengers were thrown to the ground and the young lady mentioned above received fatal injuries. The second coach which she changed from rolled into Plymouth unharmed.

Another accident occurred in 1896 in Bethlehem Junction when a tally-ho coach, carrying 16 guests from the Howard House and driven by Mr. Dean, overturned after they came through the covered bridge over the Ammonoosuc. The passengers, however, landed in soft sand and none was seriously injured.

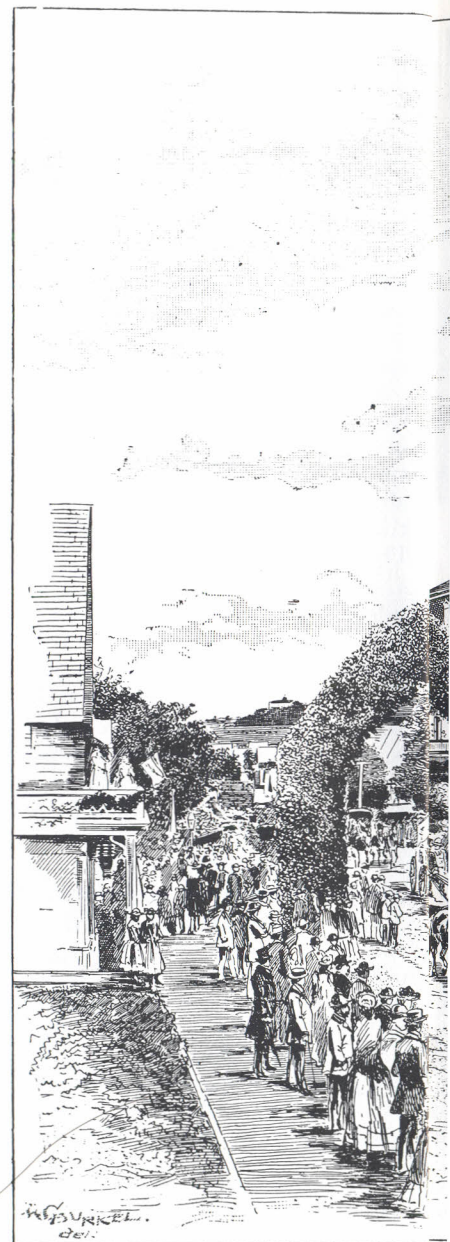
Only a few of these incidents were tragic. A news story of August 9, 1887 noted the typical gaiety of Bethlehem coaching: "The guests of the Centennial House made a most sensational Saturday evening by taking an ox rack ride to Maplewood under the most delightful circumstances. The rack was brilliantly illuminated with Chinese lanterns and was drawn by two yokes of large oxen. The tin horn was not omitted from the equipment of the ride, and if the noise it made was a reliable gauge of the hilarity of the guests they were indeed a merry company. Miss Clare skillfully drove the team with reins of red, white and blue ribbon."



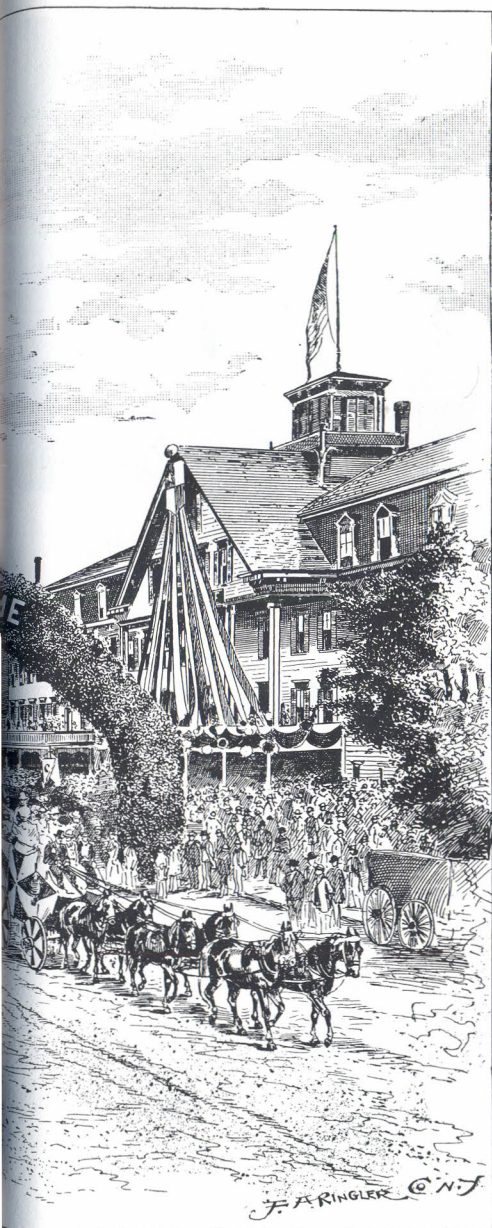
A clam bake on the Gale River about 1900.

The noise and gaiety of the summer tourists no doubt concerned the more sober selectmen of Bethlehem as witnessed by another news story July 31, 1889: "The blowing of horns at the Bethlehem station on the departure of guests has been prohibited. It has been the custom for a dozen or more lusty lunged visitors, armed with jumbo tin horns, to accompany the outwardbound tourists to the station and see them off amid a valley of agonizing toots." While the selectmen may have disapproved of the gaiety of blowing horns at departing coaches and trains, they, like all the residents and visitors of Bethlehem, enthusiastically approved of the annual coaching parade.

On August 22 of each year, beginning in 1887 and lasting until about 1935, the hotels sponsored a "Gala Day Coaching Parade." The parade combined the excitement of the 4th of July with the decorativeness of Christmas. For weeks prior to the parade, coaches were brought in from all over the White Mountains to be secretly decorated and trimmed for the grand parade. The competition for the best coach was keen, and decorators and costumers were imported from Boston and New York.



COACHING PARADE ST.



FIFTH ANNUAL
White Mountain
**COACHING
PARADE!**

Tuesday, August 25, 1891.

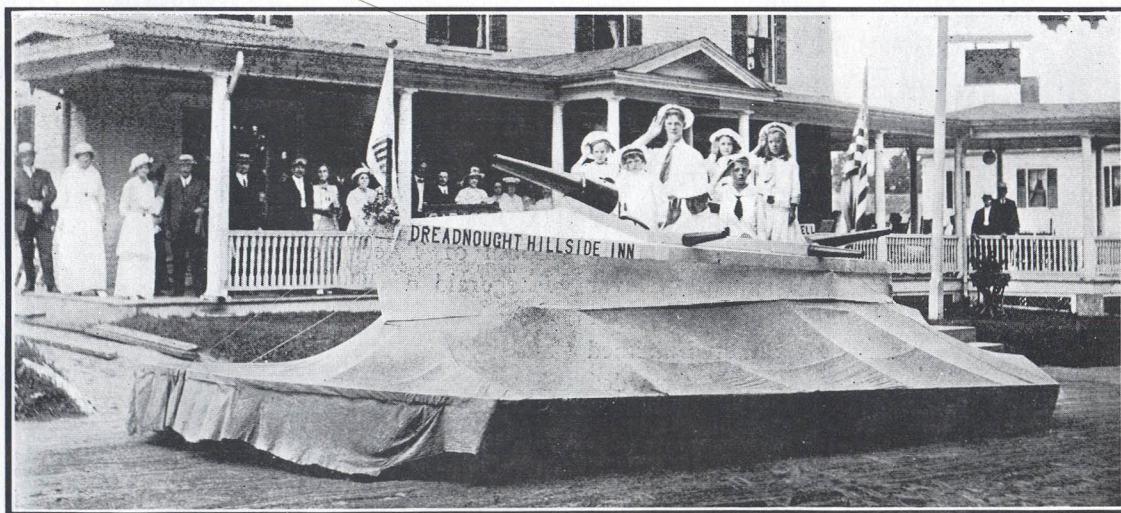
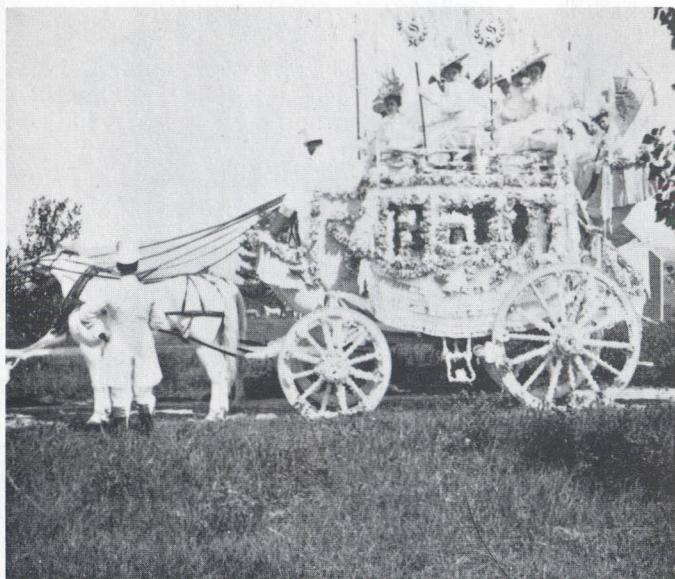
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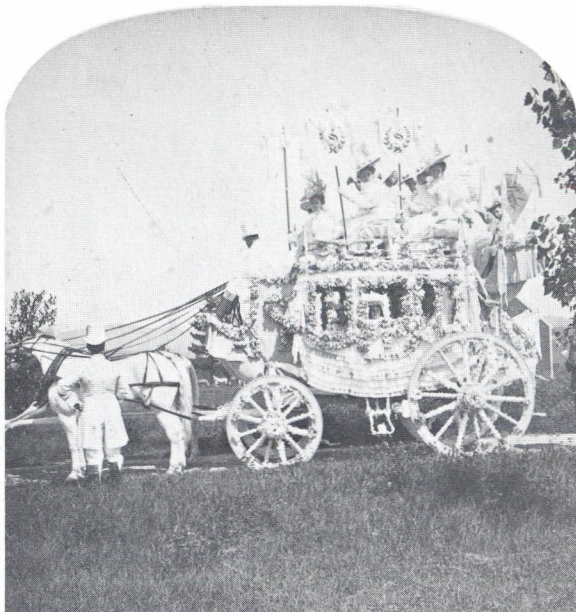
The Great Gala Day!





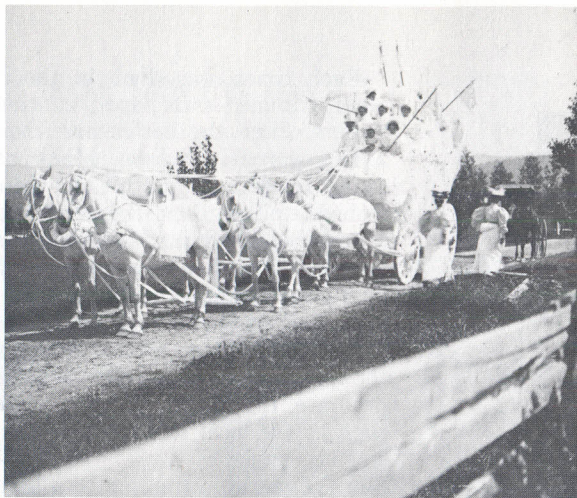
The Coaching Parade
Through the Years
Delighted Hundreds
of People





Hundreds of dollars were spent decorating the various coaches entered in the annual Bethlehem Parade. This event attracted people to Bethlehem from all over the White Mountains. In 1889 P. T. Barnum, the circus owner, came to see the parade.







Each coach was done in the color of its hotel, trimmed with paper, bunting, silks and flowers. Even the horses and their harnesses were covered with trim. Many of the year-round residents of Bethlehem were no doubt amused to see their rugged "veteran whip" friends bedecked in silks and satins atop their hotel's coach. It was a fantastic sight to behold — the long line of coaches, some decorated at an expense of \$3,500 each, strung along Main Street. It was grand fun for the tourists for they usually helped the hotel decorate the coach. Other people in town, such as the local businessmen, also decorated wagons, and these were a part of the parade. Since it was an attraction that brought people from all over the mountain region, merchants and homes along Main Street decorated their buildings in bunting. Prizes were given to the best decorated coach, the coach with the prettiest girls, the coach coming the greatest distance, and the handsomest turn-out. Both the Bethlehem Brass Band and the Littleton Brass Band played appropriate music throughout the day.

At the second coaching parade, in 1888, U.S. Supreme Court Lamar was the judge of the parade. J. E. Smith was the first chief marshal with W. H. Webster as his assistant. General G. T. Cruft was chairman of the event for many years. About 1911 decorated automobiles began to make entries, and in 1914 a Phaeton was drawn by Mike and Dennis, horses from the Sinclair House that had participated in all of the parades since 1887.



SIR ISAAC NEWTON GAY

Sir Isaac Newton Gay ran a curio museum comprised of bits of broken glass, colored paper and trash left by the roadside. Gay was beloved by summer tourists as well as the local natives. Each year he was given a grand birthday at the Maplewood. While his museum may have been a rather whimsical affair, his conversations could be fascinating and informative. The *Echo* interview of 1878 gives insight to his knowledge and personality:

"I was born," said he, "as you see my board outside, on the 16th of July, 1796. My folks—that is, my mother (my father died soon after I was born, arrived in Bethlehem on the 19th of February 1798, about nineteen months after my first appearance. Upon the death of my father, my mother took up her abode with a married sister, and accompanied her when her husband moved out into the forest, for Bethlehem was indeed a forest then. The settler in those days had to bolt and bar his log cabin door at night time, and securely, too, for bears, wolves and wildcats roamed at will throughout the sparsely settled district and often times the terrible howling of the wolves around our cabin kept its occupants awake for many hours of the night.

"Our family was the seventh to arrive in Bethlehem, and upon our arrival, the others turned out and with a will helped to put up the long one-story cabin common amongst the early settlers, and which was the residence of our families for many years.

"In those days it was pretty hard to get anyone to settle in Bethlehem. The site of the settlement was laid out by a surveyor named Snow, who also surveyed the sites of Littleton, Franconia and the surrounding district. You could buy land then for seventy-five cents an acre.

"Snow offered 600 acres free to any who would settle in Bethlehem, and not a few accepted his offer. There were only two houses between where the Twin Mountain House now stands and the bridge at Littleton then."

