HISTORICAL ADDRESS

Delivered by Erastus P. Jewell Esq.,
at the Old Home Week
Exercises

LACONIA, NEW HAMPSHIRE

AUGUST 1, 1905

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HISTORICAL ADDRESS

August 2, 1855, the new town of Laconia entered upon its political existence. Tomorrow we celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of that event. I have been a resident since 1859 and have been familiar with the growth and prosperity of the thrifty municipality for forty-six of the fifty years of its existence. Others today will speak of things pertaining to this wonderful half century which reaches its completion tomorrow, and of the hopeful future which awaits the beautifully environed City of the Lakes.

This is a memorial day, and the new city welcomes the return of former residents to renew old acquaintances and the associations of the fixed and enduring charms of their old home.

It has fallen to my lot to speak, briefly of course, of the early days, to say something of the dawn of civilization in this central portion of New Hampshire, something of the pioneers—"The hardy sons of the sterling stock" who confronted the stern and relentless conditions incident to their assault upon the wild, dark and unexplored wilderness—something of their labors and toils upon the foundations of the ancient Laconia, more than a hundred years ago.

The section of country where we live has but a brief history. Nothing is known of the vast and awful past of America during the endless ages which preceded its discovery by civilized man. Imagination alone can enter the mighty caverns which hold the secrets of the eternal and silent past.

The Winnipesaukee Lake region was not actually discovered for more than a quarter of a century after the first settlement of New England. After the lake was first seen by white men, a century more passed before settlements were attempted.

About 1736 some courageous and hardy adventurers pushed into the wilderness as far as Gilmanton and built two block houses within the limits of the old town. These were the first houses ever built upon the territory now included in Gilmanton, Belmont, Gilford and

Laconia. These houses were very appropriately called "block houses." They were made of heavy logs, and the one at the lower part of Gilmanton was eighteen feet square. The house at the outlet of Winnipesaukee Lake was fourteen feet square. For some unknown reason the block house at The Weirs was known as "White Hall." Two years later, in 1738, a road was cut from one house to the other, but no actual settlement is noted until about twenty-three years later, although the town was incorporated in 1727.

Among the grantees of a charter of old Gilmanton, issued by King George, there were twenty-four persons by the name of Gilman, hence the name of Gilmanton. It was originally spelled Gilman Town. Everything pertaining to old Gilmanton history is equally interesting to Laconia, Gilford and Belmont.

Laconia is fortunate in having at the outlet of the lake the oldest public monument in New England, the celebrated Endicott Rock, which has upon its granite face an inscription placed there in Colonial days to mark a permanent bound indicating the northern limit of the grant to the Massachusetts Bay Company. The extreme limit of said grant was then supposed to be three miles northerly from this rock. There is no reasonable doubt that the inscription was cut in the historic stone upon the first day of August, 1652. It marks an important historial event, and may well be considered as the beginning of our local history. Today is the two hundred and fifty-third anniversary of the discovery of Lake Winnipesaukee. At this time this inland water was first visited by civilized man. The old Colonial explorers, John Sherman, Simon Willard, Edward Johnson and Jonathan Ince, left their abiding initials upon the stone and departed, never to return.

With the exception of lands which were cultivated at The Weirs and a few other places by the Indians, the territory embraced within our city limits was an unbroken wilderness until about 1766. At this time Ebenezer Smith and Jacob Eaton built their log houses and commenced clearing away the forest. Prior to 1652, when the Endicott Rock was marked, probably no white man had ever stepped upon the soil of Laconia. From this time no civilized man again appears until just before the construction of the block houses in 1736.

The exact location of Smith's first house is not known, but Eaton's house was built where George Hilliard formerly lived, near The

Weirs; and not long after Smith's arrival we find he had his home where Lowell Cawley recently lived. The first road to The Weirs was from very near Smith's house to Jacob Eaton's, about where the road now runs.

On the lot where Eaton built his log house were a few apple trees, which evidently had been planted by the Indians. These were the only apple trees, as far as I know, ever found upon an Indian farm in this part of the country. Probably the ground about the trees and in the vicinity had been planted for years with corn, beans, pumpkins and squashes, which the Indians raised. These apple trees were a great inducement to Eaton and without doubt had much to do in determining where he should build his house. The apples were quite small, hard and sour, but really good cooking apples, and the fruit upon all the trees was strangely alike. Some forty years ago Mr. Augustus Doe, a very intelligent and well-remembered citizen, who lived at The Weirs, informed me of these ancient apple trees, and kindly went to Mr. Hilliard's and pointed out their location. At that time trees still bearing hard, sour apples were growing upon the ancient roots of their pioneer ancestors and traces of ancient stumps were still to be found, of which I still have fragments as reminders of the never to be forgotten visit to the home of the first settler of Laconia.

Here the first white child was born. The little baby girl was named Thamor Eaton. When she died and the place of her rest is unknown. I have thought it would be a great pleasure to place a monument over her grave, if we could really know the place of her repose.

Soon after the birth of the Eaton child, a male child was born to Ebenezer Smith. Mr. Eaton had settled with the understanding with the proprietors that the first child born in the town should be entitled to a certain amount of land, or a right of land, as it was called. When the Smith child was born, Smith claimed that the right of land was to the first male child that was born in the town. Land was not very valuable then and a friendly compromise between Smith and Eaton was the result. Eaton took forty or fifty acres where his house was built and Smith took "the lion's share"—more than two hundred acres, I think.

Ebenezer Smith was one of the proprietors himself, as well as a

first settler. He owned a large amount of real estate, and a majority of the early settlers bought their land of him. He was a very superior man and in his day was a power. He was born in Exeter, N. H., in 1734, and died in 1807, seventy-three years of age. He was a justice of the Court of Common Pleas for old Strafford County from 1784 to 1787. He was Judge of Probate from 1797 to 1805. He represented his town in both branches of the legislature, and at one time was President of the Senate. He was energetic, strong minded and level headed, and a most valuable man for any community. He was minister, doctor, lawyer, referee, justice of the peace and general counsellor for the people. Everybody went to him for advice. He advised in religious concerns, as well as in legal matters. He wrote the wills, deeds, and all sorts of contracts for a large community. He was king in all legal matters in his day, and his influence extended far beyond the limits of old Meredith. I have sometimes found his plainly written signature on legal instruments more than one hundred and twenty years old. Ebenezer Smith may be regarded as the father of the town.

At the time of his death there were only a few scattered families in town. Often one's nearest neighbor was miles away through the wilderness. There were no villages then. There were no carriage roads. There were no carriages. People went on foot in summer or rode on horseback, often tracing their way by spotted trees. Sometimes four persons rode upon the back of a horse. The late Dr. John L. Perley told me that in his childhood he had seen three and four persons together ride upon the back of a horse. The ancient horse was indeed a pack horse, a beast of burden. Upon his back was carried almost everything which is now moved upon wheels. Potatoes, apples, bags of grain, lumber, furniture and burdens of all kinds were piled upon his back. Often the faithful horse was the only conveyance for entire families journeying long distances to some new home in the wilderness. Let us pay our tribute of respect to the memory of this almost forgotten toiler, the pioneer horse, whose unappreciated privations, hardships, labors and sufferings were silently and patiently shared with our predecessors.

Ebenezer Smith died before a wagon was ever seen in this section of the state. James Jackson of Meredith, it is said, built the first wagon ever used in this vicinity. It was an enormous affair,

very heavy and of great strength. It was built after the year 1810. People went to see it as a curiosity, but few would venture to ride in it, especially going down hill.

Among the influential men of the early days, who came after Smith, was Stephen Perley. Twenty-one years after the settlement of the town, Perley came, in 1787. He was then only seventeen years old. He was born in Ipswich October 7, 1770. He became an important factor and contributed more than any other man in his time to the growth of the southern part of the town—what has always been known as "The Bridge." Young Perley was full of energy and push, and started a little store about where the passage-way is at the northerly end of the Grand Army building. There were less than ten houses within a mile of him when he opened his little store. There was no doctor, no lawyer, no minister at "The Bridge" when Perley came.

The first physician to arrive in town for practice was Dr. Call. Something more than a century ago, he lived on the Langdon G. Morgan place, uptown. He was a regular, and took care of the few who were sick. I have met one man who could remember this first physician, the late venerable Eliphalet Blaisdell of Lakeport, but he was unable to give a description of the man who lanced his finger when he was a mere child.

December 10, 1791, a notification for a town meeting was posted in Meredith by the selectmen. One of the main purposes of the meeting was "To see if the town would vote to give the Reverend Simon Finley Williams a call to settle in the ministry in said town." Town meeting was held January 2, 1792, when it was "voted to give the said Mr. Williams a call to settle as above." A committee of fifteen was chosen to take into consideration all matters pertaining to the settlement of the minister. The committee reported that in their opinion "the town should build a house 40 x 32 feet, two stories high, for Mr. Williams, in the first division lot, called 'The Minister's Lot,' and board, clapboard and shingle said house, and make and complete a good cellar under one-half of said house, and build a good stack of chimneys in said house, and furnish three rooms in said house in good workmanlike manner, to be done and completed by the first of November next as settlement, and to give Mr. Williams sixty pounds as a salary yearly so long as he shall continue the town minister; the third part of said sum to be in cash, one-

third in corn and grain, and one third part to be paid in good beef and pork, the above beef and pork to be at the common cash price."

The town voted that if Mr. Williams should settle in town, that he should preach in the second and third divisions their full proportion, according to the money they pay towards the support of said Williams, if requested. Mr. Williams' letter of acceptance was dated January 28, 1792. A church was organized August 20, 1792, with only nine members, with Mr. Williams as pastor.

Williams at this time was twenty-eight years old. He was a well educated man and very pleasing in his manners. He came from somewhere in New Jersey. This little church increased while Williams remained until it numbered twenty-nine members. He lived in the house, 40 x 32 feet, which the church had built. This house was on the Parade, a few miles from the city. He preached to the diminutive assembly, which probably gathered from a large surrounding country to hear him, at a little meeting house not far from his residence.

Not many years after Mr. Williams had established this church, serious charges, which were then supposed to greatly affect his Christian character, were made against him. Church meetings were held and the most serious and exciting investigation took place. So serious did the matter become that the church appointed a day for fasting and prayer for guidance in the path of duty. Outside ministers were invited to come and take part in the proceedings.

The exact nature of the accusations have not been fully preserved. March the second, 1797, Mr. Williams asked for a dismisal. After a long time of trouble, the church, on the 28th day of August, 1798, passed the following vote:

"Voted that the pastoral relations between the Reverend Simon F. Williams and this church be dissolved agreeably to his request on the second day of March, 1797. The church, however, cannot consistently dismiss him in regular standing nor hold him in fellowship as a private member: but are constrained in faithfulness to God, to ourselves and to him to bear testimony against his un-Christian conduct as a forfeiture of his Christian and ministerial character and to suspend him from all special privileges in the church, until he

shall testify to his repentance and secure forgiveness of the church.

(Signed) "John R. Roberts, Moderator.

"John Cate, Clerk."

Mr. Williams took a very different view of his own character and continued in his religious work. He immediately enlisted as chaplain in the United States navy. In 1801 he sailed with Commodore Preble in the frigate Essex to the East Indies. He took fever in June, 1802, and died July 3d, the same year. Wherever an American could be found in those early days, he would celebrate the national birthday. Commodore Preble had arranged for an address from the chaplain upon the deck of the Essex upon the fourth of July, but upon that day, instead of the celebration, the sad-hearted crew tenderly shrouded the lifeless form of the chaplain and performed the solemn ceremony of the burial at sea. Into the profound depths, far below the sound of the upper seas, into the dark and awful ocean sepulchre, sank the remains of Simon F. Williams, after a brief life of intense earthly activity.

More than a century have the billows rolled far above the lonely and undisturbed sleeper, but the great watch stars which looked down upon the first night of his repose still shine above him, as if to watch and guard his rest, until the great awakening when the sea shall give up its dead.

Upon the dismissal of Mr. Williams the little church faded out. It does not appear that they ever had regular meetings afterwards, and I think the organization was lost. The old meeting house, or portions of it, was moved to Lakeport, and it was finally destroyed in the great fire of 1903. Some parts of the old dwelling house are still standing upon the Parade.

While it is apparent that this first minister was involved in some trouble with his church, which resulted in his dismissal and condemnation, I am inclined to think, viewed in the light of the twentieth century, that Mr. Williams was neither un-Christian nor immoral. He evidently was an educated, courageous, thoughtful and exceptionally able man for his day; far in advance of the narrow and inflexible views which men largely and seriously entertained in the latter part of the eighteenth century, when the sound of a hornpipe or the sight of the jack of clubs would scare the old worshipers worse than an earthquake or the incarnate devil. Today there is no doubt

that this accomplished clergyman, if living, would enjoy the fellowship and respect of every minister and Christian in the city, while it is very doubtful if the dear old pioneers who were wont to assemble for worship in the little, cold old eighteenth century church upon the Parade would enjoy or even tolerate the attractive services as conducted today by our accomplished and educated ministers.

Notwithstanding the cloud which hung like a dark shadow over the name of the first minister, there is something like a charm to me in the noble Christian services which he continued to render as chaplain in the United States navy, something in his labors and death which lifts him above the cloud of superstition and doubt.

He evidently took a great intesest in public matters outside of his ministerial duties. He delivered a patriotic oration at Meredith Bridge July 4, 1796, which undoubtedly was the same that he intended to deliver from the deck of Commodore Preble's ship upon the very day when he was consigned to his ocean sepulcher in 1802. This interesting address was published and is still preserved. It was bound up with other brilliant orations—of John Lowell, Rev. William Emerson, E. T. Channing of Boston and ten other noted Massachusetts orators from 1796 to 1820. This rare volume is very scarce and expensive.

Mr. Williams had a son, who, years after his father's death, came back and visited his old home and the church upon the Parade, where his father had preached. He was then in the service of the Russian government as an officer of the navy. I learned this from aged people, now deceased, who remembered his visit. They spoke of him as an accomplished gentleman, like his father.

After 1798, no meeting house was built for quite a period, but meetings were occasionally held in the old church and among the inhabitants. Among the people there was a great diversity of religious opinion. At last the people of all faiths united to build a church at "The Bridge." Stephen Perley came to the front in this matter, as in all others. He was a Universalist, and the new church largely owed its existence to him, but Congregationalists and Free Will Baptists had an interest in proportion to their contributions to the building, and occupied it proportionately. Traveling ministers of all denominations occupied the pulpit occasionally. At last the various elements got mixed and into trouble, as we should expect.

A lawsuit grew out of the confusion, which was amicably adjusted, and finally the beautiful church was burned. It stood near the residence of the late Judge Lovell.

In 1813 the place contained thirty houses all told, but some were mere shanties. At Lakeport, at this time, I think there were but two houses. Some portions of one of these houses still remain in the small house next to the H. J. Odell store on Gold street.

Stephen Perley lived on the corner where Knight & Huntress' store is. He had his store in the same house. He soon built a second and better building on the opposite side of Mill street, where the fruit store is now located. Perley was the pioneer merchant.

At this time the old Province Road was the only road to the place. It came into town through Gilmanton and crossed the river a little south of the present bridge in this city. It went up Pleasant street by Lewis Perley's over the hill towards Meredith Center and Fogg's Station. The old bridge across the Winnipesaukee river was narrow and close down to the water. It is said that for quite a period it had no railing, until a Mr. French got drowned, when it was soon protected by a rail on one side. People in the summer often passed through the river, which was wide and shallow at this point. On the lower side, about on a line with Smith's block and not far below the bridge, was a big rock and a deep hole in the river, where farmers used to wash their sheep. The old Province Road in those days was a rude affair, quite narrow and bordered with heavy, old-growth trees, except an occasional clearing. A small brook, which sometimes went dry in the summer, but not often, crossed the road in front of the Unitarian church and flowed down to the river near where the car shops now stand. Over this brook was a low bridge of one length of plank at first, over which the few inhabitants were wont to pass, although they quite as often passed at the ends of the bridge through the brook.

Prior to 1810 Perley had built up a large business, considering the small size of the place, and this year he began the construction of the canal, which still bears his name, following nearly the course of the brook as it crossed the street. This little brook crossed Main street near the residence of Mr. Shannon. Sometimes there was a pond back of the Russell house of nearly a third or half an acre, where the boys used to skate in winter. There was then no Main street, as now, above Bank Square.

After the canal was dug across Main street, it was first spanned by a little bridge some twenty feet long and not more than ten feet wide. After the war of 1812, Mr. Perley dug out and greatly improved the canal, which was of but little use before that time, as he could get but little water through it from the river above. The object in constructing it was to get additional power from the river for an oil mill. It was first used for grinding flaxseed; afterwards Perley used it for a threshing machine, for a wheelright shop and a saw mill. A distillery also flourished upon it in the morning of our municipal history. Before the days of the canal, Perley had a cotton mill, potash and oil mill on the south side of Mill street, back of his dwelling house. He sold the cotton business to Samuel H. and Nathan Bean. They did a flourishing business on Mill street. They put in a new carding machine and dye works. Enormous quantities of rolls were carded by the Beans for farmers. This was the beginning of the woolen business in Laconia. They took the wool and manufactured it into fulled cloth, and also dressed cloth for people who had it woven at home on the old hand looms which were then in almost universal use. The farmers raised flax in great quantities then and marketed the seed in this thriving little village. Perley bought all he could get and manufactured more than fifty barrels of oil a year, with which he supplied his customers here, and sold the surplus readily abroad.

After excellent success in his second store, Perley sold it to Ebenezer Danforth and built another at what was recently known as "Number Eight," Mill street. The town had grown very fast, everything considered, and about this time a little cotton mill, with a bell on it, stood where the Belknap Mills now stand. Daniel Tucker had become prominent and had a blacksmith shop with a bellows operated by water power. He had a trip hammer which made solid music and could be heard a great distance by the people. A blacksmith shop was then a great institution. Tucker made scythes, axes, ploughs, shaves, knives and almost everything in the iron and steel line which was then used. Nails were then made by hand. Most everything which was made for his customers he also kept on hand for sale. This old and very smart establishment, I think, stood near where Mr. Esty's mill is now. Just below, on the river, or near it, was the brass foundry. Here the first bell which ever hung in town

was cast. This bell was put on the old cotton factory, which was afterwards burned. The late Timothy D. Somes came to Meredith Bridge in 1813. To him and Dr. John L. Perley I am indebted for much information concerning these early days. I rely mainly on them for the correctness of the statements which I make.

Among the almost forgotten industries of the past I might mention the quite extensive brown earthenware manufactory of Deacon Kimball. This ancient and exceedingly useful ware was made opposite Dr. Wells' house. It found a ready and profitable market long ago, but has entirely disappeared. The manufacture of lumber was from the beginning a very important industry. The sounds of the saw mill and the grist mill were heard continually. Both were important factors in the prosperity of the infant town. The saw mill and the grist mill were indispensible to its growth.

Asa D. Eager was a saddler who had a tannery near where the brick stable stands. He looked out for the people where the late Richard Gove supplied his customers with gold and silver ware. Daniel Avery, the cooper, contributed much to the comfort and well being of "The Bridge." His place of business was where the old corner store stands, now occupied by John Parker Smith. Back of Avery's was a potash business. Avery also sold groceries and rum. All the traders sold rum. They all bought ashes and flaxseed. I am credibly informed that in those days this was not a drunken or disorderly town.

The early cabinet maker, Mr. Ephraim Mallard, and the old hatters, Doe, Young, Hopkinson and Edwards, are well remembered by a few living men.

In addition to all his other business, Perley was a large land owner and was an extensive cultivator. He did a great amount of teaming for himself and others. Portsmouth was then the great New Hampshire market place. He employed in all his branches of business a large number of workmen the entire year. His teams not only went to Portsmouth, but were often seen in Salem and Newburyport, where he was well known.

The ancient traveler put up at the tavern, which was on Pleasant street where Rev. J. P. Atkinson lived, later. It was the first hotel at "The Bridge." The second hotel was where Judge Lovell died, and was kept by James Chase. There was a very ancient tavern on

the Parade, at one time kept by a Mr. Young, which may have been the first in town.

The Parade, at the time the first church was located there, was the center. Here the people of old Meredith met for the transaction of town business. Until comparatively recent years the town meetings were held in the ancient church where Williams preached.

No reliable description, so far as known, of the personal appearance of Ebenezer Smith has been preserved. What a pleasure it would be if we could have photographs of the ancient worthies who left the stage before the art of photography was discovered. Stephen Perley, the man whose influence was so powerful more than a century ago in shaping our early history, lived until 1856, and is, of course, remembered by some of our very oldest people. Fortunately, a fairly good oil painting of him is in existence and may be seen in Memorial Hall. It is perhaps the only portrait in existence of any of the very early settlers; but during Old Home Week our citizens and guests may find upon the walls of Memorial Hall a large collection of portraits and photographs of eminent citizens of the succeeding generation who established upon the foundations of the fathers our beautiful Laconia.

The men that made old Meredith famous a century ago and the old institutions of that day have passed away, and other actors have been upon the stage who did not fail to take cognizance of the riches of their environment. They recognized the smile of God upon our magnificent hills and our beautiful inland waters. Inspired by their surroundings, their work was characterized by taste for the beautiful as well as the practical. The wild Indians were touched with the transcendent charm of our natural scenery, and, departing, left a record of their appreciation in the beautiful Penacook word-sentence, Winnipesaukee.

It is doubtful if the very early builders of Laconia saw much that was attractive in their natural surroundings. They were necessarily so absorbed with the cares and exacting duties incident to their struggle for existence, that there was very little opportunity for sentimentality. They were hard toilers upon our historic foundations. Rugged, sturdy work confronted these strong, courageous men. They had great fortitude and endurance, but beyond these elements of success they had little outfit to aid them in their struggles a century and a quarter ago.

The homes of the very first settlers were small, rude log houses, and the men who so seriously investigated and condemned the first minister were strangers to the bewildering inventions of today. They were familiar with the tinder box, the foot stove, fire place, Dutch oven, tallow candle, spinning wheel and hand loom. They were strangers to friction matches, stoves, furnaces, steam heaters, gas and electric lights. The days of railroads, regular mails, newspapers, magazines, libraries, schools, telegraphs and telephones had not arrived. Base ball, foot ball, basket ball, automobiles, labor unions and hustling politicians were not in sight. And yet no doubt they were happy and contented in their way. They were not here for recreation and rest. They were not summer tourists. They were here to stay through the winter as pioneers of civilization, to attack and conquer the wilderness, and to make possible the farm, the garden, the city, and the luxurious homes of comfort which are ours today.

It is wonderful how our fathers could have accomplished so much with the meager equipment of the times in which they lived. The century just passed has swept nearly all their names into oblivion. The names of scarcely a score of the associates of Ebenezer Smith and Stephen Perley will ever be spoken upon our streets. The immense mass of mankind are all doomed to be almost entirely forgotten in less than a hundred years, and great historic events finally become dim as the years roll on and at last disappear forever upon the distant horizon.

Our monuments of brass and stone are as clay before the onslaught of the conquering years. Time respects not human achievements. The grim, relentless warrior, with merciless strides, tramples all material things into oblivion in his endless march and pauses not amid the ruin he has wrought.

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