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**THE IRISH SETTLERS OF PELHAM, MASS.**

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Almost every civil war, rebellion, insurrection, and outbreak in Ireland, from the time of the Tudors downwards, arose more or less directly from questions connected with the possession of lands. It was the land question that helped to drive the Presbyterian Irish out, to become pioneer Irish settlers in America. Whole villages of Irish people were depopulated.

These clearances gave vast numbers of Irish settlers to America before the Revolutionary War and supplied the American army with a body of brave, determined men. Massachusetts received a very large proportion of the Irish in the eighteenth century, and being by far the most important of the old colonies, the history of its early settlement is, consequently, interesting.

One of the most interesting inland settlements in the state of Massachusetts is the town of Pelham, situated in the northwestern part of Hampshire county, settled by Irish immigrants in 1738-9. A historical spot, as it was the dwelling place of that patriotic soldier, Daniel Shea, who, after the Revolution, was one of the leaders in "Shays' Rebellion."

In 1738 Robert Peebles, blacksmith, and James Thornton, yeoman, two Irish immigrants, made a contract with Col. John Stoddard of Northampton, Mass., for the purchase of his section of "Equivalent Lands," with the purpose of establishing thereon a colony of settlers "who shall be such as were inhabitants of the Kingdom of Ireland or their descendants."

This contract having been carried into effect, Colonel Stoddard sold the land to Robert Peebles, Patrick Peebles, James Thornton, Andrew McFarland, and others named in the deed. These with their families became the first settlers of Pelham. Among the early settlers are the familiar Celtic names, McCullough, McCullom, McConkey, Dick, Taylor, Gray, McClain, Breckenridge, Gilmore, 115Macklan, McLachay, McNutt, McConnell, Cochran, Savage, Hamilton, McMullen, McCartney, Joyce, Rankin, White, McFall, Butler, Felton, Hoar, Griffin, Kelley, McNeill, McLallen, McClintock.

The new settlement was called New Lisburn, after the town of Lisburn in the southern part of County Antrim, on the banks of the Lagan, in Ireland. Some of the settlers coming from Lisburn wished to call their new home after the mother town, and until 1743 the settlement was called New Lisburn when it was changed to Pelham.

At the time of the purchase, the condition of the soil was more fertile than at present. Rye, oats, corn, and barley were raised in abundance, as well as flax. The hills furnished excellent

pasturage for cattle and horses. The settlers were a quiet, honest, Godfearing people. The town grew very slowly. In 1776 the population was 729. In 1800, 1,144. Since the latter date, it has decreased in population.

When trouble arose between England and the colonies, the town of Pelham was one of the first to answer a communication from the Committee of Correspondence in Boston. A few literal extracts are interesting:

“To the Committee of Correspondence, Gentlemen: We have considered your Circular letters and are not a little shocked at the attempts upon the liberties of America ... we replied back also upon the unhappy Reign of the Stuart family & bloody Struggles to subdue a free people to Non-resistance and Passive obedience. We have still a more sense of the worth of our Liberties by the total loss of them in the conquered Kingdom of Ireland when altho made of the same one Blood they have a yoke of Iron put upon their Necks and they must serve their conquerors with as much of their money and blood as they are pleased to demand and sustain more intolerable oppressions from these Legislative Masters and unfeeling Landlords than some of the Barbarous Nations compared by the Ancient Romans before the wars of their Empire.

“This so grievous a yoke upon the Western Isle which neither they nor their fathers were able to bear has driven them by hundreds and by thousands to bide a final due to their otherwise Dear Native Land and seek a peaceful Retreat from the bane of Oppressions in this American Wilderness. Depending upon the faith of the Nation for all the privileges chartered to American Colonies, we cannot therefore but be greatly alarmed at the news of the Encroachments upon the Natural and Chartered Rights of this Province where we have our abode.”

The military history of the town is an honorable one. In the War of the Revolution, a large number of male residents took part. At the close of the Revolution, the town came into prominence on account of the part many of its citizens took in “Shays’ Rebellion.” This rebellion was not prompted by any spirit of disloyalty, nor was it designed or plotted to overturn the government. It was the wild and lawless expression of discontent with harsh circumstances, the natural outbreak of those who were suffering and oppressed.

Daniel Shea, one of the leaders in this rebellion, was a remarkable man. Very little is known about his early life. His birthplace has been assigned to Hopkinton, Mass., but this has been disputed. There is a tradition that his parents and young Shea came from County Cork, Ireland, and that they lived for some time on the eastern border of Pelham. He spells his name both “Shea” and “Shays.”

Wherever his birthplace was, one thing is certain concerning him, he hated England and all things English. Little is known concerning his life in Pelham previous to the Revolution except what is traditional.

After the battle of Lexington he was among the first to join a company of minute men. He was promoted for bravery at the battle of Bunker Hill, and shared in the campaign resulting in Burgoyne's surrender. Nothing shows more clearly the loyal spirit of Daniel Shea than his conduct during the Revolution. He took a deep interest in a cause which involved the dearest interests of his country.

Shea returned to Pelham at the close of the war, and in 1781 was chosen by the town as a member of the Committee of Safety. He was prominent in other town offices up to the time of the insurrection and was a respected citizen. The insurrection is a matter of history and need not be dwelt on here. Out of the one hundred and fifty men who were captured, fourteen were tried and sentenced to death but were afterward pardoned. After remaining in hiding for some time, Shea was pardoned. Having received his pardon, he went to New York state, where all trace of him is lost.

That Pelham was a distinctively Irish settlement is clearly shown on the occasion of the settling of the first pastor, Rev. Robert Abercrombie, 117a Scotchman. Rev. Mr. Abercrombie was educated at Edinburgh University and came to this country in 1740 as a licensed preacher. He came to Pelham in 1742. There arose a division at once in the church. One of the reasons for the division was the fact of his being a Scotchman and of his demanding rigid adherence to the doctrines and requirements of the Church of Scotland.

The majority of the members of the Presbyterian Church of Pelham wanted an Irish Presbyterian clergyman. After a great deal of controversy, Mr. Abercrombie was settled as a pastor. He was unfortunate in having a strong element of opposition to contend against from his first connection with the people of Pelham, as shown by the strong protest against his settlement. After preaching for a few years he was compelled to resign from his pastorate.

While the Irish Presbyterians predominated, there were some who were members of the Church of England and some Roman Catholics. A spirit of harmony always existed in this community. The people were peaceable, respecting the rights of others and demanding the same respect in return.

These early settlers brought with them many of the customs and traditions of the Emerald Isle, and until after the Revolution, they spoke with a rich Irish brogue. In 1765 many of the settlers, who had become dissatisfied with the soil and other existing conditions, moved westward, and joined a colony of settlers from Ballibay, Ireland, helped to found the town of Salem, N. Y.

Among the descendants of the early settlers who became noted was: Ira P. Rankin, collector of the port of San Francisco, appointed by President Lincoln.

Adam Johnson, one of the benefactors of Amherst College, and for whom the "Johnson Chapel" is named.

Dr. Israel Taylor, was a leading physician in Amherst, Mass., until his death in 1890.

Ithamar Conkey, for a number of years town clerk of Pelham, and in 1830 appointed judge of probate. His son, Ithamar F. Conkey, one of the leading lawyers of the Massachusetts bar, was a resident of Amherst, Mass., until his death.

There are very few of the descendants of the original settlers living in the town of Pelham today.