

PART VII: 1826-1840

An event of historical significance took place in 1826 with the publication of the town's first history. Salma Hale's *Annals of Keene* traced the community's development from its settlement to 1790, after which date the author wrote, "but few, if any, events have occurred, which would be interesting or instructive." Hale compiled the 69-page historical record at the request of several citizens of Keene and the newly-founded New Hampshire Historical Society in whose *Collections* the work first appeared. Jacob B. Moore of Concord printed it, and the annual town meeting voted to procure 400 copies for the local demand, "provided that the expense does not exceed 50 dollars."

The original edition of the *Annals* contained many typographical errors, was very brief and omitted mention of several notable events. Nevertheless, it was an important historical sketch and proved popular. Interest in the work prompted requests for a further account, and in 1848 Hale was prevailed upon to bring out a new edition, printed in Keene in 1851, which corrected previous errors, continued the history to 1815, and included valuable maps of the village in 1750, 1800, and 1850.

Hale had acquired some reputation as a writer with an English grammar he wrote at the age of 17. Active in state and local organizations, he was also a trustee of Dartmouth College and the University of Vermont, and a congressman from 1817 to 1819. About the time the *Annals* first appeared his *History of the United States* was published. This won a prize and a gold medal from the American Academy of Languages and Belles Lettres and saw many editions published in Keene, New York, and London.

The 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence was celebrated in grand style at Keene, as elsewhere in America. A new church bell had been acquired for the local festivities, and it was rung at sunrise, accompanied by 24 cannon salutes. The procession of several hundred citizens and friends of the community, officials of the day, and clergy was escorted by the Keene Light Infantry to the Meeting-house, where services were held and an oration delivered by Rev. Thomas R. Sullivan. Patriotic music was rendered by the Keene Musical Society, and following the exercises "a very handsome entertainment" and banquet were offered to some 150 "under an artificial bower," where 13 regular and 16 voluntary toasts were offered.

The year 1826 was sometimes called the "grasshopper year" because of the great number of these insects and the serious damage they inflicted. They destroyed gardens, field crops, and even clothes hung out to dry.

In 1827 the state legislature divided Cheshire County and created Sullivan County from a north section. The move was the result of years of agitation; after the division, the sessions of court formerly held at Keene and Charlestown were no longer shared, and Keene became the leading town of the area. As early as 1812 Walpole had made a serious bid to become the seat of Cheshire County, with an offer to erect suitable buildings. Swanzey was also at one point considered a candidate but, after the division of the territory, no serious threats to Keene's position were advanced, even though the village still lagged behind others in population for a few more years. In December 1826 the entire village consisted of but 202 buildings.

A mail stage line was begun in 1826 and offered service to Templeton and Worcester, Mass., and Norwich, Conn., and connected with New York three times a week. In 1827 daily mail stages ran through Keene for Middlebury and Burlington, Vt., and Montreal, Canada. Another competing line ran through Rindge and Fitzwilliam, with service through Keene passing on to Surry, Drewsville, Charlestown, and Woodstock, N. H., and Montpelier and Windsor, Vt., and Hanover, N. H., giving Keene two daily stages to and from Boston. The fare to Boston in 1834 was \$2.50 by the old line and \$3 by the Telegraph and Dispatch Line, which guaranteed to make the run in 12 hours. Upon completion of a railroad from Boston, stages were established about 1837 to connect with trains at Lowell, Mass. In 1829 petitions were circulated in town protesting the carrying of the mails on Sunday.

Coaches were sometimes pulled by as many as six horses, and from 60 to 150 passengers frequently arrived or departed from Keene daily. Nearly all the stages spent the night in the village. The record stage time from Boston was set on December 27, 1831, in 9 hours and 27 minutes, with eight or nine stops to shift mail and change horses. Other stage lines gave service to Greenfield and Northampton, Mass., connecting with Hartford, Conn., lines and steamboats for New York; and from Portsmouth and Exeter through Keene to Brattleboro, Vt., and Albany, N. Y., west. On September 23, 1834, a traveler arrived in town who had left Cleveland, Ohio, on September 19, and although detained six hours at Buffalo, N. Y., he completed the journey in just over four days, then considered remarkable.

The village was visited by its first circus in July 1826. Held at the

Phoenix Hotel, the bill included a play, "The Haunted Tailor." The appearance of a similar show in July 1832 brought to Keene the first zebra, rhinoceros, and orangutan ever shown in town, plus an exhibition of wax figures. George C. Shattuck, a college student visiting in Keene, wrote of it to his father in Boston. The procession into town was led by a large wagon pulled by six huge horses decked out in fancy harness and bells. Inside the decorated wagon was the rhinoceros, and following were seven two-horse wagons with the rest of the show. Large crowds were attracted including Governor Dinsmoor and the pupils of Miss Fiske's school. To the horror of the onlookers, a monkey jumped on one of the ladies in the party and tore her cap.

The New England Zoological exhibition from Boston advertised **in** May 1835, claiming 27 wagons with 80 horses and a crew of 150 men. The elephant shown in Keene later that same month was one of the largest ever brought to America. It stood 11 feet 6 inches high and weighed 12,000 pounds. John Sears, attracted into show business by an exhibition in Keene during 1823, brought a fine menagerie to his home town in 1834. He was said to be the first man in the country to enter a cage with a lion.

In January 1828 the Gilbert and Trowbridge Theatrical Company played a one-week engagement, offering "The Honeymoon, or How to Rule A Wife." The same players appeared in September in "The Heir-At-Law." They also featured comic songs and a farce entitled "The Spectre Bridegroom, or A Ghost **In** Spite Of Himself." When Monsieur Weiss, a magician, gave a local performance in August 1826, his show included a display of moving shadow pictures, "phantasmagoria," an ancestor of motion pictures. In May 1838 the famous Siamese twins, Chang and Eng, appeared at the Eagle Hotel. The show played in October 1840 amid one of the earliest snowstorms in the region. Entertainment in the form of such attractions, medicine shows, and peddlers made life more interesting and brought to the village sights hardly dreamed of a few years before.

Traveling peddlers offered valuable services to country districts and town dwellers alike during the early years of the 19th century. Journeying on foot or by wagon, they frequently carried merchandise unavailable in stores or different from what was manufactured locally. Storekeepers usually purchased their goods only once a year from a wholesaler, and there was much difficulty in delivering them. The peddler's wares were fresher, more attractive, and usually cheaper than those of the merchant. Housewives saved in anticipation of a visit by one of the peddlers in order to purchase laces, pins, needles, perfumes, costume jewelry, and other fancies.

As the result of a movement launched in 1820 to enlarge and improve the Common, in 1828 the town quit its rights to the Meetinghouse (the fourth and last one built in Keene) and turned it over to the First Congregational Society. As part of the agreement, the Society, in 1828 and 1829, moved the structure from its site on the Common to within four feet of its present location. The horse sheds, which had been built in 1789 across the head of the Common, were removed and the church remodeled with the addition of a new spire and four tall pillars to support the front of the steeple. The bounds of the Common and those of the present Central Square were now established. However, the Common remained a dusty unimproved space, crossed by roadways, and treeless. Wilder's Building (now Ball's Block) was erected in 1828, and the names of streets leading from the Square acquired their present names of Washington, West, and Court.

In 1829 the Unitarian congregation built a meetinghouse on the corner of Main and Church Streets. The cornerstone was set on July 4, 1829, and the building was dedicated on April 28, 1830, with the assistance of the Congregational Church choir. The Unitarians were the first in town to dispense with the violin in the choir loft. Their new brick church boasted Keene's first church pipe organ, built by Henry Pratt of Winchester. The church had 88 pews on the main floor and a small gallery for the singers. The style of the building was "Grecian," reflecting the interest in classic art popular in the period. At the sides of the pulpit were tablets bearing the Ten Commandments and Biblical inscriptions. The pulpit itself was supported by two high slim columns in front, and in the belfry was a 1,500-pound bell, cast by the Revere firm and sounding the musical note F sharp. Aided by a legacy from William Lamson, the sale of pews, and subscription, the congregation was able to enter their new building free from debt. Unitarians were served by Rev. Thomas R. Sullivan until 1835, when Rev. Abiel A. Livermore. became pastor. In October 1839 a public clock, built by H. Holbrook of East Medway, Mass., and the gift of John Elliot, was added to the front of the building. The original town clock had long since ceased to function and was lost when the First Church was moved and a new spire built. The Congregational Church in Keene did not have a tower clock again until 1859.

The Baptists in Ash Swamp were far from the center of activity and were experiencing difficulties. They had no settled minister for several years. Edward Hale was the minister from 1829 to 1831, and the church was reorganized in 1832, taking the name of the Union

Baptist Church. Christy G. Wheeler was ordained pastor in August 1832 but left in 1833, after which services were maintained on a small scale in the Ash Swamp meetinghouse. Revival meetings of four days' duration were held in Keene during September 1831, lasting from 5 A.M. to 9 P.M. and featuring emotional messages, confessions, and conversions. Pioneer Methodist Episcopal church services were held as early as 1803, when Bishop Francis Asbury, the "father of American Methodism," visited Keene. Organization of a Methodist Church of 30 members took place in December 1835.

Keene enjoyed some of its most brilliant years during this period. Visitors remarked upon the elegance of Keene homes and the richness of their furnishings. Several of the ladies set a high mark in entertaining, and social events, dances, receptions, and parties were noted for their taste and distinction. Well-known hosts included Justus Perry, Governor Samuel Dinsmoor, Joel Parker, General James Wilson, and his son James Wilson Jr., whose imposing house was near the site of the old Ralston Tavern. Through the efforts of Rev. Abiel A. Livermore of the Unitarian Church, literary groups met frequently, an interest in foreign literature was developed, and book societies flourished. The town of Keene had "come of age" and enjoyed some of its finest hours as a community.

The Keene Debating Society, afterwards called the Keene Forensic Society and Lyceum, represented the best minds of the area. Their lectures and debates were open to the public and embraced a wide range of subjects. The issue of slavery was considered upon several occasions as were other moral, religious, and political questions. At one meeting discussion centered on the proposition, "Would it be advantageous to the public and to Keene to construct a railway from Boston through Keene to the Connecticut River?" At another, in 1837, the removal of American Indian tribes to an area west of the Mississippi River was debated.

The Keene Book Society was formed in 1824; membership in 1827 was 122 and its library held 275 volumes. Among speakers to appear in Keene were some of the leading figures in the country, including Noah Webster of dictionary fame, who lectured in 1832. In 1831 the Keene Book Society merged with the Keene Circulating Library, which had been in existence for some years and possessed a library containing over 1,000 books. The older Social Library continued to operate, and there was also the Cheshire Athenaeum Library of some 600 books. The Cheshire Theological Institute was formed in 1830 around the 700 volumes owned by Rev. Barstow. There were

even two collections of books for younger readers, the Sabbath School Library, of over 500 volumes, and the Juvenile Library, of about 250 volumes. The two book stores continued to offer circulating collections of books to the public at a small fee.

Among the groups which were active were the Ladies' Charitable and Reading Society, Free Fellows' Society, Auxiliary Education Society, Youth's Social Fraternity, and the Masonic Order. The Cheshire Agricultural Society's exhibitions were held in Keene in 1826 and in 1829 with ceremonies and celebrations. The Keene Musical Society, Keene Harmonic Society, and Keene Musical Association were devoted to classical music, while the Cheshire County Sacred Music Society made fine church music its objective. The Keene Thief Detecting Society, organized in 1838, was composed of the leading men in town as "pursuers" of horse thieves and other malefactors.

The *New Hampshire Sentinel* was joined by a second weekly newspaper with the publication of the *Cheshire Republican* in November 1828. This paper was brought by Nahum Stone from Walpole, N. H., where it had been originally established as the *Farmer's Museum* in 1793. The Unitarians issued a monthly periodical edited by Rev. Thomas R. Sullivan from July 1827 to 1830, called the *Liberal Preacher*, which contained outstanding theological contributions. This periodical was later moved to Boston. The *New England Observer* was begun as another local publication but was short-lived, as it united with a Concord publication within a few months of its beginning in January 1826. Benaiah Cooke, who arrived in Keene as a private school teacher, soon became publisher of a number of periodicals including the *Cheshire Republican* and the *American Silk Grower and Agriculturist* (about 1836) during the brief period when dreams of easy fortunes in silk were entertained in New England. Cooke also issued the *Cheshire Farmer* from 1838 to 1840. Rev. Abiel A. Livermore sponsored a periodical, the *Social Gazette*, "for the publication of the literary efforts of the young." In it appeared a story by Mary Elizabeth, daughter of James Wilson Jr. She later gained a place in American literature as Mrs. Sherwood of New York and Washington, writer of social etiquette and a noted poet. Mrs. Sherwood is the only woman from Keene included in the *Dictionary of American Biography*. Born in Keene on October 27, 1826, she died in New York City on September 12, 1903. She was hostess for her widowed father during his term in Washington as a member of Congress, 1847-50, and in 1857 she and John Sherwood, a lawyer from New York, were married in Keene. Her background in New York and European society enabled her to write

authoritatively on social life. When she was a child, however, her literary talent was not fully appreciated, and the fact that her first story was actually published locally did not please her mother. The town librarian expressed concern that the young girl read too many novels.

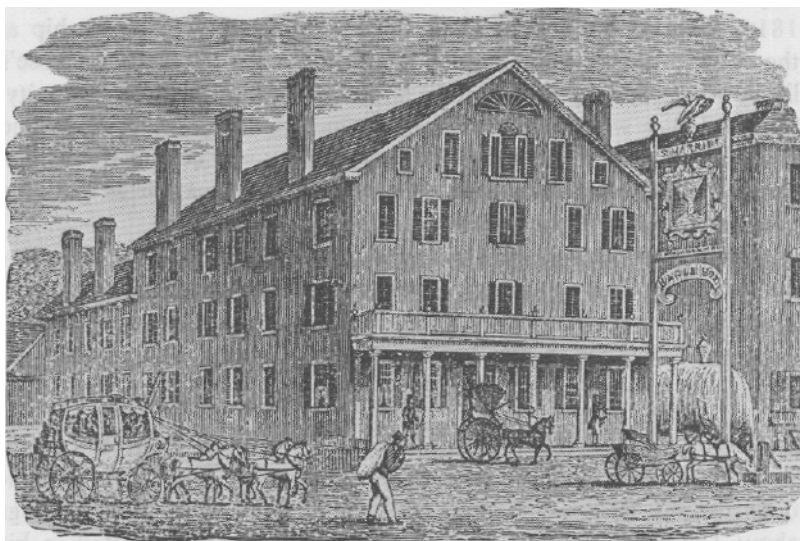
While serving the Keene Unitarian congregation, Rev. Abiel A. Livermore wrote his Commentaries on the Gospels and on the Book of Acts, 1841-44, which saw several American and English editions. He also wrote a prize-winning essay of the Mexican War. Although not a part of the Keene publishing scene, Edward Payson Dutton, who was born in Keene in 1831, joined the Boston book trade and founded the publishing firm which still bears his name.

Temperance and charitable organizations flourished, including a Tract Society of Keene, the Ladies' Cent Society, the Heshbon Society, and church foreign and domestic missionary groups. A large temperance meeting was held in Keene in 1829, and the Cheshire County Temperance Society, organized in 1830, had long years of service. There was also a Keene Temperance Association, and a short while later the Young People's Association for the Promotion of Temperance was organized. The town supported proposals for a state hospital for the insane with a meeting in 1836, at which several resolutions were passed in favor of the project advanced by Governor Samuel Dinsmoor, a native of Keene. When surplus government revenue was awarded to the states in 1837, Keene voted to use its share for worthwhile loans and to award the interest therefrom to the proposed asylum, provided it be located in town. Dr. Amos Twitchell was among those appointed by state authorities to a committee to select the location and after Concord was chosen, Keene directed that its interest payments be used for other local purposes. In September 1838 a large anti-slavery convention was held at the Court House. The slavery topic was the subject of the Debating Society's meetings as early as February 1834, and was fast becoming an issue of national concern. John Dickson Jr., who lived in Keene from the time of his birth in 1783 until around 1808 and who later served in Congress from New York State, is generally credited with delivering the first significant anti-slavery address on the floor of the House of Representatives in February 1835.

The various hotels and taverns in the village continued to do a healthy business. Colonel Harrington at the Eagle Hotel was host to frequent dances and balls. In January 1836 a group from Walpole, 178 strong, arrived in 66 teams to dine and dance from 6 P.M. to daylight, and a 47-team sleigh-riding party from Dublin was entertained at the Phoenix Hotel in December 1832. John Prentiss' new brick block

had an oyster saloon in its basement and there was another operating in town. These saloons offered oysters, cooked and raw, as well as a wide variety of liquid refreshment. One of the pranks of the period involved the theft, in December 1827, of the sign from George W. Emerson's "victualing cellar," or saloon. It was discovered the next morning nailed up over the main entrance of the Congregational Church, and a reward of \$25 was offered for the apprehension of the culprits.

William Lamson's new brick store, on the east side of the Common at the corner of Roxbury Street, became a popular local gathering place. Jesse Corbett carried on a watch-repairing and jewelry business and was succeeded by Norman Wilson as principal jeweler in Keene.



Eagle Hotel, from woodcut in the first Keene directory, 1831

Edward Poole established himself in this trade about 1835, and was the first in town to advertise "Loco Foco" or friction matches. Poole became a mechanic of rare ability and conducted some of the first local experiments in photography. Working with him for a time was a relative from Massachusetts, William Frederick Poole, who later became a noted librarian and founder of *Poole's Index to Periodical Literature*, the forerunner of the modern periodical index. John C. Mason was a gunsmith, with a shop on Winter Street. This street, as well as Middle and Summer Streets, was opened in 1832 as part of a development program in that section.

Dexter Anderson, a hatter, arrived in Keene in 1827. Until 1835 Richard Montague was active in tailoring in association with several partners, and the firm of Dinsmoor, White & Lyon, established shortly after 1833, was the first to sell ready-made clothing in town. By this time long trousers had replaced the knee breeches of the Revolutionary period, and high beaver hats supplanted the three-cornered ones of an earlier day.

The firm of Keyes & Colony erected a brick building on the corner of West Street (site of the Keene Savings Bank) in 1833, and its third story became one of Keene's best halls. It was equipped with a spring floor and was popular for both dances and meetings; at one time the Baptists held church services there. A baker had established himself in 1816, and this business was carried on under different ownership at the north corner of Main and Church Streets until 1900. John Chase's livery stable opened before 1830 and was the first in the community. Several ladies were in business, operating small millinery shops and dressmaking establishments. Women's clothing was copied from illustrations in magazines such as *Godey's Lady's Book*; dress patterns were not produced until 1863.

A blacksmith and wheelwright shop occupied the site of the present City Hall. The major textile industry was Faulkner & Colony, who were still dressing cloth and carding wool into rolls for families to spin and weave at home. Keene craftsmen were creating many fine pieces of furniture and ornamental goods for the handsome homes being erected in increasing numbers. There was even a portrait painter, Joseph Wheeler, who lived on Court Street. Wheeler came to town as a youth about 1810 and his first artistic ventures were furniture decorations for the Briggs cabinetmakers. He began ornamental paintings about 1829, and a number of local portraits were completed in his studio, which was described by Mrs. Sherwood as "a little nook of refinement and artistic seclusion, with that indescribable charm which artists' studios always possess."

Carriages, chaises, saddles, harnesses, and leather goods were in constant demand, and the first "Franklin fire-frame," or heating stove of this popular style, was advertised for sale locally in 1834. Pumps and woodenware were being made on the North Branch and at Ash Swamp. Jehiel Wilson's industry at South Keene, begun about 1820, was reported to be the first in New England to produce pails by power machinery. A forge located in the area at that time gave to the section the name "Furnace Village."

The screw gimlet, which had been invented by Gideon Newcomb

of Roxbury, was also an important product in Keene, as well as the manufacturing of bits and augers and a patent jack screw for raising buildings. A turning mill was at work producing spinning wheel parts, and numerous saw and gristmills were kept busy by an increasing population. Proposals for a canal from Surry to Keene, with mill sites along its course, were studied in 1832 and 1833, but the project was abandoned. Industrial progress was beginning to make itself felt in earnest in the region where formerly farming had been predominant.

The town school committee watched over the steady progress of local education. In 1831 there were 768 students enrolled, and money raised for schools amounted to \$1,300. Complaints that too much religious matter was being taught brought about an end to this instruction and the distribution of tracts in public schools in 1832. Private education was offered by Miss Fiske and others. Benaiah Cooke, later a Keene printer and publisher, arrived in the village about 1827 and opened a private school in a room over a store. Afterwards called the Keene Academic School, it enrolled nearly 100 pupils. Alonzo Andrews had a private school in 1830, as did Alphonso Wood about 1829, and Osgood Herrick operated a private grammar school for a few terms. Writing and bookkeeping were taught by Reuel Blake at this period, and music and dancing instruction was continued by special schools. With its long rows of rude benches and desks, Washington Street's Center District School, which was warmed only by an open fireplace, was replaced about 1831 by a two-story brick schoolhouse, topped with a cupola and the first bell in any Keene school.

In December 1828 Keene High School was established by the citizens of the three central school districts. Classes were first held in Wilder's Building. The first teacher was Edward C. Eells, a graduate of Middlebury College. Candidates for admission were examined by a committee, and the school was managed by a prudential committee, as in the case of each school district. Requirements stated, "no scholar shall be admitted into this school who is not nine years of age; who cannot read, and who has not made some progress in learning to write; who is not expert in the first four simple rules of arithmetic, and who is not acquainted with the rudiments of geography." The next year Eells was succeeded by Asahel Bennett, whose salary was \$40 a month. The school became inactive after 1830 and was not revived until 1853.

The Keene Fire Society, of 64 members, and the Fire Fencibles, with 45 members, were the two local fire clubs, still private organizations. The latter group, organized in March 1825, was the original hook and ladder company of Keene. The firemen's uniforms were long red frocks.

Keene's first directory appeared in 1831. Although a village register had been published in handbill form as early as 1827, the first serious effort at a directory was a 36-page booklet containing 508 names, a business register, and illustrations of the two village churches and two hotels, the Phoenix and the Eagle. Citizens had met the previous December to decide on names for the 12 streets and areas covered. Among the directory's listings were 204 farmers, 34 laborers, 25 shoemakers, 22 carpenters, 17 merchants, 16 glass blowers, 15 widows, 13 blacksmiths, 13 instructors, and a variety of single classifications. Town officials included fence-viewers, field drivers, fire wards, hog-reeves, and pound keeper. The editors of the work stated that their aim was "to afford a convenient manual for those who reside in the vicinity, and a correct guide for the stranger; who can at once form an opinion of the business, population and flourishing condition of the place." There was not another directory published until 1872.

Political feeling was high in Keene, where enthusiastic conventions of Whigs assembled in opposition to the movement favoring Andrew Jackson for President of the United States in 1828. Keene cast 346 votes for Adams and 107 for Jackson. When an attempt on Jackson's life was made at a funeral in Washington in January 1835, Samuel Dinsmoor Jr. of Keene was standing so close at hand that he heard the caps of both pistols explode. The procession with the President had just proceeded from the rotunda of the Capitol into the portico. Fortunately both pistols flashed and no one was hurt. Keene's population in 1830 was 2,374, for the first time exceeding that of Walpole, Westmoreland, and other townships of the region. In 1832 Keene cast 344 Whig votes and 131 Democratic votes in the national election. The number of voters in 1833 was 499. Living in Keene were, in addition to the human population, 280 horses, 393 oxen, 799 cows, 666 young cattle, and 1,984 sheep.

Joel Parker, a leading lawyer in the village since 1816, was appointed to the state's supreme court in 1833. He became chief justice in 1838 and a highly respected legal figure, later a Harvard and Dartmouth professor of law.

The Keene Light Infantry was still among the best military companies in the state. Their colorful uniforms of blue faced with red included a helmet of bearskin, with a foot-high tin front and black plumes. The men were also equipped with knapsacks captured from the British during the War of 1812 and issued to the local company due to shortages of supplies. The company, with the Ashuelot Cavalry,

formed an honor guard for Samuel Dinsmoor upon his return from Concord on July 4, 1831, after his election as governor of New Hampshire. Governor Dinsmoor was conducted from Marlborough to Keene, where he received the applause of its people and a special welcome by students of Miss Fiske's Female Seminary, who were arranged before the school building to do him honor. Following this triumphant arrival, a reception and banquet were held at his Main Street home (site of the present Colonial Theater). Samuel Dinsmoor was reelected in 1832 and 1833 to the state's highest office, and died in 1835. The military units of Keene had all participated in a muster held in October 1831, when they were reviewed by Governor Dinsmoor and a member of his staff, Colonel Franklin Pierce, later President of the United States. The Keene Light Infantry journeyed to Concord for service as part of the honor guard during President Andrew Jackson's state visit to New Hampshire in June 1833 and won the special praise of the President and his party.

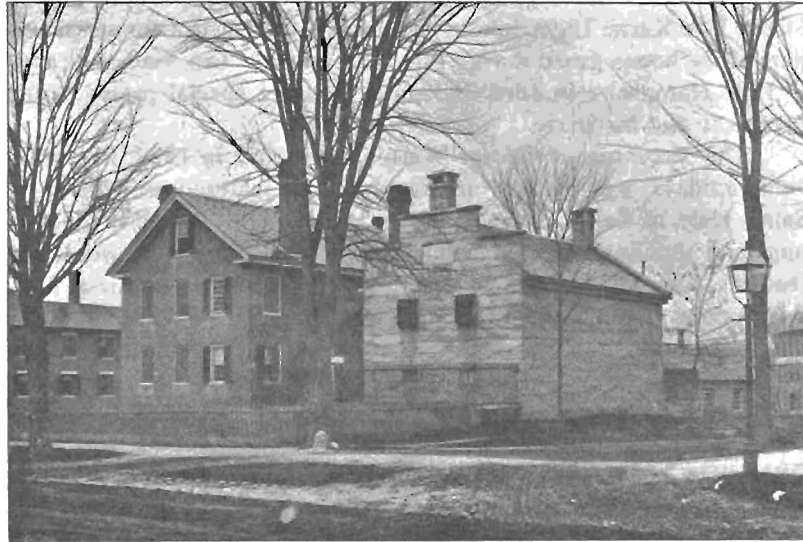
The centennial of George Washington's birth in 1832, like other civic holidays, was patriotic in character and featured an oration by Salma Hale, as well as choral music and a banquet. The ball in the evening and illumination of the village after dark, however, were new features. Late on the night before July 4, 1828, some ambitious celebrants drew the Keene Light Infantry's old cannon to the Common and attempted to fire a salute. The charge was too heavy, and the resulting explosion blew the cannon into pieces, which flew in every direction. Fortunately no one was injured.

During the "hard cider and log cabin" campaign of 1840 Daniel Webster visited Keene on July 9, and spoke for two hours to approximately 4,000 people at the Academy House yard. During his address some of the supports of the hastily-constructed platform gave way. "If the Whig platform goes down, I go with it," Webster remarked and went on with his speech. That evening he was guest at a gala reception.

The Ashuelot Bank was organized in 1833, with Samuel Dinsmoor as its first president, and a brick building was erected on the west side of the Square. The Cheshire Provident Institution for Savings was organized in 1833, with Dr. Amos Twitchell as its first president. This bank was located in George Tilden's book store on the west side of Main Street. Later it became the Cheshire County Savings Bank. The Cheshire County Mutual Fire Insurance Co. was formed early in 1834.

The town poor farm was established in 1830 on the Deacon Daniel Kingsbury place (at the end of the present Aldrich Road) and was maintained by the town as a home for the indigent until 1876.

Escapes from the old wooden jail had become so frequent they turned into a local joke. Once six to eight persons being held for debt climbed out without difficulty through a window and had a “night on the town” before returning to wake the jailer to let them back in. They were told to come back in the morning and not disturb people’s sleep. The 1831 jail population was four men and one woman; two jailed for assault and one each for debt, theft, and insanity. However, laws for the relief of those taken for debt were soon passed. In 1833 the wooden building was replaced by a stone jail, using 1,400 tons of Roxbury granite and four tons of iron in the construction of “one of the strongest and most thoroughly built prisons in the Union.” It contained four cells on



Old jail on Washington Street—1833–1884

the first floor and three above, and the structure measured 24 x 36 feet. A jailer’s house constructed of brick was erected next to the new jail. Also built in the period were several fine Washington Street houses, and the first tombs in the nearby cemetery were built in 1833. A private family burial tomb was erected by Justus Perry at his imposing home on the site of the present Keene Junior High School. This tomb was later removed to the town cemetery.

The question of a railroad through Keene had been in many minds ever since that form of transportation had proved practical. It was discussed by the Keene Debating Society and was the subject of surveys.

There was talk of construction from Boston to Brattleboro, Vt., with a connecting line to Keene in 1829, but not until July 1835 was the Keene Railroad Co. chartered, with a projected line to the village from Lowell and Nashua through to Brattleboro and Bennington in Vermont and on to Troy, N. Y. Engineers examined various proposed routes, one through Marlborough, Dublin, and Peterborough. All proved too expensive, and the scheme was finally abandoned, although dreams of a rail link for Keene were not forgotten, especially when navigation on the Connecticut River ended in 1835, with the sale of the locks and canals at Bellows Falls to Boston manufacturing interests.

Although never associated with local railroad affairs, Samuel S. Montague, born in Keene in 1830, became an officer in western railroads and was largely responsible for spanning the continent by rail as a planner and builder of the Central Pacific Railroad. The movement westward was intensifying at this period, and in June 1834 an emigrant meeting was held in the Town Hall for those interested in becoming pioneers of a new generation.

The Phoenix Hotel burned on April 6, 1836, destroying all but its brick walls, although most of the furniture was saved. The building burned slowly, a floor at a time, giving ample opportunity to remove most of the contents. Amid the confusion one helper is reported to have thrown a fine looking glass out a second-story window, while carefully carrying a feather bed downstairs to safety. There was a serious fire near the Eagle Hotel, which destroyed several buildings later in the same year; the danger from fires was becoming quite a serious threat, as more buildings clustered in the Central Square and Main Street area.

After looking at the blackened ruins at the corner of Roxbury Street for some months, a group of businessmen raised a fund to erect the Cheshire House, using some of the brick walls and the portico left standing from the Phoenix Hotel, and what was to become one of Keene's most famous landmarks opened in November 1837.

A remarkable display of "northern lights," aurora borealis, was witnessed in Keene on January 25, 1837. During the first three-quarters of an hour of the display the mercury in Rev. Barstow's thermometer, the village's standard in matters of temperature, fell 10 degrees. The event was a subject for discussion and scientific explanation for some time among those of the town most active in scientific pursuits.

When Halley's Comet was sighted during October 1835, there was one man living in Keene who recalled its previous appearance. Thomas Baker, who had seen the comet as a boy in 1759, could de-

scribe it vividly and even drew a sketch of the phenomenon in 1835, when he was over 80 years of age. Another comet which attracted widespread attention was Donati's, seen in unusual brilliance during 1858.

Miss Fiske died in May 1837 and, though her school continued in operation for several years under the direction of her staff, without her personal guidance and leadership the institution lost some of its high standing. Largely sponsored and supported by the Congregational Church, the Academy in Keene was opened in the spring of 1837. Breed Batcheller, grandson of a well-known Tory of Revolutionary days, became its first instructor. Though a private school, it offered education to all qualified youth of the town, and the enrollment was about 200 students, while the staff numbered four during the early years. Instruction was offered in the usual subjects taught in such institutions, augmented by music and drawing. Among the pupils were two Cherokee Indian girls, probably Keene's first "exchange students," who were invited to town for educational opportunities during the 1840's. The brick house on the corner of Court and Summer Streets was built at this time to serve as a boarding house for the school, which soon became known as Keene Academy.

William Torrance became principal of the school in 1850. However, financially unsuccessful, the school experienced difficulties in maintaining high standards, and in 1853, through Torrance's efforts, the building was leased to the "Associated Districts" of the town, thus beginning community-sponsored secondary education in Keene. The popular Torrance died in 1855 and was buried in the Washington Street Cemetery, not far from another pioneer Keene educator, Miss Catherine Fiske.

The financial crisis of 1837, which gripped the entire nation in one of its most serious depressions, was the cause of widespread business failures and had its effects on Keene. A meeting of citizens was held in May, and a committee chosen to examine the local situation and make recommendations. Upon the advice of this group, the two local banks followed the course of many such institutions in larger places and suspended specie payments. The committee further recommended "such a measure should in no wise impair the confidence which the community has heretofore placed in the management of the Banks in this town." Keene was able to weather the serious depression with less severe consequences than had been anticipated, but the effects of the disaster which closed so many businesses and banks, ruined merchants, frustrated labor, and paralyzed the national economy for

seven years helped bring to an end much of the brilliant social activity in Keene as elsewhere.

In 1839 the revived Baptist Church, led by Rev. John Peacock, erected a brick meetinghouse on Winter Street. On the corner of Winter and Court Streets the county, in 1840, erected a granite building for county offices and the storage of records. The site is that of the present Cheshire County Court House, which was erected in 1858.

During this formative period of Keene's growth the outline and size of Central Square were finally established. Three-story brick buildings had been built on its north, east, and west sides, and most of the old plank walks had been replaced by brick. The Cheshire House, Unitarian Church, Baptist Church, Center School, and Academy Building, all of brick, had been built near the Square, and the new county office building and jail, both of stone, added to the village scene, as did a number of fine houses along the principal streets. Stone bridges at the lower end of Main Street and on the Walpole and Surry Roads had been added, as well as many highway improvements. Mills, shops, and industry of various sorts were established, making the town one of the busier centers in the state.

But it was still a quiet country town in many ways, described by a visitor as "one of the most delightful villages in New England. There is hardly another place in the Union (of its size of course) that possesses more talent and sterling intellect than Keene." Francis Parkman, famed historian, said of Keene: "A town noted in rural New England for its hospitality, culture without pretense, and good breeding without conventionality."