Short History of the Town of Shelburne

The history of Shelburne begins officially on August 18, 1763, when Governor Benning Wentworth of New Hampshire signed the charter establishing the town.

The name "Shelburne" or "Shelburn," as it often appears in old records, "was chosen to honor the Earl of Shelburne, a celebrated nobleman of the British Parliament. He was influential in upholding New Hampshire's claim to the land west of the Connecticut River as far as Lake Champlain."

The first recorded white men, Thomas Logan and John Potter (or Pottier), arrived in 1768, settling on what is now Shelburne Point. Cutting virgin timber and conveying it by raft to St. Johns, Quebec, they are credited with opening up the lumber trade with Canada. The subsequent settlers apparently bought their lots as surveyed by Ira Allen.

The charter provided for seventy lots, of which four were to be tax free and designated for: The Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, the glebe for the Church of England, the first settled minister of the gospel and for the benefit of a school.

About ten families, mostly from Massachusetts and Connecticut, had settled along the lake prior to the Revolution, but upon word of the approaching British and Indians, they fled this part of the state. The only one of whom anything is known was Moses Pierson, who had bought a farm of 1000 acres in 1769 and whose withstanding an "Indian" attack in 1777 is commemorated on a plaque near the town beach. In 1783 Pierson returned and others followed. The first federal census recorded a population of 389 in 1791.

From the beginning Shelburne's economy was based on farming. With the clearing of land and burning of logs the town experienced a potash boom. A carding and fulling mill, a gristmill, a sawmill and blacksmith shop were erected on the LaPlatte River at Shelburne Falls. In 1811 a few Merino sheep imported from Spain led to an upsurge in sheep-raising. Orchards and fruit growing became a major source of income for the farmers with some 17,740 trees in 1880. Today Shelburne supports some 38 private enterprises.

Following the War of 1812 commerce on the lake expanded rapidly. The Champlain Transportation Company established its shipyard at Shelburne Harbor and launched its first steamboat, the "General Green," in 1825, to be followed by ten others before the "Ticonderoga" in 1905.

The first of at least four "public houses" along Rte. 7, the Shelburne Inn, was built in 1796 by Capt. Benjamin Harrington. He also built the first church, the "White Church" (burned in 1865), and deeded to the town the green as a "Parade Ground" in 1807. Religious services began about 1800 when a circuit rider from Vergennes met townspeople for worship in private homes. Three denominations have prevailed; the Methodist Church was dedicated in 1874, Trinity Episcopal Church in 1886, and St. Catherine's Roman Catholic Church in 1895. The Baptist Church was dedicated in 1972.

In 1886 a dozen farms settled by early families along the lakeshore were purchased by Dr. and Mrs. William Seward Webb to create a baronial estate, one of the show places of America, known as Shelburne Farms.
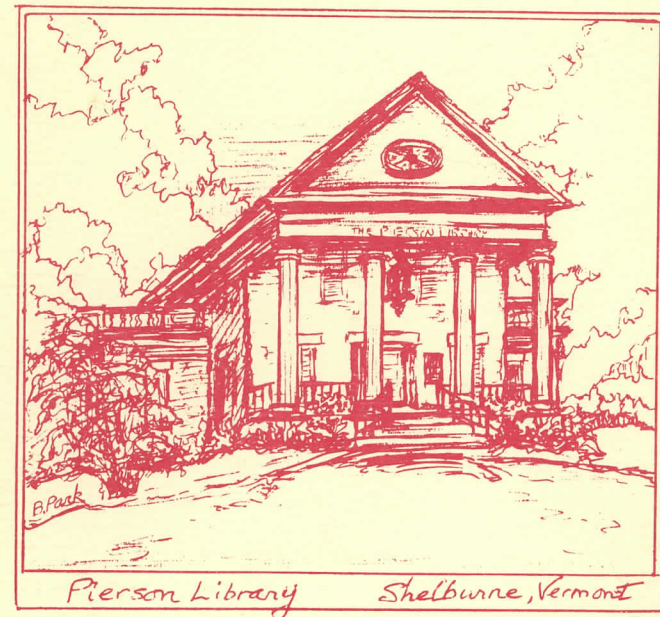
By 1830 there were 13 school districts with one-room school houses, 3 of which are still standing. Today with a population of some 4100 persons Shelburne buses its pupils to two elementary schools in the village and to the Champlain Valley Union High School in Hinesburg.
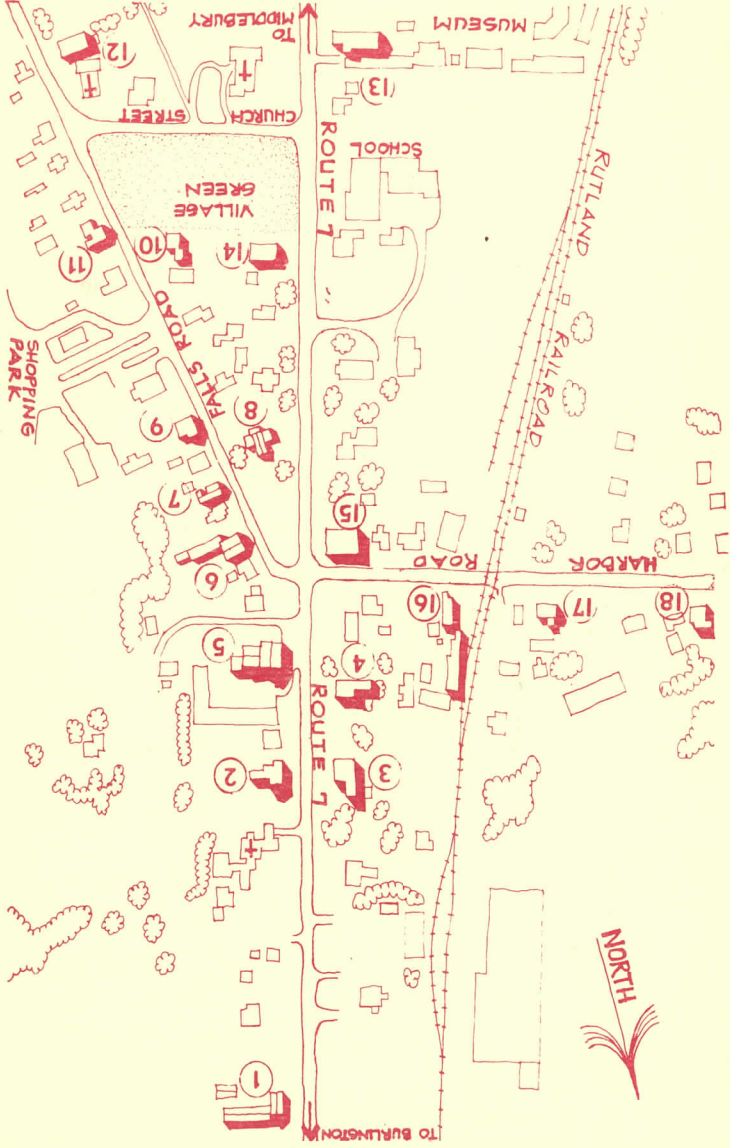
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Walking Tour of Shelburne Village

Pierson Library   Shelburne, Vermont

Shelburne Historic Site Committee

Shelburne, Vermont

05482

Map of Walking Tour Area

1. HARRINGTON HOUSE 1800. Homestead of Capt. Benjamin Harrington, sea-faring man from Connecticut, prominent citizen of Shelburne. In 1788 he purchased a large tract including the site of the village and extending west and north to Shelburne Bay. This is one of four homes in the township built before 1875 still in possession of descendants of the original owner.

2. DR. JOEL FAIRCHILD, JR. c.1832. On a half acre of land purchased for $60.00 in 1827 he built this house to which he brought his bride, Polly Bacon, whom he married July 15, 1832. Remodeled several times, it has been a residence for nearly a century and a half as well as housing Mrs. Deyett's Private School in the early 1900's.

3. HIRAM PIERSON c.1839. The earliest deed indicates that Hiram Pierson had built the house before he sold the property to Dr. Jonathan Tayler in 1839. Originally a colonial type house with columns and entrance on the south, it was remodeled in Victorian style by the Geers in the 1880's.

4. LEE TRACY 1878. Built from the bricks of the "brick" Methodist Church which stood from 1833 to 1877 on the site of the St. Catherine's Roman Catholic Church. It is now owned by the third generation of the Tracy family to occupy it.

5. SHELBURNE HOTEL 1796. Built by Capt. Benjamin Harrington, it has remained a "public house" serving travelers under the management of a long list of owners whose names recall many periods in Shelburne's history, among them: Comstock, Burritt, Weed, Lawrence, Beottinger and Corey.

6. PROSPER BACON 1839. Apparently built as a cobbler shop the building was shortly converted to a general store and has remained so through the years under the proprietorship of Deyett, Roberts, Palmer and Stearns.

7. EDWARD HARRINGTON 1816-1819. This quaint little house is known to the older residents as the Collamer House; it was built on a half acre of land originally a part of the Capt. Benjamin Harrington farm.

8. BURGESS HALL 1816. It is believed that the PIERSON LIBRARY was originally constructed for a store. The earliest known deed is dated 1816 when Burgess Hall sold it to Nathaniel Peckham, who conducted a store. From 1837 to 1883 it was the Methodist parsonage; thereafter a private dwelling. It underwent modifications both before and after its purchase from Cyrus VanVliet in 1910 for use as a town library.

9. JAMES KINNEY 1815. This "brick house and brick shop" were built on an acre of land purchased for $100.00 in 1814. The 142 acres later acquired constituted a sizeable village farm on which the Shopping Park now stands. Known to successive generations as the Nelson Newell house, the Emerson Thorp and Nason Strong house, it has further significance as a station on the Underground Railway which sheltered and transported slaves during the 1860's.

10. DISTRICT METHODIST PARSONAGE c.1839. The earliest deed conveys this "Parsonage lot" to the trustees of the Methodist Episcopal Church. The map of Shelburne in the 1869 Beers Atlas carries the above designation; thereafter it became a private residence.

11. HENRY LANGDON 1853-59. This house is built on an acre of land from the Nelson Newell farm purchased by Ashal Nash for $200.00 in 1849. Among the owners of longer tenancy between 1886 and 1917 were Isaac and Lucina Smith and Truman B. Webster; the Smiths were descendants of William Smith, the original settler on Quaker Smith's Point. The copper horse weather vane, dated 1850, at the Shelburne Museum stood for a century on the horsebarn. Remnants of headstones unearthed behind the barn point to an earlier private burying ground.

12. CHAPEL 1888. The parish hall of St. Catherine's Church was constructed on the Webb Estate in 1888 as a chapel for Roman Catholic employees during the development of the estate. It was moved later to the village to provide a center for parish activities.

13. JOHN SIMONDS 1830-40. Known to subsequent generations as the Weed House it was the first acquisition on the grounds of the Shelburne Museum in 1946 and now contains collections of pewter, glass, china and doll houses.

14. NELSON ISHAM 1844-51. This brick house was first sold with ½ acre of land in 1851 for $1200.00. Since 1883 it has been the Methodist Parsonage. With the removal of the square-pillared "piazza" it was restored and refurnished in 1966 at a cost of nearly $28,000.

15. JOHN SIMONDS 1851. The builder and date are recorded in the "Town Meeting Book" of the town of Shelburne. As the town's largest general store it supplied the residents for nearly a century and a quarter with everything from snaths to teacups under no less than eight sets of proprietors.

16. CARRIAGE AND PAINT SHOP c.1845. Records fail to disclose the builder of the red clapboard shop which was apparently an adjunct to the blacksmith which stood between it and the railroad. For two generations a meat market, it has served the Shelburne Craft School more recently as woodshop and weaving room. The two long yellow buildings behind the red shop were long ago moved from their site behind the town hall. Allegedly they were built about 1849 to house laborers constructing the railroad, then served as bowling alleys, and ultimately tenant houses at their present site.

17. FIRST EPISCOPAL PARSONAGE 1833. This first of three Episcopal rectories was commissioned by a large board of trustees. The Parsonage House Society. It was "leased" but briefly to the Rev. Louis McDonald and in some inexplicable way, which defies the historians, became and remains to the present day a private residence.

18. DAVID ROSS c.1845. This house is referred to in deeds as the "David Ross Place" and the "Alexander (Sandy) Hall Place." It has always been a residence but moved some 300 feet to the west to its present site around 1920.