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OLD SCOTLAND IN VERMONT

By WALDO F. GLOVER

The "wee bit of Old Scotland" to which Mr. Glover refers was a "large bit" in terms of the contribution made by our Scottish people to the welfare and genius of the state. We have in early stages of planning a series of papers showing in concrete terms the permanent values in the life of the state that came through the Irish, French, Italian, and other racial strains. Mr. Glover is the author of Abraham Lincoln and the Sleeping Sentinel—a definitive study of the dramatic story of William Scott, the young Vermonter saved from execution by President Lincoln. Editor.

. . . the mountains, the hills, the lakes, the dashing streams of southern Caledonia County, Vermont, bear a striking resemblance to those same features in the old Caledonia beyond the sea.

WOULD you like to see a wee bit of Old Scotland in New England? Then come with me to the hills of southern Caledonia County, Vermont—to hills that were cleared and cultivated and still are cultivated, by the Cochrans, the Gibsons, the Gilfillans, the McLams, the Nelsons, the Taiseys, the Whitehills, and scores of other families bearing names as indigenous to Scotland as the heather on her mountains. But our object today is not to visit these people, delightful as that might be, but chiefly to ponder over a few ancient stone houses, or remains thereof, reminiscent of the Old Country.

When we consider that the town of Ryegate was settled *en masse* by *The Scotch American Company of Farmers*, organized in Inchinnan, Scotland, for the purpose of "purchasing lands in any of His Majesty's Dominions in America," and that a year later the town of Barnet was, to a considerable extent, settled by *The United Company of Perth and Stirling*, the wonder is that both towns were not pretty well dotted with stone houses patterned after the country homes and peasant cottages of the motherland. Surely there was no dearth of building material, for every lot of land, and in most parts of these towns, every acre, yielded more than enough field stones for a cottage. Moreover, on the slopes of Blue Mountain were outcroppings of granite in convenient sheets or layers fairly begging to be quarried. Why, then, did not those Scotch pioneers build more cottages of this type, espe-

cially when they had among their number artisans of the various trades, including stone-masons?

First of all, it seems that time was an essential factor. During the spring and summer of 1773 James Whitelaw and David Allan, agents of the Scotch American Company, had made an extensive tour of the American colonies from Ryegate, formerly a New Hampshire Grant, to North Carolina, and, after carefully weighing the advantages and disadvantages of the various areas offered for sale, had decided in favor of Ryegate. On October 2, 1773, these agents bargained for the south half of this town with the owner, Dr. John Witherspoon, himself a Scotsman and the Presbyterian President of the College of New Jersey, now Princeton University. We can well imagine the excitement with which the expectant colonists welcomed the news of this purchase, and their eagerness to be away to New England where they were to carve out homes in the wilderness, and build the "city" of their dreams.

As early as May 23, 1774, the first of these adventurers arrived in Ryegate, and by the end of a twelvemonth, when the outbreak of the Revolutionary War put an effectual damper on further immigration, a considerable body of settlers had arrived and had been given their assignment of land. Now with forests to be cleared, houses to be built, crops to be raised, and families to be fed in the meantime, it is evident that all work had to be done in the most expeditious manner possible. There simply was not time to build stone houses like those in Scotland. Log houses would serve temporarily, and could be built in a small fraction of the time required for those of stone. Of course, the Ryegate pioneers had never seen log houses in Scotland, but there were plenty of such structures in use in Newbury; and there were also workmen in that town who could show their new neighbors how best to build them. So they built log houses both in Ryegate and in Barnet.

Now a second question raises its head. When the log houses had served their purpose and had begun to decay, and larger houses were needed, both to satisfy the pride of the owners as well as to furnish greater comfort for their families, why was not that the time to build stone houses? If Wordsworth's definition of poetry be true—"emotion recollected in tranquility"—why were not the nostalgic memories of Old Scotland materialized in charming stone cottages in Ryegate and Barnet, now that the more rigorous days of pioneering had gone, and a more leisurely and tranquil way of life begun?

In a word, the reason was that except for their loyalty to the Presbyterian Church, and their dogged persistence in the use of

barley broth as a principal daily food, these Scots had come to adopt most of the practices of the older New England towns, especially of Newbury, their neighbor on the south. The plank or frame house was the type predominant in New England. So with timber in plenty and sawmills near at hand, what could have been more logical for these good people than to have followed the example of their New England neighbors in building plank or frame houses? And this is just what they did,—all but five nonconformists: John Orr, James and Abraham Whitehill of Ryegate, William Gilkerson of Barnet, and Robert Taisey of Groton. It is especially for the work of these five men, or what remains of it, that you have been led through this long introduction. *They built stone houses.*

It is impossible to determine the exact age of some of these houses, but they were all built between the years 1797 and 1812. In all likelihood the Orr house is the oldest. When Frederick Wells was writing the *History of Ryegate*, he had what might be considered reliable information that this house was built "some years before 1800." John Orr, a native of Kilmalcolm, and a member of the Scotch American Company, arrived in Ryegate in the spring of 1774, and was assigned two lots by the commissioners in charge of the distribution of land: a large lot for a farm, and a house lot in the proposed "city," both of which were located in or near the present hamlet of Ryegate Corner. In 1797, Orr exchanged these lots with all his improvements of twenty-three years, for two hundred acres of virgin land in the western part of the town on the Groton line, where he began the life of a pioneer all over again by clearing a farm and erecting a set of buildings. As it is unlikely that he would have gone to the trouble and expense of building a log house which would presently be discarded, we may assume that the stone house was built at once, or by the year 1798 at the latest.

The Orr house differs from the other four houses of this group in that its walls to the height of the eaves are of stone, while the two gables are of wood. This house stood in its original form for over a century. About forty years ago the front wall was razed and a wooden addition of modern design was incorporated into the old building. Hence, it is from the rear that an idea of its original appearance can best be obtained. It is of interest to note that this farm has remained with the descendants of John Orr for 155 years, the present owner being Charles Hooper, a great-great-grandson.

The Gilkerson house on Gilkerson Hill in Barnet probably comes second in respect to age, having been built, it is believed, before the

year 1800. The farm was settled about 1774 by John Galbraith of the Parish of Balfron in Scotland, and in 1785 came into the possession of John Gilkerson, formerly of Kilwinan, Scotland. Log houses sufficed for both Galbraith and Gilkerson; but when William Gilkerson, John's eldest son, approached the state of matrimony, he evidently wanted his future bride, Agnes Somers, a lass from Cambuslang, to be queen of as fine a stone house as any she had known in Scotland. William was married January 28, 1802, but as he had spent most of his young life on his father's farm, he well may have been at work on his stone house somewhat before the turn of the century. Indeed, judging from the great care which evidently attended the construction of this house, it may be that some time, perhaps a period of years, was consumed in its building.

Of the two Whitehill houses in North Ryegate, that of James is the older, having been built in 1808, while that of Abraham, his brother, was not built until 1812. The Whitehills were not members of the Scotch American Company, but as they were residents of Inchinnan, they knew all about that company, and the colony which had been established in Ryegate; and doubtless they welcomed the opportunity, when at last it came, to join their kinfolk in the new land across the sea. This opportunity came in 1798 when the historic "Witherspoon Tract" of six hundred acres in the northwest corner of Ryegate, bordering on Groton on the west and Barnet on the north, was offered for sale.

This tract had been given in 1774 by President John Witherspoon of Princeton, to his son, James, Junior, who repaired forthwith to Ryegate, accompanied by a retinue of servants, including, it is believed, a number of colored slaves. Here it must be observed that all this happened while Ryegate was still a part of Gloucester County, New York, and fully two years before the independent Republic of Vermont abolished human slavery within its bounds by constitutional enactment. On this tract young Witherspoon had cleared about twenty-five acres and built some temporary log houses when the news of the Revolutionary War penetrated the wilderness. Espousing the Colonial cause, as did his distinguished father who signed the Declaration of American Independence, young Witherspoon returned home, became a member of the staff of General Washington with the rank of major, and fell at the Battle of Germantown; and with him fell the dream of a Witherspoon "estate" in North Ryegate. It was to this tract that James Whitehill came in 1798 where he found the Witherspoon clearing overgrown, and the buildings in ruins. Here he built a

log house for himself and one for his brother Abraham who followed him thither in 1800. In these cabins the Whitehill brothers lived while they cleared away the forests, and, in leisure time, built their stone houses.

James Whitehill's stone house remained unchanged until 1833 when his son, Abraham II, who had inherited the farm, undertook a major project of "improvement." This was accomplished by razing the east gable and most of the lower wall, and by constructing in its place a wooden gable over a recessed porch. A wooden ell extending northward was also added, presumably to accommodate a growing family. The farm remained in the possession of the James Whitehill family through three generations. Upon the death of Corwin Whitehill, grandson of James, in 1929, it was acquired by the Whitehill Family Association, thus assuring the preservation of what remains of the old stone house. Here the Association holds a reunion in August of each year. From here, also, are distributed the books of the Whitehill Library Association, a neighborhood organization.

The stone house of Abraham Whitehill suffered no "improvements" so long as it was occupied as a residence. In 1857, however, William Whitehill, son of Abraham, built a wooden house on what he considered a more suitable location, whereupon the old stone house of 1812 was allowed to disintegrate. The walls, however, stood intact well into the eighteen-nineties when Quincy A. Whitehill, grandson of Abraham, needed stone for the foundation of his new barn; and the old house proved a tempting source of supply. The west gable and the two side walls were razed, leaving the east gable to stand for more than another quarter-century, a very picturesque ruin. Abraham's farm remained in the family possession until 1946, when it was sold by a great-grandson of the pioneer, and passed out of the family.

The last stone house of Scotch origin to be noted, but one of the most picturesque of the group, is the old house in Groton built by Robert Taisey. This house was not noted in the Groton grand list of 1808, but it does appear in 1812, the date of the next recorded list. Hence, we may say that it was built about 1810. It is featured in Congdon's *Old Vermont Houses* in which the author gives an excellent description of the house although sadly misinformed as to dates, both of the Taisey family and the house which Robert built.

William Taisey, father of Robert, was a member of the Scotch American Company, but did not come to New England in 1774 with the first contingent. By waiting to come over in the company of about sixty would-be colonists who left Scotland in the spring of 1775,

OLD SCOTLAND IN VERMONT

I GILKERSON HOUSE IN BARNET
ERECTED ABOUT 1800

II TAISEY HOUSE IN GROTON
ERECTED ABOUT 1810

III JAMES WHITEHILL HOUSE IN NORTH RYEGATE
ERECTED ABOUT 1808

IV JOHN ORR HOUSE IN WEST RYEGATE
ERECTED IN 1798

V REMAINS OF THE ABRAHAM WHITEHILL HOUSE IN NORTH RYEGATE
ERECTED IN 1812



I



II



III



IV



v

ALL TOWNS MENTIONED ARE IN CALEDONIA COUNTY
IN NORTHEASTERN VERMONT

William Taisey and his companions ran into difficulties. Arriving in Boston just before the Battle of Bunker Hill, they were not permitted by the British authorities to proceed to Ryegate, but were given the option of joining the British army, of going to Nova Scotia, or of returning to Scotland. Most of the company, including William Taisey, chose the last-mentioned course; and it was not until 1795, or twenty years later, that he returned to New England, accompanied by his wife and two sons, Robert and William. The Taiseys went first to Ryegate where they originally intended to settle; but finding the best land already taken up, they turned westward to the new town of Groton where they found satisfactory land at a reasonable price. Robert and his aging father settled on the "Stone House" farm in 1801, living in a log house until the stone house was completed. For the next forty-three years, or the remainder of his life, this was Robert's home. After his death the farm passed through several hands. For the last half-century, however, it has been in the possession of the Fellows family.

Although no technical discussion of architectural features will be undertaken here, a few observations and comparisons may be in order. To begin with, the five houses were all of similar style, being about the size and shape of the average one-story New England cottage of 1800. They were all built of stone found or quarried near at hand, principally of rubble and random ashlar, the more shapely blocks being used around doors and windows and at outside corners. The solidly built walls were about two feet in thickness, with openings for windows widening towards the inside of the wall to admit the greatest amount of light possible.

An interesting tradition of the Gilkerson house is that for the mortar used in its construction, William Gilkerson transported sixty-one barrels of lime from Burlington by ox team. In this respect the Whitehill brothers were more fortunate, for they discovered a bed of limestone on their own land. Even today their kiln is pointed out as an historical landmark. They manufactured lime not only for the construction of their stone houses, but for chimney and plaster work throughout the neighborhood. As the Taisey house in Groton is but a scant mile and a half from the Whitehill kiln, it is quite likely that Whitehill lime was used in the cement work in that house.

Unlike most of the wooden New England cottages of the period, none of these houses has a large central chimney. Each was heated by fireplaces with flues incorporated into the walls of the gable ends. In this respect they resembled most of the country homes of Scotland.

The Gilkerson and the Taisey houses had four fireplaces on the ground floor, one in each corner room. The two flues in each gable end ran slantingly upwards and towards each other until they nearly came together, then straight upwards with smoke exits into a short chimney-top at the peak of the gable.

The Orr house had but two fireplaces, one at each end of the house—the parlor end and the kitchen end, the latter being much the larger, and including the oven. The parlor fireplace has been closed for many years, but could be opened and put to use. The kitchen fireplace was sealed up many years ago, having been adjudged unsafe.

Of the fireplace arrangement in the Whitehill houses we know but little, with the Abraham house a total ruin, and the east gable of the James house having been removed in the remodelling job of 1833. However, the west or kitchen end of the latter has been preserved. Here may be seen a huge fireplace and oven with a heavy stone mantle extending over both. This shapely stone probably came from Blue Mountain, for it is known that quarries were worked there at an early date to furnish mantles and hearthstones for many houses both in Ryegate and in Groton.

Of all these houses the one built by Gilkerson is in the best state of preservation. Fortunately, this house fell into the hands of the Kitchell family who appreciated its possibilities both as an architectural gem and as a charming home. The bricked-up fireplaces were re-opened and put to work. Especially picturesque is the great fireplace with its connecting oven in the dining room, formerly the kitchen. The pine panelling, which had been concealed for many years as “old-fashioned,” is again resplendent in the light of day. Everything in the line of restoration has been undertaken, not to destroy, but rather to enhance the original features most worthy of preservation.

But perfect as is the Gilkerson house in every detail, it is not so reminiscent of the rustic beauty of a lone Highland cottage as is the Taisey house. “This one needs only a thatched roof,” writes Congdon, “to be a typical mooreland cottage. The way the roof finishes along the gable wall without any moulding and the eaves stop against a stone bracket or corbel are characteristically Scottish details.” Weathered to a soft gray by the alternate sunshine and storms of seven-score years, with its outside aspect virtually unchanged by “improvements,” except for its too brilliant roof, the Taisey house snuggles on its wind-swept hillside, a veritable bit of Old Scotland.

Does anyone ask, “Why so much ado over five old stone houses, one a total ruin, and two others remodelled out of countenance; is

this all of Scotland you can show us?" So far as architecture with a Scotch accent is concerned, the answer is yes, but certainly not in several other respects. Although the granite and the paper industries have brought into the region many new names, as has also the inter-marriage of Scotch families with native Yankees, there yet remains a goodly portion of the population bearing family names which appeared on the rolls of the Scotch American Company, and the United Company of Perth and Stirling, or were borne by other families of Scots who came hither prior to the year 1800. And these names are not confined to Ryegate and Barnet alone; they have freely overflowed into the contiguous towns of Groton, Newbury, and Peacham. Moreover, the Church of Scotland has maintained a profound influence over the lives of these worthy people through all the years. Today there are four Presbyterian churches in Ryegate, two of which in South Ryegate are happily federated; and three in Barnet, one of which is a congregation of Covenanters, the only one of that order in Vermont.

And, finally, the name of the county is a perpetual reminder of Old Scotland—a name suggested, it is believed, by Gen. James Whitelaw of Ryegate and Col. Alexander Harvey of Barnet who, not only had been the leaders of the two companies of Scotch pioneers, but also in later years had become the outstanding citizens of that portion of old Orange County which in 1792 became Caledonia. But the name, however given, is not a misnomer, not only because of the preponderance of Scotch influence in early days, but also because of the physical features of the region; for the mountains, the hills, the lakes, the dashing streams of southern Caledonia County, Vermont, bear a striking resemblance to those same features in the old Caledonia beyond the sea.

