

The History of Lew Beach

Although the hamlet of Lew Beach, formerly called Shin Creek, and still earlier Milltown, was settled late, as settlements in the Eastern part of the United States goes, still the land seems to have been held under lease and occupied much earlier than the historians of Sullivan County have supposed.

The Hardenburgh Patent was granted in 1708 or 1709. It was thought that this huge tract of land, so inaccessible because of navigable streams and the unbroken forests, was not used, excepting perhaps as a hunting and kind of vacation ground for the Indians, until after the Revolutionary War had broken the power of the Indians in New York State. But in 1749 deeds were registered in the office of the Secretary of State at Albany from Julian Ver Plank to Gillan and Mary Phillips (also spelled Philips), to James and Susanna Bartineau, and to John and Mary Ann Jones. These leases subdivided Great Lot #5, land in the wide, and, until the advent of the Downsville Reservoir Shaft, pleasant valley that comprises lower Lew Beach. The leases state that this land was held and occupied seventeen years before Jehiel Stewart settled in Rockland. Who were these people? Since they held lease and not title they could not have been absentee landlords. And since their women held lease with the men they were probably not hunters. We must suppose then that they were the earliest settlers, even though we cannot trace their descendants today.

A few years later, however, names that we know today began to appear. In 1772 title passed to Elias Desbrosses and through him to his two nieces, Elizabeth, who married John Hunter, and Magdalen who married Henry Overing. These people owned but did not live on the land. But they did give leases to people who cleared lands, built mills and began to farm the country. In 1795 James Desbrosses gave a lease to Abel Sprague to the land where now the shaft is built, and the rent for this 190 acres was to be "one shilling per acre per year." The same year a lease was given to Thomas Soramie on the land now occupied by the

Beaverkill Trout Club, and formerly owned by Henry Voorhees. At the same time John Davidson is mentioned as being in residence and claiming ownership to the flat between these two tracts of land.

Undoubtedly the Hunters and Desbrosses and the Overings were absentee landlords. There is mention of an agent collecting rents and making leases for them. But it is also certain that by 1795 Abel and Thomas Sprague and John Davidson occupied their lands, farmed and lumbered and built at least one mill and that their descendants continued to live on their land. Lew Beach, or Milltown, was settled.

One of the earliest settlers in Lew Beach is reputed to be Samuel Woodard, a hunter, who lived where the Hardy house, one of the oldest houses in this area now stands. Woodard is credited with capturing a mountain lion with his bare hands, on at least one occasion, trussing it on a sapling and carrying it to his home where he kept it as an odd and, I am sure, a rather unsatisfactory pet. Other names crop up again and again in this area, the Joscelyns, the Barnharts, the Knapps, the Busseys, the Voorhees, the Larraways. These, too, must have been among the first families to settle Lew Beach.

Life was rugged for those early settlers. It was not until John Hunter, who is always referred to in the old leases as "John Hunter, Jr. of Westchester Co.", had Hunter Road cut over the mountains to the Neversink Valley, using the ~~PA~~ Indians' Old Sun Trail as their basis, that this area became at all accessible. This was in 1815. When the Delaware and Hudson Canal opened in the Neversink Valley in 1827-28, making a trip from the Delaware River to New York City possible it must have seemed to our Lew Beach inhabitants that the world was opening up for them. We read of hemlock shingles, and hides being floated down the canal and we know that such articles were dragged by oxen across Hunter Road to the Neversink. Also, and this was still in practise in the lifetime of Ed Sprague who died in 1912, lumber was rafted in the spring down the Beaverkill in small colts to East Branch. Here four of these

colts were lashed together as a raft and floated down the Delaware to Philadelphia.

In the Atlas of 1876 we find what the New York City Public Library calls the earliest map of Lew Beach. Here we see a store owned by W. Hardy, and an inn, a forerunner and a part of the present Lew Beach Villa, I imagine. Also there was a shoe shop owned by S. L Knapp where boots were not only sold but actually made. A blacksmith shop stood where Stewart's garage now lies but there is no school, no church, no Post Office shown on this map. In another ten years the old church that stood across the road from the blacksmith shop was built and, a little later, the present Methodist Church was built. Also a one room school house that at one time held as many as seventy pupils functioned until the advent of the Central School. Lew Beach also soon had a Post Office, and this was in operation before there was a Post Office in Livingston Manor. In the early days the pay of the Postmaster was \$5.00 a year. But few letters passed through the Post Office. Three times a week Zebadée Kelly took the mail on horseback from Lew Beach north along trails, not roads, through Fleishman's and thence out into the world.

The early settlers had worse things to contend with than mere isolation from the life and industry of the cities. After the Revolution the fear of Indian massacres passed, but not the fear of disease and floods. The old cemetaries show grisly tales of whole families of children being wiped out in one epidemic. Diptheria and "black measles" were not just childrens' diseases but something evil and malignant and rightly to be feared.

When floods came, as they did every few years, families were isolated and must accept not only death but birth without the aid and comfort of neighbors. In one flood in September of 1863 bodies were washed out of the Sprague burying ground, now called the Lew Beach Cemetary although this stands far from the stream and high above it.

John C. Voorhees, so the well authenticated story runs, had been buried there just recently. His coffin was washed out and down stream. It was finally recovered some distance away, with the lid ripped off, but the body still dry, and there was a second burial of Mr. Voorhees. Such an incident must have added immeasurably to the suffering of the bereaved and also it must have made all of the inhabitants of Lew Beach feel that not only was life uncertain and full of peril but that even in death one could not here be sure of rest and peace.

The Anti Rent War of 1845 that so shook Delaware County was not such a burning issue around Lew Beach. The cause of this war was that families who had leased and occupied land for generations, perhaps, could never gain title to this land. Some of these leases were otherwise unjust. Under some of them leases could not be transferred, mills could not be built, and there were other obligations such as the upkeep of a landlords orchard. The title to the land was held under grants from the time of Queen Anne. People felt that perpetual rent was unjust in a free land. They also felt that since the grants came from England, whose yoke they had thrown off, it was wrong for landlords to benefit eternally from the bounty of a monarch who no longer ruled the land. The discontent climaxed with the tenants disguising themselves as Indians and going to the aid of neighbors who were being dispossessed. One sheriff was tarred and feathered and finally Sheriff Steele was killed in Andes. Delaware County was then declared in a state of insurrection. Undoubtedly men from Lew Beach had been among the "Indians" who had helped the dispossessed. Sympathy ran so high that the sleepers of the bridge at Lew Beach were cut to hinder the posse from getting though to the Delaware Valley. But since the people of Lew Beach had been allowed to gain title to their own land there was no actual war in that town. The trouble ended the next year when the Legislature declared perpetual rent illegal and made it possible for the tenants to purchase their land.

with the migrations of Passenger Pigeons. Shin Creek seems to have been one of the nesting places of these birds and eye witness accounts tell that the air was black with birds around the nesting places. Birds were so thick that they did not need to be hunted. They could be clubbed to death. Barrels of them were killed and salted down for the winter. This we might, perhaps, understand. But then commercial hunters came in. They cut roads through the forests so that the birds could be shipped to New York. A favorite method of slaughtering the trusting creatures was to catch a few birds alive and sew their eyelids shut. These birds were put on poles and nets spread around them. When they were shaken to the nets below flocks of their comrades, either from curiosity or the desire to help, would follow them into the nets. Then a rope was pulled and the whole flock was killed. This slaughter continued, mercilessly and foolishly, until the Passenger Pigeon was extinct.

At the turn of the century boarding houses and summer hotels abounded around Lew Beach. Although not quite in the class with Saratoga still this was a fashionable area. Artists and actors and men in public life came to Murdock's, in particular. There is a pool near the bridge on the Beech Hill Road known as the Jo Jefferson Pool, after the great actor of that day. At Sprague's professional men were more likely to gather. The country store flourished, the ice cream parlor flourished, the corner saloon flourished, at least during the summer time. There were hay rides, hotly contested baseball games, square dances semi-weekly, clam bakes. And then gradually the people, that is the summer people, disappeared. Private fishing clubs bought up mile after mile of the Beaverkill, and with it the large boarding houses. These fell into disrepair and then were pulled down. More land fell to the state, through sale and non-payment of taxes. Once more Lew Beach is a hamlet of few people. Farm lands have gone back to forest. Deer and pheasant are once more to be seen. Perhaps once again Lew Beach will become the hunting and vacation land that the

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