



The Village House

Originally published in the Franconia Area Heritage Council Newsletter, October, 2016

The property at 651 Main Street, known as the Village House for the last 50 years, can be traced back to when it was the Barrett farm. Lemuel Barrett, a Revolutionary War soldier from Lancaster MA, listed in the Franconia 1800 census. In 1819, at the age of 58, he applied for a war pension, stating that his dwelling house had burnt down in April 1804 and he was in “reduced circumstances & stand in need of assistance from my Country for support.” In 1827 he was able to purchase 33 1/3 acres from Priest Young. To that he added three parcels of adjoining land in 1829 and another tract in 1831 for a total of about 60 acres. The current Village House structure, including the attached barn, has been expanded and renovated many times over the years. The original house portion no doubt was built by or for Lemuel who died in 1846. His widow Phoebe, with the help of her son Jacob Burnham from her first marriage, kept the farm going until 1853 when it was sold to John Bowles.

John Bowles in turn sold it a year later to Joseph Watson who owned and occupied his homestead farm for the next 28 years. The 1860 agricultural census lists his crops as Indian corn, oats, Irish potatoes, buckwheat, 500 lbs. butter, 10 tons hay, and 50 lbs. of maple syrup.

Robert Petrie bought the farm in 1882. He was a blacksmith and horse-shoer by trade; his son Albert ran the farm. The old blacksmith building still on Main Street, now leaning precariously towards the Gale River, used to be on the other side of the road and was his shop. After Mr. Petrie died in 1892, the “Petrie Place” frequently changed hands: to Silas Nute, followed by Henry Noyes, Henry Clark, Hollis Godard and Waldo Taylor in 1906.

Waldo Taylor farmed the property until 1920 when he sold it to his son Silas. The farm was now about 55 acres, the boundaries having been altered several times. Silas owned the farm for 33 years, the longest ownership to date. In 1928 he remodeled the house: enlarging the veranda, building a sleeping porch across one end, and adding a fireplace. His 1964 obituary in The Littleton Courier stated that “Mr. Taylor was a farmer in the early days and came to Franconia some 60 years ago. He was employed at the Profile Farm for a time and then drove the stage from Franconia to Littleton for George Lurvey for several years. He became the rural delivery mail carrier and served in that capacity for some 30 years, retiring in 1956 due to ill health.” Two of his children stayed in Franconia, Bertha married Don Eastman and Myrtle married Austin Macaulay. Silas was the last to farm on this property. Interstate 93, which opened in 1959, went right through the crop fields behind the houses and barns on Main Street, also cutting off access to pasture lands and tree lots.

In 1953 Osman and Margaret Johnstone from Tom’s River, NJ acquired a portion of the property from the Taylors. They turned part of the expanded farmhouse into a restaurant called Johnstone’s Coffee Shop. When Osman became ill in 1960, Louis and Leona Thompson took over the management. They served breakfast, lunch and dinner with homemade pastries and bread.



Johnstone's Coffee Shop ca. 1960

Walter and Gertrude Geswell of Wilmington MA acquired the restaurant in 1964 and renamed it the Village House Restaurant. They expanded the enterprise to a seating capacity of 120 which included a breakfast room, two dining rooms and the Tack Room Lounge that offered music entertainment.

The Geswells sold the Village House in December of 1972 to George and Shirley Found who in turn sold it in 1976 to Jack and Carol McGurin who had Franconia ties. Jack had been head waiter at Hillwinds Sirloin Tavern and was a ski instructor at Cannon, and Carol had been a waitress at the Village House. They successfully ran the restaurant and lounge for 14 years until 1990, catering to local residents and skiers, and offering a popular Mexican food night.

The Village House suffered for a few years in the early 1990's under Stephanie Martini of Boston before being purchased by the Fullertons, Philip and Carol and their son Robert who was the chef. They brought the restaurant back to life, offering specials to their patrons, for about a dozen years, before selling to Ronald and Jennifer Ingerson of Lancaster in 2005 who called the establishment the Farmhouse Restaurant and Tavern. Their ownership ended a few years later in foreclosure. The Village House name returned in 2008, and it is currently the headquarters of Chef Joe's Catering owned by Joe and Nancy Peterson.



The Village House in 1987 under the Ownership of Jack and Carol McGurin



Chef Joe's Catering in the The Village House, 2010