

## B. HISTORY

The major events of Cooper's past have been summarized in this section from local texts, newspaper accounts, and from the recollections of residents.

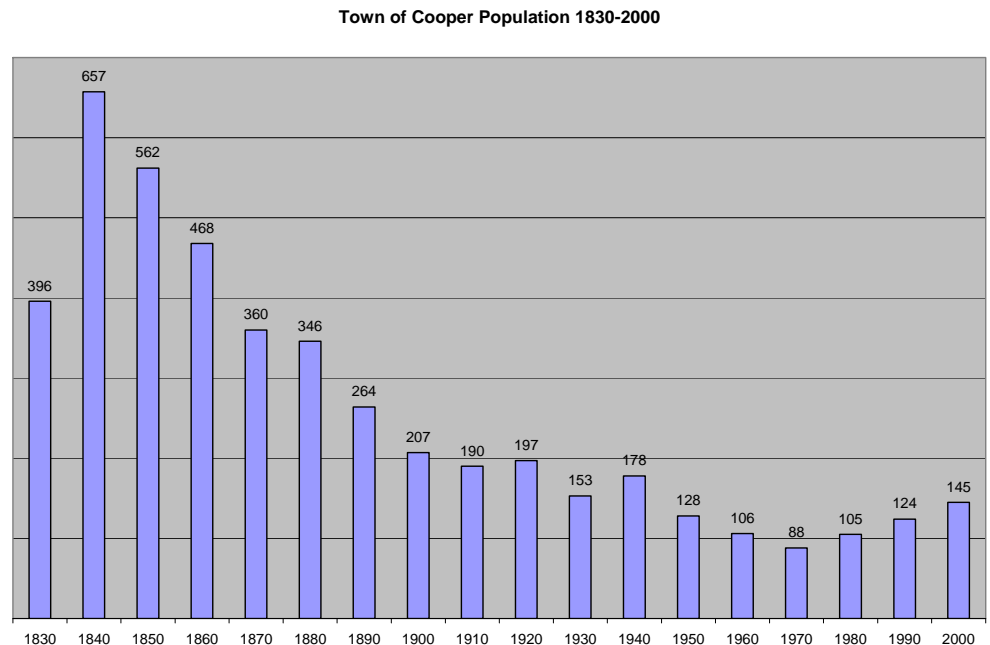
### Native Americans and Early Settlement

Undoubtedly, Native Americans traveled through and seasonally resided in this place we now call Cooper. They would have used the waters of the East Machias, Dennys and St. Croix watersheds, not only as transportation routes, but also as sources for food. The town of Cooper was known as Township 15 – E Division in the late 1700s. In the 1790's, "Lottery Townships" sold for 20 cents an acre. At age 24, General John Cooper was appointed High Sheriff and jailer for all of Washington County and was the principal owner of "wild land" in Township No 15 – E division, now known as Cooper. He settled Cooper in 1816 and his grave is located in the General Cooper Cemetery on private property near the Cathance Grange (see Map 2).

A portion of what is now the town of Meddybemps was part of Township 15 and formed the northeast corner of Cooper. The town of Meddybemps was incorporated in 1842 from parts of the Plantation of Baring and the towns of Cooper and Charlotte.

Early settlement in Cooper took place in three areas including Grove (where the Cathance Grange still stands), East Ridge and West Ridge. Subscribers to the Atlas of 1881 lists families still resident in Cooper and eastern Washington County with roads and lakes named after them: Averil, Day Farmer, Dewey, Ellis, Foster, Doten, Howe, Saddler, Sawyer, Smith and Vining. They were listed at first as "farmer" and also as lumbermen, mechanics, selectmen and town treasurer.

Population peaked in 1840 and declined precipitously until starting an upward climb with the 'back to the land' movement of the 1970s and the vacation/retirement settlement along lakefront properties of more recent decades.



Source: Fogler Library Maine Census Population Totals, 2008

**Government and Industry**

General Cooper built a sawmill and grist mill in 1816 at a cost of \$200. He eventually built a substantial residence which stood until it was destroyed by fire in 1976 (A-CHA Newsletter, Special Issue, March 1996). Cooper was incorporated as a town on February 6, 1822. Families supported themselves with sawmills and agriculture.

**Education**

In 1825, three years after the town was incorporated, Cooper had three school districts and one hundred scholars. This required \$100 in taxpayer support. At that time, the town only needed taxpayer money to fund three things: county taxes, keeping the paupers, and teacher salaries. Room and board for the teachers (as well as the paupers) was often put out to bid (A-CHA Newsletter, February, 1995). At the peak of its population, in the late 1800s, Cooper had six one-room schoolhouses. The West Ridge School was closed in the 1920s, the North Union School closed in 1942 and the East Ridge School was the last one to close its doors in 1957. This structure is the only one still standing and is in use as a residence.

**Religion**

Early records indicate that there were several small churches in the mid-1800s though none now remain standing. The most substantial church was a Congregational church built in 1835. It caught fire and was destroyed in 1912 when adjacent blueberry fields were burned. An 1861 map shows a site for a Baptist church. This site has also been referred to as “lightning place”. Historical folklore indicates that there were three attempts to build a church on this site. Each time the building neared completion, it either blew down or fell down. This was taken as an omen and the project and the site were abandoned (A-CHA Newsletter, November, 1994). Since the destruction of the last church building in 1912, various religious services have been held in the schools, the Grange Hall, or at times in private homes. Cooper residents now travel to neighboring communities to attend church services.

**Farming and Forestry Industries**

In the 1800s Cooper residents earned their living primarily from lumbering and agriculture and they continue to be the primary sources of income for many. The means of conducting agriculture and lumber operations has changed considerably with the shift from manual to mechanized and motorized methods.

According to the Calais Advertiser of September 6, 1860 as quoted by Harold Davis in An International Community on the St. Croix, “... Crawford, Cooper, Baileyville and Alexander were towns where farming took up four months, logging took up four months, and loafing around ... the remainder of the year. The towns were cursed with enough timber to destroy thrifty farming, yet not enough to make prosperous lumbering. Young men grew up with an axe and pick pole in hand, and after trying the sociability of working in large crews, or on the rivers driving logs had no relish for picking up stones alone on a ten acre lot...”

Farming in most of the nineteenth century did not produce much, if any cash income. However, farming was central to the livelihood of Cooper people from the first settler until after World War II. In reality, the early farm family produced food for the table, fiber for clothing, fuel for cooking and heating, and lumber for structures to house the family and their animals.

The invention about 1880 of the separator brought about a change in farming. Farmers purchased dairy cows then separated the milk into cream and skim milk. The skim milk was used to feed hogs, which became food for the family or were turned into cash. The cream went to the International Creamery collection building on the Cooper Road in Alexander, known as the North Union Road as it leaves the town of Cooper. Their plant in Calais turned cream into butter which was shipped to the big cities along the East Coast. There were 4 dairy farms on the North Union Road and others in Cooper but none remain today. A grist mill was located at Mill Pond. Long after it fell out of use, local historian Justin Day noticed the mill stone lying on the ground and becoming overgrown with vegetation. He arranged for a pulp loader to recover the stone and it is now preserved for posterity at the Cooper Fire Station.

Improvements in apple genetics allowed farmers to plant orchards, and ship barrels of the apples to the cities. Before 1880, most apples grown here were used for vinegar, cider, and animal food. Many orchards were destroyed in May 1935 when a major winter freeze killed many trees and this source of income.

Blueberries are one of only three fruits native to this area, the others were cranberries and grapes. Native Americans knew that burning the fields in spring helped the crop and they dried blueberries for pemmican, as well. During the Civil War, berries were hand-picked and hand canned & soldered for shipping to the Union Army. Berries were also hand picked (for 2 cents a quart) and shipped by schooner in one quart wooden firkins to Boston (the trip took 2 1/2 days). As we enter the twenty-first century, blueberries are the only commercial farm crop in Cooper. The economic value of these blueberry producing fields give Cooper its wonderful open areas and scenic views. There are currently about 1100 acres still in blueberry production (See Map 6 – Land Cover) none of which are irrigated.

The forests that surrounded the farms provided cash income for the residents. Men would spend the winter in Cooper cutting pines and moving the logs to the waterways for driving to the mills in spring. Drives took place on Cathance Lake and down the Dennys River. By the Civil War, pine was about gone and the men had to go up the St. Croix or up the Machias to work in logging crews on those watersheds. Some also took part in the river drives. By 1880 men turned to logging spruce along the same watersheds, and to working in the bark woods. There was no tannery in Cooper, but some were employed in tanneries at Princeton and Grand Lake Stream.

Early sawmills provided for the local market. In the 1800s there were mills in North Union off Dead Stream and at the end of West Ridge. Another mill off Whiff Hill operated until 1950. A lathe and shingle mill also operated on Old Mill Road. None are currently active.

During the first half of the twentieth century farmers cut and sold firewood in Woodland and Calais, and cut pulpwood for St. Croix Paper Company in Woodland. Some supplemented their income

cutting and shaving hoops and bounty hunting for porcupines. Many families also ate venison year-around.

Few residents currently cut lumber as an exclusive source of income. Lumber that is cut is trucked all over the state to obtain the best market price. The Domtar mill in Baileyville, 23 miles to the north and east is major source of employment in Cooper. Other uses of the forest include tipping by landowners or by lease to those seeking access to raw material for wreath making or for sale to larger wreath makers. Christmas trees were also produced historically but are now overgrown.

### **Historic Structures and Land Use Activities**

With few exceptions, all the structures built in Cooper during the nineteenth century were related to the farm; the single family home that might house three generations of the one family, the barn(s), and other outbuildings necessary for farming. The exceptions were the schoolhouses, the Churches, logging camps, and the few small mills.

There were two logging camps. One was located on the Love Lake Road known at the time as the "City's chopping road" due to it's use between the 1920s and 1940s by the city of Calais for logging work by those receiving general assistance from the City. This land is now encumbered by the Sunrise Easement held by the New England Forestry Foundation. The other logging camp was located across from the former landfill and operated in the 1940s by Sheriff Ray Foster who brought prisoners to work in the woods.

The oldest house still standing in Cooper was built in 1850s on Dodge Road. It is still used as a residence. Several other homes date back to the late 1800s including the Abiah Day homestead on East Ridge. A Civil War Veteran, Abiah Day died in 1948 and is buried across Route 191 in a private cemetery at the corner of an open field on land owned by his grandson Justin Day.

Many old farm houses and buildings have long since fallen in or burned. In the early 1900s many farmers headed west and open lands and hayfields started growing back to brush and forest. Local historian Justin Day estimates that over 1000 acres of hayfield have grown back to forest in the last century. He says that the woodlands are full of scattered rock piles, stone walls, cellar holes and abandoned wells. The only remaining open land in Cooper of any significance is blueberry land.

There are very few public or community buildings in Cooper. The exceptions are the Cathance Grange, built in 1911, and still standing though in need of restoration, and the Cooper Fire House, built in 1968. The Cooper Fire Department was started in 1968 with the construction of the Fire House and the purchase of a 1957 International fire engine from Laconia, NH.

Until the early 1980s dwellings on Cathance Lake were primarily seasonal. In the past 25 years many of these smaller cottages have been renovated into year round homes.

### **Transportation**

In 1898 the Washington County Railroad came to the area. Cooper residents had to travel to

Ayers Junction to reach the station for passenger travel as well as to ship timber on box cars. The use of the rail lines diminished substantially in the 1950's and 60's and the rail line was declared exempt in 1986. This was a result of more inexpensive trucking costs on the interstate highway system.

Before the arrival of the automobile, a trip between Machias and Calais took two days by horse and buggy and required a stop over. Cooper was the logical place to put up for the night. Catering to the needs of travelers was an early source of income for some residents. In fact the General Cooper house operated as an inn for such travelers. Automobiles came into use in the 1920s though travel was still slow.

### **SELECTED TIMELINE**

1790s	Lottery Townships sold for 20 cents per acre
1816	First settled by General John Cooper – Township 15 – E Division
1816	First sawmill and grist mill
1822	Incorporation as the Town of Cooper.
1825	Three school districts established.
1835	Congregational Church constructed
1840	Census population peak of 657 residents
1861	Map depicts Baptist Church
1898	Washington County railroad opens
1900	Two post offices in Cooper
1911-1912	Cathance Grange constructed
1912	Fire destroys last church in Cooper
1920s	West Ridge School closes
1935	Major freeze kills many apple trees
1942	North Union School closes
1957	East Ridge School closes
1967	Lowest population since incorporation – 67 residents
1968	Cooper Fire House constructed
1976	General John Cooper House destroyed by fire
1986	Calais Branch of railroad declared exempt
1988	Formation of Cathance Lake Association
1995	Postmistress retires; no longer any post office in Cooper
1996-2000	Multi-use recreational trails, i.e. hiking, jogging, ATV/snowmobiling tied into to Cooper

### **SELECTED REFERENCES**

- Community Analysis of Cooper, Maine. Mary Dunn, 1999.  
Alexander – Crawford Historical Society Newsletter (A-CHS). November 1994  
Alexander – Crawford Historical Society Newsletter (A-CHS). February 1995  
Alexander – Crawford Historical Society Newsletter (A-CHS). March 1996 (Special Issue)  
Interview – Justin Day, May 24, 2010

**HISTORIC BUILDINGS AND PLACES**

Early settlers usually built a log home with a dirt floor and a hole in the roof to let out the smoke. None of these primitive structures exist today. Settlers' permanent homes were built as soon as possible thereafter. There were post and beam frame houses. Being on the frontier, these homes were built by the owners who were farmers and loggers, not carpenters.

The Maine Historic Preservation Commission maintains an inventory of important sites including buildings or sites on the National Registry of Historic Places (NRHP). They record no such listings for the town and indicate that a comprehensive survey of Cooper's above-ground historic resources needs to be conducted in order to identify those properties which may be eligible for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places.

**REHABILITATION GRANTS**

The Federal Historic Preservation Tax Incentives program rewards private investment to rehabilitate certified historic structures (building listed individually in the National Register of Historic Places or a building located in a registered historic district and certified by the Secretary of the Interior as contributing to the historic significance of the district). The building must currently be used or will be used for commercial, industrial, agricultural, or rental residential purposes, but not used exclusively as the owner's private residence. Under PL 99-514 Internal Revenue Code Section 47, tax incentives include:

- A 20% tax credit for certified rehabilitation of certified historic structures.
- A 10% tax credit for rehabilitation of non-historic, non-residential buildings built before 1936.

For both credits, the rehabilitation must be a substantial one. That is, during a 24-month period selected by the taxpayer, rehabilitation expenditures must exceed the greater of \$5,000 or the adjusted basis of the building and its structural components. And, the rehabilitation must involve a depreciable building. The National Park Service must approve, or "certify," all rehabilitation projects seeking the 20% rehabilitation tax credit. Owners seeking certification of rehabilitation work must complete the Historic Preservation Certification Application.

A Maine State taxpayer is allowed a credit equal to the amount of the Federal credit claimed by the taxpayer under section 47 of the Internal Revenue Code for rehabilitation of certified historic structures located in Maine. The credit is nonrefundable and is limited to \$100,000 annually per taxpayer.

**CEMETERIES**

Cemeteries are a cultural resource providing insight into the history of the community. There are five cemeteries maintained by the town. They are depicted on Map 2 Public Facilities and Transportation and include the following:

- West Ridge Cemetery
- East Ridge Cemetery
- Evergreen Cemetery
- Perkins Cemetery
- Creamer Cemetery

A sixth, the General Cooper Cemetery is located on private land near the Cathance Grange. There are several other private cemeteries in the town. Funds are raised annually for mowing, maintenance and veterans flags for the public cemeteries.

## **ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES**

According to the Maine Historic Preservation Commission (MHPC) there are no known prehistoric archaeological sites located within Cooper. They indicate that a couple of professional surveys have been completed for utility corridors, and a portion of Cathance Lake shoreline on Birch Point has been surveyed. The MHPC notes that the remainder of the Cathance Lake shoreline, and the Dennys River valley need archaeological survey.

There is one known historic archeological site in Cooper, an unidentified farmstead known as the Dennys River Farmstead that is probably 19th -20th c. Local historian Justin Day suggests that this is the Haskell/Smith homestead. MHPC indicates that no professional survey for historic archeological sites has been conducted in Cooper. They indicate that future such fieldwork could focus on agricultural, residential, and industrial sites relating to the earliest Euro-American settlement of the town in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## **THREATS TO EXISTING SITES**

The greatest threat to historic buildings and archaeological sites is the lack of knowledge among landowners. Many old buildings have been intentionally destroyed without measurements and photographs. Many cellars and wells are filled and leveled without first creating a GPS record.

**Historic Buildings:** The historic buildings that have been identified above are not protected within the provisions of existing land use regulations. Without the proper ordinances being in place, the loss or conversion of the remaining buildings is possible.

**Archaeological Sites:** The locations of some of the above referenced archaeological sites are protected under Shoreland Zoning and Flood Plain Management Ordinance provisions that have been adopted by the town.

## **Public Opinion Survey**

Respondents to the 2009 survey indicated very strong support for actions to renovate and restore the Cathance Grange.

**SUMMARY**

The history of Cooper is based upon the natural resources that drove the local and regional economy, including logging, and more recently, blueberries. Many current residents can trace their families back to the town's early days. Cooper enjoys many of the benefits from our past. It is a small town with a strong sense of community where people look out for one another. The town seeks to maintain a link to its heritage and support for development that retain the scale and appearance of the town as well as preserve its historic character.