**The Birth of Bristol by Pete Hope**

On June 21, 2015 Bristol will be 250 years old. The area that became Bristol became a barren wasteland after the destruction of Fort William Henry in 1696. The origins of the town go back to 1729. Colonel David Dunbar was given a commission to establish the Colony of New Georgia east of the Kennebec. After construction of Fort Frederick on the footprint of Fort William, Dunbar laid out the settlements of Walpole, Harrington and Torrington in the Pemaquid Peninsula. (Torrington grew into the settlement of Broad Cove.) The northern boundary of these settlements was near the falls at present day Damariscotta Mills. The western boundary was the Damariscotta River and the eastern boundary was Muscongus Bay. Dunbar's settlers were tough, independent and land hungry Scotch-Irish from Northern Ireland. One family was that of James Sproul who settled in present day Pemaquid Harbor. Subsequent Scotch-Irish pioneers were the Fossett, Nickels and McFarland families, to name a few whose descendants are still here.

With the English capture of Quebec in 1759 a long period of French and Indian wars came to an end. The population east of the Kennebec had grown a lot and the huge county of Lincoln was established in 1760. Four towns in this part of the mid-coast were incorporated before Bristol. In November 1764 men from Walpole, Harrington and Broad Cove met to discuss establishing a new town. A committee was formed to petition the Massachusetts Bay General Court for the permission to incorporate. Elijah Packard was hired to do the survey.

On June 21, 1765 men met to incorporate the new town. Bristol included present day South Bristol, Damariscotta, Bremen and Bristol. The town records do not indicate when the name of Bristol was adopted but clearly someone knew the origins of Pemaquid in the 1620's, financed and supported by Aldworth and Elbridge, two Bristol (England) merchants. Many of the fishermen who had come here earlier and the settlers of Pemaquid had come from Bristol also.

The first town meeting was held at the house of William Sproul on December 4, 1765. He was the son of James and had an inn on the East Branch of John's River. This was located on a bridle path to the Damariscotta River. (Sproul owned the eastern half of the Hope farm and the Winer/Lennox property.) It was recognized that the original survey which ended in Round Pond was in error because it omitted Broad Cove. This was corrected by a new survey in 1766.

Before the Revolution the town records reveal that there were usually two town meetings a year, in the spring and the fall. They were held all over town, including Richard Jones' saw mill in Bristol Mills and a school house in Walpole. The constable summoned citizens to the town meeting thusly: “We command in his Majesty's name to notify and warn all freeholders and others qualified to vote...”This was not a democracy. Those qualified to vote were male property owners, over 21, who had paid their ministerial and poll taxes. Until the town hired a minister the ministerial tax paid for itinerant ministers to preach.

Each year selectmen and overseers of the highways were elected from each of the three districts. The importance of farming was indicated by the election of pound keepers (William Sproul was one for years.), and hog reeves. No matter what a man did for a living part of his sustenance was the family farm. Stray cattle and hogs were not conducive to gardens! Owners had to pay the pound keeper to get their livestock back. Hog reeves had the enviable job of rounding up stray hogs which I can assure you is no easy task. For years the town paid a bounty on wolves and occasionally on crows.

Other positions in town were assessors, a tax collector (he received a percentage of the taxes), surveyors of lumber, a sealer of leather, overseers of the fish (this was to manage the alewive run at Damariscotta Mills, the Pemaquid River and Muscongus Stream. Alewives were an important food source and widows to this day are entitled to a free bushel.) and a tythingman. The tythingman's main job was to oversee conduct on the Sabbath, particularly at church. He had a tything stick to poke unruly children or wake sleeping adults.

The importance of education was recognized right from the start and money was voted on yearly for each district. Another important issue was the support of the poor. Basically, Bristol voters didn't want to have town “charges.” Indigents, including, at least once, an entire family were “warned” out of town. Generally, paupers were auctioned off. The low bidder took the person in and supported him or her for the year. Here are two interesting items from the town records. Elizabeth Trow became “...a town charge by having a black child.” Does this mean that there were slaves or possibly a free black in Bristol before the Revolution? In 1786, in an issue that would resonate with conservatives today, the town voted “...to see what methods the town will take with the people who are able to work and yet get the town to support them.” Poor farms became a remedy for poverty in the 19th and (early) 20th centuries.

In the early days of Bristol's existence the most contentious issue had to do whether to have one or three meeting houses. It went back and forth until 1772 with the majority voting one way and then a “decent” would overturn that vote. It appeared to be finally settled in 1771, to have one meeting house in Bristol Mills. The frame was constructed about where the grange hall is. But, lo and behold, there was yet another vote and this time final decent and meeting houses were erected in Walpole, Broad Cove (it is no longer there) and Harrington. The frame was pulled down and ox teams hauled the massive beams down the Hay Meadow Road, an ancient road, along the east side of Little Falls Brook and then across the Harrington Meadow Bridge (remains can still be seen near the Harrington Meeting House) to land that William Sproul had given to the town for a cemetery and meeting house. In 1772 the town voted to have a Presbyterian minister and to be under the Boston Presbytery. A committee was formed to find a minister and a Scotsman, Alexander McLean (McLain, no relation to today's Sc otch-Irish descendants) was hired. He was installed at Sproul's Inn.

The other important issue which continues to the present dealt with roads and bridges. At this time and well into the future the best transportation to Falmouth or Boston for goods or people was by sail. Even after roads were laid out travel was difficult, hard in the winter and nearly impossible in mud season. There were roads, bridle paths and blazed trails before 1765. Town records show that most town meetings dealt with the layout of proposed roads or the acceptance of completed roads. It was important for settlers to get to mill, market and meeting house.

There were four early, important town roads. The first road laid out by the overseers of the highways in 1766 went from Dee's Variety up to the Harrington Road and up Rt. 129 to Day's Cove in Damariscotta. These are rough directions of how this road was laid out. The description of this road is interesting because all the residents along it were named. The next year a road was laid out from Munroe Brook in Round Pond, down Rt. 32 to the Elliot Hill Road and across it to the Dump Road (Foster Road) and then up to Robert Given's mill on the Pemaquid River. In 1770 a road was built from the Four Corners to Amos Goudy's mill in Clark's Cove. The last road that I consider of the greatest importance was built for “...the convenience of the back settlers.” Generally, this went from Fir Hollow up to an old road that went to Bristol Mills where Richard Jones had his mill.

By the time of the Revolution the town was well established but we must be aware that for most residents hard times were right around the corner.

(This article first appeared in the the Old Bristol Historical Society’s newsletter, Spring 2015)