

**EXETER IN 1776. SKETCHES OF AN OLD  
NEW HAMPSHIRE TOWN AS IT WAS A  
HUNDRED YEARS AGO. PREPARED FOR  
THE LADIES CENTENNIAL LEVEE HELD IN  
EXETER, FEB. 22, 1876**

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Exeter in 1776. Sketches of an old New Hampshire town as it was a hundred years ago.  
Prepared for the ladies centennial levee held in Exeter, Feb. 22, 1876 by Charles Henry Bell

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**CHARLES HENRY BELL**

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PREPARED FOR THE LADIES' CENTENNIAL LEEVEE

HELD IN

EXETER, FEB. 22, 1876.

*Am*  
*Charles H. Snow*



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## EXETER IN 1776.

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The approach of the national Centennial has exerted a wide and perceptible influence upon the community. People in the active walks of life have hitherto usually paid little heed to the memory of the past; many of them had hardly the curiosity to learn the names of their own grandfathers, and cared no more for the relics of a former generation, than for the dust beneath their feet. But the near prospect of the birthday of the nation's Independence, with its preliminary celebrations and preparations, has kept the public attention directed to the Revolutionary epoch, until all classes have begun to feel a genuine interest in the subject. No longer are the events of the last century the exclusive property of the antiquary; they are fruitful topics of conversation and study in numberless households. No longer are the clothing and ornaments, the weapons and domestic utensils of our ancestors allowed to moulder in attics and dusty corners; they occupy conspicuous places now, and are handled tenderly, as objects of interest and pride. In short, the antiquarian fever has become in a manner epidemic, and the past takes the precedence of the present, in a double sense.

In view of this happy direction of the popular taste, the present occasion has been thought a favorable one for presenting to the inhabitants of Exeter a sketch of the town, and of some of the leading spirits who dwelt and figured in it, one hundred years ago. The picture may be somewhat

crude, for it is necessarily drawn in haste; but it will have the merit of being truthful, if records and apparently authentic traditions can be relied on.

It is extremely questionable if one who only knew Exeter as it was in 1776, would be able to recognize the Exeter of to-day as the same place. The conformation of the ground in the vicinity of the river and falls must have greatly changed. The slope from the higher lands down to the water was formerly much more abrupt than it now is. The ridges have since been cut down, and the low ground filled up. A century ago, in very high tides, the western part of Water street used to be inundated, so that boats could be rowed through it for a considerable distance. The road to Newmarket, in the earlier times, did not run down by the water's edge, but back from it, over the high land. The fact that the bed of Water street has been artificially raised, was demonstrated by an excavation made not long since in front of Messrs. Porter & Thyng's store, which exposed a stratum of gravel, several feet in thickness, evidently deposited there by successive generations of highway-surveyors.

And if we can believe the accounts that have been handed down, there has been a still deeper fill in front of where Mr. John W. Getchell's store now is. The house of Col. John Phillips was built there, more than a century ago, and was destroyed by fire only a few years since. When the house was erected, the front is said to have been three stories in height; within the memory of those now on the stage only two stories have ever been visible, and the lower one of those was sunken at the last considerably below the level of the sidewalk. If the case was as represented, it is plain that Water street, at that point, has been built up at least a dozen feet above its original level. But it is proper to say that the foundations of the house, which were exposed when Mr. Getchell's building was erected, do not appear to confirm the tradition. Still, there can be no doubt

that the street has been a good deal raised there ; if not so much as the height of a story of a house.

The change in the character of the public highways, since 1776, is worthy of special notice. For many years before the Revolution the lumber-trade was the chief business of the town. Vast quantities of the choicest spoils of the forest were brought each year from inland points, to the Exeter landing,—a part to be used for the construction of ships here, and the remainder to be rafted, or otherwise transported down the river. The greater share of the money raised for the repair of the highways was expended on the roads towards Brentwood and Epping, over which the staple commodity in which our citizens were so deeply interested was hauled to tide water and a market. The result of it was that the other ways were sadly neglected. Fortunately this was of less consequence from the fact that most of the travel at that period, was upon horseback. The river, too, served admirably as a public highway, in former times, between the settlements upon its banks. So long as people could do their business by means of boats, they were not so particular about the condition of the roads.

The basin of the salt river, six score years ago, presented a far busier scene than it does to-day. The channel was then capable of affording a passage to vessels of considerable size, and ships of from two hundred to five hundred tons' burden were built here ; six or eight of them each season, it is said. Several vessels were owned here, and made voyages along the coast and to the West Indies and Europe. With ships unloading their cargoes at our wharves, with carpenters and caulkers plying their busy trades in our shipyards, and with long lines of teams dragging the mighty pines to the river side, the spectacle must have been full of life and animation. Perhaps something of the same sort may again be realized, when the obstructions to the navigation of the Squamscot shall be removed.



As the Revolution drew nigh, the lumber trade declined, and the business activity of the place diminished. The breaking out of hostilities sent some of the most enterprising citizens into the army; commerce was suspended and ship building was no longer lucrative. The mechanics became soldiers or sought employment elsewhere, and Exeter, its limited resources drawn upon to the utmost to sustain the war, looked forward with anxious hope to the issue that was to bring peace and restore prosperity.

Of course there were no sidewalks in 1776; those have come in mostly within the last half century. A few shade trees then flung their protecting arms over a part of the village, some of which are still standing, or have but recently disappeared. A giant elm, here and there, remains to tell the story of the past century, and some sturdy buttonwoods of equal if not superior age, on both sides of the great bridge, succumbed to disease and were cut down, within the recollection of many persons. But the great bulk of our present ornamental trees are of more recent date even than the sidewalks.

The size and extent of the village was of course much less a hundred years since, than now. The entire population of the town at that period did not quite reach 1750 souls, which is something less than one-half what it now is. And as a large proportion of the inhabitants lived in the less compact parts of the town, the village could not have greatly exceeded one-third its present dimensions. The character of the buildings, too, was generally inferior. To be sure the best of them were spacious, handsome and constructed from the choicest materials, as a few surviving specimens still attest; but probably the major part of them must have been comparatively small and poor. Unpainted houses were the rule then; they are the exceptions now. On the southerly side of Front street there used to be nothing but fields and woods; Bow, Court, Elm, Elliott and Pine streets, with all

their branches, are the growth of little more than forty years last past.

In 1776, Exeter could boast but two churches, and those both Congregational; nor was there either Academy or Seminary, then. But in the article of public houses a hundred years have probably given us no increase. There were then two taverns on the east side of the river, and the whole number was no doubt greater than it is now. This is to be explained by the different habits of the earlier generation. Auction sales and many kinds of public business were formerly transacted at the inns, as they were usually called. They were places where the citizens of all classes used to meet, especially in the evenings; and the convivial habits of the past age contributed essentially to their being well patronized. Exeter during the period of the Revolution was a place of great resort, and as those were not days when men could whirl into town from their homes by the train in the morning, and whirl back again to their own firesides in the evening, nearly every visitor here had to pass a night or two under the roof of one or another of our hospitable landlords.

Exeter, a century ago, had but just assumed the position in the province to which its size and importance entitled it. Forty years before, the town had become an object of jealousy and dislike to some of the dignitaries under the crown, at Portsmouth, and in consequence thereof had been tabooed and "left out in the cold," so far as it was in their power to accomplish it. The last royal governor, John Wentworth, however, was too sensible and politic to allow his conduct to be influenced by an old grudge. He took particular pains to conciliate the inhabitants of Exeter; visited the town repeatedly, in much state; formed and commissioned a company of cadets here, embracing many leading men, as a kind of body-guard to the occupant of the gubernatorial office, and established relations of intimacy with several of the prominent citizens.

He labored zealously and conscientiously for the good of the province, and at the same time to uphold the power of Britain over it. He hoped no doubt that his special friends in Exeter might adhere to the cause of the crown, as so many of his connections and dependents in Portsmouth did. But he reckoned without his host. When the tocsin of war was sounded, Exeter might be said to be a unit, on the side of liberty, and the men whom Gov. Wentworth had delighted to honor were the first to declare in favor of their oppressed country.

Exeter then became, and remained for many years, the capital of the province, and state. The Legislature held its sessions here, and during its adjournments, the Committee of Safety took its place, and exercised its functions. The courts were again established here, and the town became practically the headquarters of all military undertakings, in which New Hampshire was concerned. And here on the fifth day of January, 1776, was adopted and put in operation the First Written Constitution for popular government, of the Revolutionary period. The honor of taking the lead of her sister colonies in this momentous "new departure" belongs to New Hampshire, and Exeter may well be proud to have been the scene of an occurrence so interesting and so memorable.

The structure in our town which has perhaps retained its old-time appearance most perfectly for the past century, is the powder-house, situated on the point near the river on the east side. It was built about 1760, and has apparently undergone little repair since that time. It probably first held military stores destined for the French and Indian war, which, however, terminated before they could have been much needed. A few years later it was opened, no doubt, to receive a part of the powder captured by the provincials in the raid, under Sullivan, upon Fort William and Mary in Portsmouth harbor, in December, 1774. But as powder with-