Somerset County
1809

Somerset County was formed on March 1, 1809 from the northern part of Kennebec County, largely through the legislative efforts of John Ware, then a Maine representative to the General Court in Boston. The new county included eighty-three unorganized townships, twenty-six towns and seven organized plantations within its boundaries. The county was allowed two sessions of the Courts of Common Pleas and General Sessions. All matters for the Supreme Judicial Court would be heard in Augusta.

The shire town designation was settled on Norridgewock, one of the oldest settlements and the most important town in the new county. The choice of shire town was made after canvassing the merits of towns competing for the title: Anson, Canaan and Norridgewock. As a principal founder of the town, John Ware made strenuous efforts to have the courts sit in Norridgewock. He offered to donate a building for the county’s use if the county administrators chose to locate the shire town there. His donation of space for the court was for “as long as they choose to occupy the building.” Ware said that he would agree that the other contenders for shire town should have all that belonged to them. Asked what that was, he replied, “the gallows rope to Anson, and whipping post to Canaan.”  

The first sessions of the court in 1809 were held in the town meetinghouse while the building donated by Ware on the banks of the Kennebec was being converted from a residence to a courthouse. When it was completed it housed most of the county functions and appointees. Norridgewock residents staffed the courthouse positions. William Jones was appointed Judge of Probate and Clerk of the Courts, Richard Sawtelle as Sheriff, John L. Prescott and Samuel Searle as Deputy Sheriffs, John
Loring as County Treasurer, and Samuel Smith as Crier of the Courts. Amos Townsend of Fairfield was chosen Register of Deeds. Beza Bryant of Anson, Bryce McLellan of Canaan, and Andrew Crosswell, of Mercer, were appointed Judges of the Court of Common Pleas, William Allen, Jr., of Industry, and Eli Weston of Canaan were appointed Special Justices of the Court of Common Pleas.

John Ware's reconstructed building served as the Somerset courthouse for ten years. In order to find a place to incarcerate criminals or individuals awaiting trial on criminal charges, one of the first county administrative actions was to build a jail. John Ware contributed an acre of land for a jail, along with eight hundred dollars for the construction of the building. In 1810 the county appropriated $2,000 for its share of the cost of the jail. This first construction project was managed carefully and the actual cost to the county was $1,750. The jail was built of stone and was two stories high, with three rooms on each floor and an entry.

The community's next need was to provide safe storage for probate records and deeds. A small brick building was constructed in 1815 for the probate court offices. Located on the banks of the Kennebec not far from John Ware's courthouse, the probate court building was built by the county for $1,000. One early opinion of the new probate office was that it was "conveniently situated," facing the main road and in close proximity to the existing courthouse. Adjacent to the probate building a two story Federal-style house was built for the Clerk of Court.

The county had long planned to construct a permanent courthouse building in Norridgewock, and in 1819 it received permission from the Massachusetts Legislature to begin building. Land was donated across the street from the Probate Court building, immediately adjacent to the Congregational Church, and facing the lane leading to the county jail and brand-new jailkeepers house. The new courthouse was completed and occupied in 1820. The building was described as follows:

"The courthouse is built of brick, fifty feet by forty, with an addition of 18 feet on one end, containing an excellent fire-proof vault for the safe keeping of the county records, a large entry and stairway on the lower floor, with a belfry and tower above. The lower floor of the body of the house is divided into four apartments, with an entry and passage way between the rooms, and a passage way from this to the other entry at the stair way. One of the front rooms, twenty feet square is for the clerk's office, the other of the same size is for the register of deeds office; one of the back rooms is for the grand jury and the other is the office of the county treasurer. The court hall is on the
second floor, finished in good style and suitably furnished with desks, tables and chairs. The chairs for the judges and jurors are cushioned. The floor is carpeted and seats are fitted up convenient for spectators. ³

"A beautiful building, admirably located, and well adapted to the uses to which it is put," the 1820 courthouse cost over 4,300 dollars. A group of citizens raised funds for a bell to be placed in the cupola of the new building. The bell, from the Paul Revere foundry in Massachusetts, was to be used to call people to court. It was a good quality bronze bell, with a gold tinge said to have come from an English gold coin tossed into the molten mass as it was poured to form the bell. ⁴

The weeks of the court’s sessions were enjoyed by the town. People from surrounding towns flocked into Norridgewock, some to attend to business related to the court and others to listen. Daily papers were few, and in the evenings the bar rooms were filled by those who wished to hear the problems of the day discussed. One local pub, the Danforth Tavern, was virtually “under the eaves of the courthouse.” One judge, when asked his opinion about the location of the shire town, responded, “I never want the courthouse farther from Danforth’s Tavern than it is now." ⁵

As in all counties with extensive lumbering operations, Somerset County saw a disproportionate amount of litigation. Criminal cases, how-

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The first Somerset County Courthouse
was constructed on the riverbank next to the meetinghouse.
Maine Historical Society
ever, were somewhat rare. Nevertheless, the county remained ready to house and tend suspects and criminals. A residence for the keeper of the jail and his family was built of brick in 1826. The new building extended over the attic story of the jail to which it was attached. One of the rooms in the building served as the jailer’s office.

The jail was soon occupied by suspects in two of the early murder cases in Somerset County. The earliest capital trial was in 1827, when Gridley T. Parkman of St. Albans was tried for poisoning his wife. He was acquitted. Adaline Taylor of Mercer was tried in 1828 for the murder of her infant son, Warren. She, too, was acquitted. Nearly twenty years later, in 1845, John Ferguson of Haverhill was tried for the murder of Jefferson Spalding. Ferguson was also acquitted.

The 1820 courthouse was refurbished and updated in 1847, using a county appropriation of $296.57. A new slate roof was added.

In the latter half of the century, Skowhegan rapidly grew to become economically more powerful than Norridgewock. Skowhegan residents and business men began to look at the possibilities of moving the county seat to their town. Using their new-found power, the Skowhegan state representative was able to convince the legislature to favor his town with a redesignation as shire town.

On Feb. 15, 1872, Governor Perham approved “An act to change the place of holding the Supreme Judicial Court in the County of Somerset,
and to change the shire town of Somerset County." The legislative act contained three sections:

- The first section of the act provided that the several terms of the Supreme Judicial Court "now required to be held in Norridgewock, shall after the first day of March 1872, be held in Skowhegan."
- The second section required the county commissioners, within five years from the date of passing the act, to build a courthouse in Skowhegan, "suitable for the accommodation of the courts and offices of said County, and to procure a loan of money for that purpose and assess taxes for the payment of the same."
- The third section specified that the town of Skowhegan, by the first day of March, "provide suitable room and other accommodations for said court and officers to the acceptance of the majority of the county commissioners." 6

After the passage of this act there were only 14 days for the town to find accommodations for the court before its first term. Residents of Skowhegan immediately began to reconstruct two stores in the Williams building at the south corner of Elm and Madison streets into offices, along with
two brick vaults to accommodate county records. At the same time, they moved to transform Coburn Hall, a private meeting space, into a courtroom.

The time was short and when the first day of March arrived, attorneys representing Norridgewock claimed that the vaults prepared were not in suitable condition to receive and safely preserve the records and that the law had not been complied with. By the provisions of the act, remaining issues were left to a majority of the commissioners and their decision was final. As expected, the commissioners decided that their preparations had been adequate.

Despite the commissioners' decisions, residents of Norridgewock continued to press for relief. The Honorable Stephen D. Lindsey and John J. Webster, Esq. prepared a petition for a writ of prohibition against the County Commissioners. Honorable Joseph Baker of Augusta, and Honorable David D. Stewart represented the county commissioners. The petition was brought in the name of Sylvester Walton who was state's attorney for the County of Somerset.

The Norridgewock petition was heard in the March term of the Supreme Judicial Court on the third Tuesday of March, 1872, with the Honorable Edward Kent of Bangor presiding. The county commissioners' counsel filed a motion to dismiss, a motion to remove the temporary prohibition that had previously been entered and an answer. After a hearing by Justice Kent, the petition was dismissed. Exceptions were filed and allowed. Immediately after this decision, Kent adjourned court to convene at Skowhegan on the fourth day of the term.

The exceptions were heard by the Law Court at which John H. Webster, Esq., argued for the petitioners and Honorable David D. Stewart for the respondents. The court sustained the ruling of Justice Kent, thereby deciding that Skowhegan was the lawful shire town of the county of Somerset.

Yet the designation of shire town seemed tenuous, because Skowhegan had not made arrangements for a permanent courthouse. The issue divided the county politically for the next few years. Norridgewock supporters nominated candidates for county commissioner at the next election, and nearly all of them were elected. They were determined to restore the shire town designation to Norridgewock.

In a dramatic last-minute action, before the newly elected officials could act, ex-Governor Coburn, a Somerset County resident, offered to donate a sufficient amount of money to build the county a courthouse at Skowhegan. The offer was immediately accepted by the county commissioners. As the shire town designation passed to Skowhegan, according to one his-
torian, "Norridgewock, much to her sorrow, was bereft of her favorite child." 7

Plans for the new building were drawn under the guidance of architect C.F. Douglas. In 1873 construction of the courthouse on the corner of Court and High Streets began, under the supervision of John Russell, S. B. Walton and E. G. Pratt, the county commissioners. Foster & Dutton were the builders.

At the formal dedication on Feb. 5, 1874, Ex-Governor Coburn explained in simple terms his purpose in offering "to build a suitable building for a courthouse. I have been wanting for some time to do something for the citizens of the county." At the exercises in Coburn Hall, later in the day, one of the several speakers, Honorable J. C. Talbot of Machias,
described the “whole secret” of Governor Coburn’s life: “he proposes and then sets about to carry out the purpose. As long as this beautiful courthouse stands, it shall stand as a monument to an honest and noble-hearted man.” A life-like bust of Governor Abner Coburn has stood since 1875 in the Somerset County Courthouse. 8

In the county commissioners’ records for 1876 were the following expenditures:

- For jurors: $3,800
- Sheriff’s bills: 1,200
- Jailer for support of prisoners: 500
- Constables for serving: 125
- Clerk of Courts compensation: 275
- County Commissioners’ bills: 675
- For Judge of Probate salary: 250
- Register of Probate salary: 400
- County Treasurer, compensation: 275
- Books, stationery, blanks and printing: 500
- Fuel: 300
- Fencing Courthouse: 100
- Record damages and cost: 80
- Costs of committees and posting notices: 200
- Bills of costs in criminal cases: 2,000
- Repair of roads in unincorporated places: 100
- Furnishing Courthouse: 100

TOTAL: $14,000

Similar expenditures for furnishing and upgrading the courthouse occur over several years in the commissioners records. 9

In time, the business of the county outgrew the 1874 Skowhegan Courthouse, and in 1904 the building was enlarged and remodeled under the supervision of John Metcalf, M.L. Merrill and L. C. Williams, county commissioners. John Calvin Stevens was architect and R. J. Noyes, the builder. The existing site, purchased from Rev. Samuel Bickford and L. L. Morrison, was enlarged by buying land on the east side from the Morrison family. The building’s original chimneys and roof outline were considerably altered from the 1875 design. In addition, the landmark cupola with its tall flag staff was removed.

In 1937, as the accumulating volume of records and documents once again outgrew the capacity of the filing rooms, it again became necessary to enlarge the courthouse. The remainder of the Morrison lot was purchased and in 1938 a large fireproof annex was built, with corridors connecting it with the courthouse. The Registry of Deeds and grand jury...
rooms occupied the first floor of the annex, with the law library, district attorney's room and a hearing room on the second floor. The newly vacant space on the first floor of the old building was taken over by the Maine State Police Detachment until the completion of the police barracks in 1960. After 1960, it was used for additional filing space by the Probate Court and Clerk of Courts. The space on the second floor was converted into a jury room and consultation rooms. All construction was under the supervision of Lee W. Foss, Simeon J. Whitney and Henry Crowell, County Commissioners. Bunker & Savage were the architects and H.P Cummings Construction Company, the builder.

When the municipal court system was changed to state-run district courts in August, 1965, the east end of the courthouse was remodeled to provide a site for the district courtroom and attendant offices. In the early part of the 1970s, the entire courthouse was renovated with a new heating system, carpeting and modern lighting.

In January, 1975, the county attorney system was changed by the state to the district attorney system. In place of one county attorney serving Somerset County, the new system had a District Attorney and several assistants serving a district made up of Somerset and Kennebec Counties. In July of 1976, administration of the Superior Court was taken over by the state. All court personnel became state employees and the position of Clerk of Courts was removed from the county ballot.

Social programs were gradually added to the county budget and were housed in the county courthouse building. These included food stamps, County Soil Conservation, extension service, Association for Retarded Children, Mental Health Association, Northern Kennebec Regional Planning Commission, Kennebec Regional Health Agency, Northern Kennebec Community Action Council, Central Senior Citizens, Human Relations and Skowhegan Area Industrial Development Commission.

In 1986 the District Court moved from the courthouse into separate quarters. The Somerset County Courthouse was added to the National Register of Historic Places. Old county buildings in Norridgewock still stand in a quiet location along the Kennebec—the Probate Court building (extensively altered), the Clerk of Courts building, the building John Ware provided for the first county courthouse, the Danforth Tavern and the jailer's residence. Unfortunately, the 1820 courthouse and the jail are missing from this group of early county buildings. The old jail at Norridgewock was used until 1895 when property opposite the Skowhegan courthouse was purchased for construction of the present jail. Granite from the jail was used in part for tombs in the nearby old cemetery. The old 1820 courthouse in Norridgewock was sold and became a coat factory. It burned completely in 1890.
1 Hanson, J.W., History of the Old Towns of Norridgewock and Canaan, comprising Norridgewock, Canaan, Starks, Skowhegan and Bloomfield from their early settlement to the year 1849, Boston: published by the Author, 1849, p. 346n.
2 Id., p. 346
3 Allen, William, The History of Norridgewock, Norridgewock: Edward Peet, 1849, pp. 138-139
4 Hanson, J.W., History of the Old Towns of Norridgewock and Canaan, comprising Norridgewock, Canaan, Starks, Skowhegan and Bloomfield from their early settlement to the year 1849, Boston: published by the Author, 1849, p. 346
8 Coburn, pp. 966-967
9 Records of the Somerset County Commissioners, Vol. 6, p. 133, 1876