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# GROTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## Newsletter

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## GROTON'S RAILROAD HISTORY

By Julie Kay Sanville 1984



Railroad Station by D. A. Smith  
Montpelier & Wells River RR

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The first train in Groton was described by Waldo Glover in Mr. Glover's Groton as "a gala day for Groton, such a milestone in the industrial progress of the town" and Charles M. Chase, editor of the Vermont Union in Lyndon, VT wrote: "Thursday, August 21, 1873 was a great day in Groton, when the people realized the long-expected joy of welcoming the first train into their village. Tracklaying on the Montpelier and Wells River Railroad (M&WR RR) was completed to the Depot of that village in the forenoon, and a few minutes before 12 o'clock the old Passumpsic railroad engine 'Orange' Martin Hamlet, engineer, and G. E. Whipple, fireman, whistled up to the depot, drawing a train of one passenger car and eleven stake cars, containing over 1,000 people. Over 1,200 people from Groton, Ryegate, Barnet, Topsham and Peacham had collected to welcome the arrival. Cannon, the village bells and hurrah of the multitude gave ample evidence that hearts were full and Joy complete."

Plans for a railroad to connect Boston and Maine RR from Wells River to the state capitol in Montpelier were started as early as 1848. A

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possible route through Groton Pond woods, “a nine-mile wilderness” according to Waldo Glover, was surveyed in 1850 but the Civil War put all plans on hold.

Judge Isaac Newton Hall, Groton’s Representative to the Vermont General Assembly was “more than any other man, considered father of the railroad.” He sponsored legislation in 1868 to grant a charter, and an enabling act allowing the four towns, Montpelier, Plainfield, Marshfield, and Groton, to bond for the railroad project.

The first stockholders meeting was December 26, 1868. Judge Hall was the only member of the first board of directors who did not resign, and a new board was elected August 23, 1870. Stock subscription of \$400,000 was raised by September 27, 1870, and just 33 days later a construction contract for \$1,065,000 was awarded to N. C. Morrison of Boston, MA. Ground was broken in Montpelier on November 1, 1870. About the same time work was started on the Wells River end and the two work crews met at the summit near the Lanesboro station. The first train ran over the whole route on November 24, 1873.

The 38-mile railroad line made travel easier and faster, it increased the economy by helping the lumber and granite industries expand, and the farmers and merchants ship and receive produce and goods of all kinds. The railroad also helped bring about another change in Groton – the summer camper.

Camps at Groton Pond date back to 1894 and for many years the railroad was the only means of transportation to the camps. Disembarking at either Lakeside Station or the Rocky Point Flag Stop, the campers took a boat to their cabins on distant shores according to Susan Antenen in *History Hike Vermont*. Marian Lindsay Proudfoot wrote a book in 1970, *Camping at the Pond: A History of Lake Groton* with photos, timetable, and amusing stories about some of the campers, including the late Dr. Benjamin Franklin Clark (the obstetrician who delivered me), Mrs. Alice (Lord) Goodine, Groton Historical Society officer, and many other familiar Groton family names.

Mr. Glover wrote, “The Montpelier and Wells River Railroad was well patronized offering important and convenient connections with the Boston and Maine and the Central Vermont lines. For years, the schedule remained practically unchanged.” The trains carried express, freight, mail, and passengers. School children living at Ricker’s Mill and Lanesboro rode to and from the Groton village School on the morning and afternoon trains. There were three railroad stations in Groton, usually called Depots. The largest was in Groton Village and smaller ones at Groton Pond and Ricker’s Mill. There was a Flag-Stop at Rocky

Point on Groton Pond and a Station at Lanesboro, just over the town line in Marshfield.

Groton Village Station was destroyed by fire in 1894 and was replaced with a new one built closer to the crossing. Katherine Blaisdell wrote in *Over the River and Through the Years* (book one), "An old boxcar was used as a temporary station until the new one opened in 1895." My stepfather, Derk R. Ruitter, made a large picture frame in 1977 for his oldest daughter, using the colorful ornate molding from the old burned down railroad station.

The Boston and Maine Railroad controlled the M&WR RR in 1911. And the state-wide flood of 1927 destroyed nearly all the bridges and washed out 10 miles of track between Groton and Wells River. However, the Central Vermont Railroad, through a mutual arrangement, enabled the M&WR RR to be first back in operation in December 1927. Railroads began to lose business as roadways, cars and trucks became more popular for transportation, and in 1945 the M&WR RR became part of the Barre and Chelsea Line.

Steam engines using large amounts of wood from the surrounding forests were used for many years before they converted to burning coal. In the 1940's the M&WR RR started using diesel engines.

My late grandfather, John Franklin Hatch Sr. of Groton, retired in January 1955 after working with the railroad and the associated telegraph company as a section hand, telegraphy repairman and track foreman since 1917. He walked to work most of his life. My grandmother, Mary V. (Page) Hatch, worked as the caretaker and agent for the railroad from May 1946 until December 1955, under Chief Dispatcher B. B. Hamel of South Ryegate.

John F. Hatch Sr. family lived at the Groton Railroad Station since 1930, where my mother, Marilyn Hatch Ruitter was born and raised, along with her brothers and sisters. All the other Railroad Stations along the M&WR RR have been burned, torn down, or removed with the Groton Station being the only exception. It remains to this day and is my grandmother's home in 1984.

My Grandmother says that the Groton Depot once had a large waiting room for passengers complete with toilet facilities, a ticket office, a huge freight room, and an apartment for station agents or employees as living quarters. There are three rooms and a bath downstairs, three bedrooms on the second floor, and a large attic on the third floor, accessible with a drop-down ladder of wood and ropes. She still refers to the rooms by their old names – "the waiting room," "the office," etc.

Steam locomotives filled their boilers with water from Whitcher

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Mountain Brook about half a mile east of the Depot before 1889 when a large wooden water tower was built at the Groton Station. The water tower was sold in the late 1950's to Steamtown USA and moved to Bellows Falls, VT for a railroad museum and tourist attraction. About 1890 the woodsheds were no longer needed when coal was used to fuel the boilers. Second-hand locomotives from the Boston and Maine RR were used mostly, but there were two new engines between 1911 and 1925.

Groton Depot closed in December 1955 and the last train through town was November 15, 1956. Some of the local railroad workers were Harris Roberts, Ray Palmer, John and Mary Hatch, A. John White, and Zane Heath. Lorimer Puffer carried mail from the trains to the Post Office on Main Street. Trains included a mail car with the mail sorted by a postal worker while they travelled between stations. My mother, Marilyn Hatch Ruitter remembered local farmers coming late at night to pick up express and freight orders including little peeping chickens, assorted livestock, and supplies. Handcars used by workers were push type at first and later motorized. The creamery, where James Cilley now has a body shop, sent milk and cream daily in large metal cans.

Train rides were a way of life and the only way my mother's family travelled for many years. Schedules were important, and the train whistle was used by many to tell the time of day. The M&WR RR bed is now a dirt road, some parts not accessible or passable, after the rails, ties, signals, and bridges were removed the winter of 1956 and spring of 1957. A crew under Mr. Horton dismantled and salvaged the line. The 108-year history of the railroad through Groton came to an end March 18, 1957 at 8:10 a.m. when the crew pulled the final rail at Wells River with a train headed by Old Diesel No. 14.

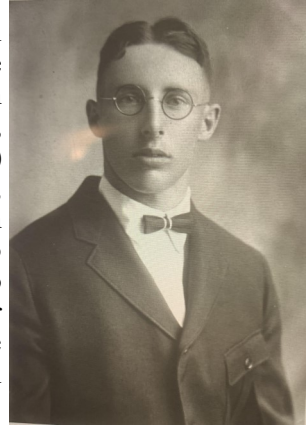
Vermont Department of Forest and Parks purchased the 38-mile-right-of-way in 1957. Parts of the railroad bed are now state highways, some were sold or leased to private citizens, and in Groton the town owns the old railroad right-of-way. Old moss-covered railroad ties in the forested areas can still be seen as reminders of times gone by. Groton Library houses the old signal light switch, and Groton Historical Society displays old photographs and railroad memorabilia during the annual Fall Foliage Festival in Groton on the first Saturday in October.

The Old Railroad Depot and the bottom portion of the old water tower still stand at the corner of Railroad Street on the Groton – East Topsham Road as a reminder of Groton's Railroad History.

(Condensed from a school paper by Julie Sanville donated to GHS, ed.)

## MERTON ERNEST BECKLEY (1870-1941)

Merton Ernest Beckley, son of Abel and Anna (Page) Beckley was born 30 June 1870 in Barre, VT. He grew up in Marshfield, VT and married Lena Wilson, daughter of William and Elsie (Batchelder) Wilson on 20 June 1899. They had a son, Kenneth Malcolm Beckley born in Marshfield 1 May 1904 and died in Chicago 25 February 1996. The family moved to Groton in 1915 and lived on the Powder Spring Road where James and Phyllis Burke now live (2021). He died at Hanover, NH on 12 April 1941 and she died in 1953



M. E. Beckley, an entrepreneur, contributed to the economic development of both Marshfield and Groton early in the twentieth century. In 1895 he bought the vacant lot east of McCrillis' store on Main Street in Marshfield and built a block in which he kept a store. This block burned in the fire of 1905 when owned by Homer Carpenter. Beckley built another similar building up the street, east of the K. of P. Hall, which housed his telephone central office as well as Cora Preston's millinery and fancy goods store. This second building burned in the fire of 1909 which also burned the K. of P. Hall and damaged the Universalist Church across the street.

He began generating electricity for the village of Marshfield about 1898 with a dynamo in the old Martin Pitkin butter box shop attached to the west end of the village sawmill. In 1900 he assembled a group of investors and developed Molly's Falls to produce more electricity for the increasing demand.

Although Molly's Falls has only a modest watershed of about 26 square miles, Molly's Brook drops 180 feet in 165 yards just before entering the Winooski River, providing a long-recognized source of excellent waterpower. Early histories of Marshfield refer to a Clover mill, built by Stephen Pitkin, which may have been at these falls, but the first known business to locate there was Byron Pitkin's (great grandson of Stephen) cider mill in 1892. In the nineteenth century, the roar of Molly's Falls could be heard in the village, a mile downstream. After M. E. Beckley built the Penstock to generate electricity, Molly's Falls has been silent.

By 1902 Beckley's company had expanded its lines and

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become the Molly's Falls Electric Light Company serving many homes in the area. In 1915 the company went out of business and Green Mountain Power Corporation eventually acquired Molly's Falls and constructed reservoirs at South Cabot and Peacham Pond. From these impoundments, water traveled through a penstock to a new generating plant at the base of the falls.

Mr. Beckley also brought telephone service to Marshfield and Groton. Although there had been a telephone in Putnam's store at Marshfield since about 1890, and Theodore N. Vail, President of AT&T had one at Vail's Pond (now Seyon) in Groton early in 1900's, it was Beckley who made the telephone a household item when he assembled the first telephone central switchboard about 1900 in Marshfield. A telephone exchange was established in Groton about 1905 by New England Telephone Company in the Hatch Block (now Welch Apartments) and later moved to the house near the iron bridge over the Wells River. When Merton Beckley moved to Groton in 1915 he built a second exchange known as the People's Line in the Taylor Block, which later burned. He devoted much of his time in Groton to organizing and operating the Molly's Falls Telephone Company which later combined with New England Telephone Co. (Sources: Marshfield Historical Society web page and Mr. Glover's Groton)

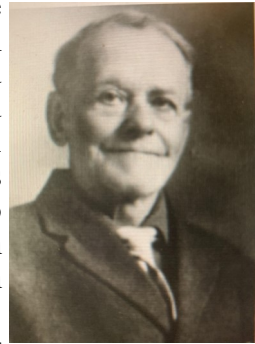
Telephone Central switch board used in the early 1900's like the ones in Marshfield and Groton installed and maintained by M. E. Beckley for the Molly's Falls Telephone Co. and managed by Mrs. Linnie Freer, who hired local High School girls as telephone operators. Later the New England Telephone Company and Molly's Falls were combined and eventually became part of AT&T before it was broken up in the Governments anti-trust lawsuit.



**MITCHELL GOSLANT of LANESBORO, VERMONT**

Condensed from stories on Marshfield Historical Society website

Lanesboro, once a busy logging village on the Montpelier & Wells River Railroad, is in the town of Marshfield near the Peacham and Groton town lines. The community was named for Dennis and Edwin Lane, who built a sawmill there in the winter of 1882-83, about 10 years after the railroad began operating. They also manufactured sawmills at Lane Mfg. Co. in Montpelier. After Dennis died in 1888, Edwin managed the mill at Lanesboro, and General P. P. Pitkin was president of Lane Manufacturing Co. The Lanes owned 2,600 acres of timberland around the mill, employed a workforce of 25 to 50 people, sawed about two million board feet of lumber and cut one thousand cords of wood annually. Dennis Lane was also a selectman for the town of Marshfield.



Mitchell Goslant

About 1892 or 1893, Mitchell H. Goslant owned the mill and he continued purchasing timberland. His holdings totaled nearly 18,000 acres. In 1919 he sold 2,615 acres of logged timberland in Marshfield, and 2,845 in Peacham to the State of Vermont for \$2.75 per acre, and it is now part of Groton State Forest. Later he sold 10,000 acres to Groton Lumber Company at Groton Pond, and it was also added to Groton State Forest after logging. Mitchell reserved about 200 acres around the buildings from his sale to the state, and it remained in the family after his death in 1926.

Mitchell Goslant, son of Nathan and Mary (Derocher) Goslant, was born in Derby, Orleans Co., VT on 11 May 1839. After logging around Walden for 16 years he came to Lanesboro. In addition to his expanding lumber business, he opened a grocery store and although unable to write, he was a real Yankee trader and made it a success. He was also postmaster at Lanesboro for many years. When timberland in this vicinity was cleared he turned to the granite industry and owned property for quarrying.

He was twice married and father of 16 children, 13 of whom were living at the time of his death on 30 November 1926.

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# Groton Station of M&WR RR



Locations of Depot, water tower, and businesses of R. Davidson and H. P. Hood. Note double tracks at Depot and triple ones at businesses.



Granite manufacturing businesses east of Station were C. Hendry, Hosmer Bros., Bonazzi & Tonelli, and Hendry & Bailey





Charles J. Bailey (1867-1941) was Station Agent at Groton Depot in the 1930's.



Ricker's Mill Station 1947  
Photo by D. A. Smith



1947 Barre & Chelsea train arriving at Ricker's Mill. Photo by D. A. Smith

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Three of the five from his first marriage to Margaret are John of St. Johnsbury, Moses of Plainfield, and George of Newport. Ten of the 11 children from his second marriage to Harriet Jewett are Fred of Peacham, Frank of Barre, Perley of Dover, N.H., Mrs. Mabel Baker of Hollywood, Calif, Mrs. J. H. Legendre of St. Johnsbury, Harold of St. Johnsbury, Albert of St. Johnsbury, Mrs. R. M. Cutting of Plainfield, Rupert living at home, and Mrs. Milton Julian of St. Johnsbury. He died after being hit by a falling poplar tree at the age of 87. Casper Lyford said the sawmill at Lanesboro collapsed while Mitchell lay in his casket nearby in his house.

Lanesboro had its own depot, post office, boarding house, store, school, and church. Mr. Goslant held Catholic services in his home before the church was built. Twice a month priests from Lyndonville or St. Johnsbury arrived on the train Saturdays and held Mass on Sundays.

A rugged pioneer, one of the best-known men in Central Vermont, Mitchell Goslant was laid to rest in Newport. Although he should have been bowed by the weight of years, he could not give up the work that brought him much in worldly goods and only himself knew how much in the satisfaction of a task well done. Mitchell H. Goslant, aged 87, known for 50 years as the Lumber King of this area, died, the victim of a falling tree, and in a wooded glen, the like of which he had cleared many times so Vermont and other parts of New England might have lumber with which to build. He was found dead beneath a fallen tree and evidence showed he had been just a trifle too slow in his jump when the warning creak of the falling timber came to his failing hearing. He was generous, but in a quiet, helpful way which made it difficult for any but those whom he had assisted to discover his good deeds.

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## THE SAGA OF A SMALL TOWN

By Janet Puffer

This story started on a windy day in the little town of Groton, VT. The weather forecast predicted up to 55 miles an hour wind.

Mid-morning I went to the mailbox and returning to the house I could hear and soon saw two pieces of metal roofing on the stone shed next door flopping back and forth from the center ridge, ready to fly off.

The stone shed, now a long storage barn, is still called the stone shed. That is what it was built for more than 100 years ago. My grandfather, John Benzie, manufactured Granite Monuments here in the late 1800's and early 1900's.

I made phone calls and left messages to people I thought would know how to fix the roof. I knew those metal sheets flying in the breeze might cause great damage. Then I went looking for help in my car. Here is where the wonder and goodness of a small town begins.

I noticed Constable Milt Lamberton's truck at the Town Clerk's Office, so I stopped and told my story to him, Linda Nunn, (town clerk), and Roberta Dana, (town treasurer).

I told them, "I have a potential missile on top of the stone shed. I'm looking for someone to help me secure those two pieces of metal roof before they break loose and harm someone or something."

Milt said, "I'll radio Brent Smith (road commissioner) and Philip Palmer to come help." Linda thought they would be out looking for fallen trees because of the wind. Milt went out to his truck to call. Philip answered and Milt said to me, "You tell them what is going on." I explained the wind had lifted two pieces of metal on the stone shed roof and they were potential missiles.

Milt drove to the stone shed to wait for them and parked his official truck in front of the building, putting flashers on to warn folks of immediate danger overhead. I was concerned for Milt standing in the yard with the metal roofing ripping away in the wind.

Brent and Philip arrived in short order. Looked the situation over and decided the best bet was to go find our son, Matthew. Milt

said he would go but Brent said to him (you need to understand Brent's humor) "No, you stay here and if you think someone is in danger – shoot them before they get hurt."

Brent and Philip left to go find Matthew. In just minutes Matt and three other men arrived. It was hard to believe they found him so quickly.

Matthew heard about the stone shed roof from Frank Lapham, rural mail carrier from the Groton Post Office. Frank heard Milt talking with Philip on the radio. Frank saw Matthew working at a place on his route and alerted him to what was going on. This is called incredible teamwork!

Because Frank heard Milt's call to Brent and took time to tell Matthew, help came like I had called 911. Amazing!

How wonderful it is to live in a small town. Things like this happen every day around here. We just must look for them and be part of them

Thank you Milt, Brent, Philip, and Frank for getting our son with good helpers to secure the stone shed roof before it became a potential missile. I am very thankful for all the folks in the town of Groton and their helping hands.

Groton is a small town and wonderful large family.



Stone shed next to Janet's house on Little Italy Road.

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# GROTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWS

## Spring 2021 meetings in a nutshell

By

Phyllis Burke, Recording Secretary

### A synopsis of the GHS minutes for May 11 and June 1 meetings

After a long COVID winter, Groton Historical Society met twice this spring to plan our summer 2021 activities. Our focus will be on Lake Groton, in conjunction with the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Lake Groton Association, to highlight history of the lake for the town and lake residents and bring both communities together as one.

**Lake focus:** Thanks to the initiative of Deborah Jurist, we will reprint Marion Lindsay Proudfoot's 1970 "Camping on the Pond" booklet with permission from her son Eric Proudfoot. Deborah has worked hard to re-type the text in a larger format and collect new photos where the original ones are not available. The booklet will be on sale for \$15.00 per copy.

Other items for sale will be our new jigsaw puzzle featuring an aerial photo of Lake Groton by Peter Kimball, publisher of *Bridge Weekly*. Lise Shallberg will again manage the ordering and sale of the puzzles.

Lise has compiled a large-format map of properties around Lake Groton. After extensive discussions at both meetings, a title, identification of properties, and text were approved. Maps will be available for sale on paper or as laminated copies.

Peter Paul House will be open on August 28<sup>th</sup> between 10am and 2pm, for tours of the house and lake-themed exhibits. One will feature two antique "bathing costumes" found at a Lake Groton camp and donated to the GHS by Jane Valentine in 1993. A photo exhibit will focus on the steamer, old boats, the railroad, and old bathing suits.

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We have permission to make a brief presentation to the Lake Groton Association after their annual meeting on Saturday, Sept. 4<sup>th</sup>. This will be a chance to introduce GHS and sell our puzzles, Lise's map, and books, including "Camping on the Pond."

### **Fundraising report**

Thanks to the generous response to our fundraising campaign, and to generous memorial donations, Treasurer Susan Pelkey Smith reported we have raised more than enough to complete the exterior painting and repair of the Peter Paul House. Matt Nunn painted the north and west sides last summer, and will paint the east and south sides in 2021. Our heartfelt thanks to everyone who responded so generously.

### **Peter Paul House maintenance**

Because the house has been closed since 2019, a thorough cleaning is needed. We voted to hire someone to clean, and Lise will get estimates for the job. We also voted to hire Eric LaBlanc, the pest control person who treated the house in 2020.

### **Other business**

Vice-President Brent Smith has turned on the water at the house – thank you Brent!

Phyllis Burke will attend three sessions in June on Care of Textiles workshop presented by the Vermont Historical Society. This will enable us to better care for our wonderful collection of antique clothing.

Phyllis Burke, Recording Secretary

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## Vermont Historical Society News

Vermont's story is shared, celebrated, and preserved by more than 190 local historical societies and museums in all corners of the state. Working hard, often only with volunteers and excellent apple pie recipes, they foster a sense of community that bridges generations, provide a sense of place, and help define Vermont's unique identity.

"Lively & Local: Historical Societies in Vermont" exhibit explores the work of these essential community organizations through images and stories curated by a select group of participants from around the state. These stories highlight many different ways local historical societies approach and fulfill their missions.

Visitors can find information on many local history organizations with our online directory kiosk, and "Build Your Own Historical Society", choosing objects from participating organizations and the Vermont Historical Society.

"Lively & Local: Historical Societies in Vermont" is on view through October, 2021 at Vermont History Museum, 109 State Street. Pavilion Building (next to the State House), Montpelier, VT

Participating Organizations: Big Heavy World (Burlington); Cabot Historical Society; Colchester Historical Society; Dorset Historical Society; Enosburgh Historical Society; Estey Organ Museum (Brattleboro); Greensboro Historical Society; Hildene, The Lincoln Family Home (Manchester); Lincoln Historical Society; Pownal Historical Society; Shelburne Historical Society; Shrewsbury Historical Society; Waterford Historical Society; Williston Historical Society.

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