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View of Saco Falls, 1829. In colonial Maine, rivers like the Saco promised easy transportation and abundant industrial energy, drawing settlers and speculators to the area. The Saco both united and divided these settlers as it shaped the towns that grew along its banks. George Folsom, *History of Saco and Biddeford* (1830).

RESEARCH NOTE: SEARCHING FOR DEMOCRACY IN COLONIAL SOUTHERN MAINE

BY WILLIAM G. ROBBINS

William Robbins is Emeritus Distinguished Professor of History at Oregon State University. He received his PhD from the University of Oregon in 1969, and his professional interests center on forest and environmental history. He has authored and edited eleven books and served as the editor of ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW for two years. Robbins has received multiple awards for his research; in 1997, Oregon State University named him Distinguished Professor of History. The following article was originally written as a seminar paper for James Henderson's colonial history class during Robbins's brief tenure as a graduate student at the University of Maine. The methodology used in this research was quite innovative when it was written in 1966, as the so-called new social history had only just emerged. This era marked an exciting time in the social sciences, with new methods that allowed the historian to approach history "from the bottom up." Using census records, land records, tax lists, suffrage lists, and an array of other data, historians were able to uncover what life was like for ordinary workers, women, slaves, the illiterate, and a host of others who had been previously marginalized in the historical record. In this article, Robbins explored the social, economic, and political development of the Lower Saco River region of Maine, guided by the methodology of the new social history. His interest was in uncovering the prevalence of political and economic democracy in colonial Maine. The following article represents the preliminary research he conducted in 1966 in order to determine the potential for further inquiries into this question. Through this research, Robbins unearthed an array of potential opportunities for the historian with access to local records in the towns of Saco, Biddeford, and Buxton, Maine. While not a finished article, this research note raises many issues ripe for additional examination. These issues will be discussed at the end of the article.

MAINE'S SACO RIVER drew many settlers to its banks in the seventeenth-century. While its waters are fed from New Hampshire's White Mountains, and its path through Maine is relatively short, the Saco was an important focal point for some of Maine's earliest colonial communities, and the river would determine the settle-

ment patterns of these early colonists. The way these early Mainers dispersed themselves would say something about the nature of their political and social structure. The influence of the river, and the extent of democracy in Maine's colonial era, is illuminated in an investigation of the very lower reaches of the Saco River. As it winds south and eastward towards the Atlantic Ocean, the river passes by the town of Buxton, which lies on the east side of the river. Further on, just before it empties into Saco Bay, it passes through the towns of Saco and Biddeford, which, like so many other Maine communities, lie adjacent to one another across the river, Saco bordering Buxton on the eastern shore. While an examination of eighteenth-century Buxton, Saco, and Biddeford sheds light on the character of democracy in colonial Maine, it also leaves many questions unanswered.

Organizing these communities was not a simple, clear-cut process. This is most readily demonstrated in the array of names given to these communities over time. The repeated renaming of reflected the division of communities, as well as transfers of property ownership and political power. In February 1630 the Council for New England granted Thomas Lewis and Richard Bonighton land on the east side of the river.¹ Later the same year the Council granted a piece of land on the west side of the river to John Oldhan and Richard Vines.² By 1636 the two areas presented a well-organized plantation. During the 1650s the settlements came under the jurisdiction of Massachusetts and were formally organized as Saco.³ Saco did not retain the permanence implied in its formal organization, however. By 1690 the greater portion of the population migrated out of the area, driven by the uncertainties associated with King William's War. This war, which ended in 1699, was followed by Queen Anne's War, which lasted from 1703 to 1713. Both were part of a series of conflicts between England and France, known as the French and Indian Wars, that played themselves out in the American colonies for much of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; Indian allies contributed to the widespread hostilities throughout the Maine frontier. It was not until the Treaty of Portsmouth effectively ended Queen Anne's War in 1713 that people began to return to the lower banks of the Saco River.

The first evidence of reorganization appears on March 15, 1717, when the town elected its first officers and levied a rate to pay a minister's salary, along with other expenses.⁴ More than a year later, on November 14, 1718, Saco experienced its first name change when the General Court incorporated both sides of the river as Biddeford. The town's

first recorded meeting took place the following March when a vote determined Humphrey Scamman, Benjamin Haley, and Ebenezer Hill selectmen. In May 1719 the town elected Scamman to represent Biddeford at the General Court in Boston.⁵ Biddeford experienced a degree of relative permanence from 1719 until 1762, as throughout these years the settlements remained under one municipal government. In 1762, however, the territory and inhabitants of the east side of the Saco River were incorporated under the name of Pepperrellborough. This lasted until 1805, when the town became Saco.⁶

According to one local historian, the period after the resettlement of Biddeford was crucial. "Between 1718 and 1762, when Saco was Biddeford, many changes occurred which permanently affected the economic and social structure of the community."⁷ In 1716 and 1717 twenty-year-old William Pepperrell purchased two-thirds of what was known as the Bonython tract on the east side of the river.⁸ He then sold part of this holding to Nathaniel Weare and mariner Humphrey Scamman. Weare and Scamman then built a saw mill and lodging house and gave Pepperrell half interest as partial payment for the property.⁹ Pepperrell sold only a small portion of his immense interest in Biddeford during his lifetime. He made few improvements on his holdings, which were located on the eastern side of the river. When he died in 1759 the schedule for his property in town amounted to over 5,500 acres. The security Pepperrell's progeny likely assumed upon the inheritance of his vast estate was short-lived. In 1779 the Pepperrell estate was confiscated by the Massachusetts General Court because of Sir William's grandson's Tory sympathies. This was a scenario repeated throughout the American colonies during the Revolutionary period. It was Colonel Thomas Cutts, perhaps the most influential person in the early history of Biddeford and Pepperrellborough, who purchased nearly half of Pepperrell's confiscated lands.¹⁰

Cutts came to the area from Kittery in 1758. The following year he purchased a small part of Indian Island (now Factory Island) in the Saco River, opened a store, and over the years built a thriving business. By the end of the Revolution Cutts had eighty-four pieces of real estate appraised at \$96,626. Judging from his accounts, he was a powerful figure in eighteenth-century Maine.¹¹ Along with Amos Chase, Thomas Gilpatrick, Jr., and Benjamin Nason, Cutts was instrumental in building the first bridge across the Saco River, and later Cutts purchased the shares owned by Chase and Nason.¹² For a town whose residents were separated by a great river, the bridge must have been a welcome addi-



In 1716-1717 William Pepperell purchased two-thirds of the Bonython tract on the east side of the Saco, an estate that included over 5,500 acres. In 1779 the lands were confiscated due to Tory sympathies among Pepperell's descendents. Colonel Thomas Cutts, perhaps the most influential person in the early history of Biddeford and Pepperrellborough, purchased nearly half of the confiscated lands. Maine Historical Society Collections.

tion, but the imposition of the toll, while necessary for those who invested in the bridge's construction, would eventually serve to divide the people of Biddeford. In 1762 the town was reorganized into two distinct municipalities. Ultimately, geography dictated autonomous community development.

The first indication of a division between the two communities occurred in March 1752. During a town meeting, the community passed a measure leading to the construction of a new meetinghouse on the river's west side. Thirty persons, most of them from the eastern shore, entered their dissent, and that April east-side residents established their own separate parish. The meetinghouse, which was completed on the western side of the river in 1759, was not built at the charge of the town, but by subscriptions from its inhabitants.¹³ Meanwhile, the inhabitants on the east side of the Saco River made plans to build their own meetinghouse. Townspeople debated whether the town should devote money for the completion of the new east-side meetinghouse or repair on the meetinghouse on the west side of the river.¹⁴ In 1757 the members in attendance at the Biddeford town meeting passed the following: "That the meeting house now erected on the east side of the river be a meeting house for the public worship on said side and be finished by the inhabitants of said side at their own cost and charge." The town's Reverend Mr. Morrill was permitted to preach there "one third of his time the year ensuing."¹⁵

At a town meeting held on April 12, 1762, freeholders and qualified voters concluded the following:

Voted to sett of the Inhabitants on the East Side of the Saco R. in said Town as a District and allow said District there just proportion of the towns personage, Lands with the Buildings thereon Bought for the Revd Mr. Moses Morrill as Shall be adjudged by a Comm. to be chosen by the said Town at said Meeting if they see fit; and the following Value thereof be Assessed of the Inhabitants of the West Side of ye R. To be paid to said District when they shall be so constituted by the General Court: on said Districts giving the Inhabitants on the West Side of ye R. a Discharge in full of their Interest in the afore-said Priviledge.¹⁶

The following month a petition was sent to Governor Francis Bernard from "sundry inhabitants of Biddeford." The petition contained a request from the inhabitants on the eastern side of the river for incorporation as a separate district. The petitioners referred to the vote of the town meeting the previous month and gave as their reason for separa-

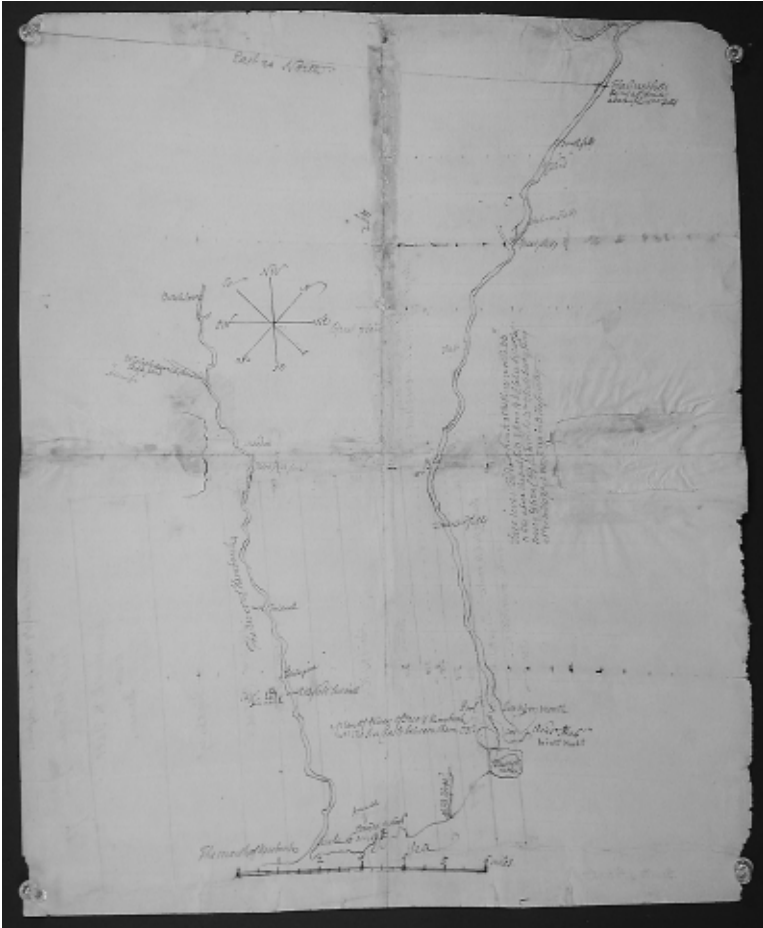
tion the “difficulties naturally attending the crossing [of] said River particularly to attend the necessary Duty of the Public Worship of God.” Signatories to the petition were:

Tristram Jordan	John Googins	Gershom Billings
John Bryant (??)	James Gray	Robert Patterson, Jr.
Amos Chase	Benjamin Jellson	James Patten
Robert Patterson	Robert Edgcomb	William Jameson
Richard Berry	Joseph Libbey	Samual Scamman
Thomas Cutts	John Maine	Ezra Daves
	Ebenezer Ayer	
	Samuel Dennett ¹⁷	

Evidently there was little opposition to the incorporation of the east side as a separate community. The General Court recognized their first request and incorporated those on the east side into the new town of Pepperrellborough. The community gained all the rights and privileges of a town, except that it would not have a representative to the General Assembly. Instead, it would join with Biddeford in choosing a representative.¹⁸

In July 1762 Pepperrellborough held its first town meeting, where the town elected Tristram Jordan, Amos Chase, and Robert Patterson, Jr. as selectmen. All three proved prominent in the affairs of Pepperrellborough.¹⁹ From the date of its incorporation to the year 1795, Pepperrellborough had approximately fourteen different men serving as selectmen.²⁰ Four of this number served for one-year terms, while ten served much longer and more frequently: obviously, there was more continuity than change in local elected offices. Considering that eligibility for office-holding and franchise depended upon landholding status, and considering that a relative minority of the population held the majority of elected offices, it is likely that land ownership was limited in Pepperrellborough. Large numbers of men were surely employed in the saw mills and in enterprises belonging to men such as Thomas Cutts, and it was Thomas Cutts, and a rather select group of people, such as Tristram Jordan, Humphrey Pike, Ebenezer Ayer, and Samuel Scamman, who filled Pepperrellborough’s important town offices from 1762 to 1814.²¹

A similar pattern is evident in Biddeford, where the same men returned yearly to the various elective offices. For example, only four men held the office of town clerk in the period 1717 to 1788: Humphrey Scamman (1717-1734); Samuel Jordan (1734-1741); Rishworth Jordan



Plan of Rivers of Saco and Kennebunk with Sea Coasts Between Them (1731). The map, part of the Pejepscot Proprietors Records, indicates mills and roads in the developing lower valley settlements. Maine Historical Society Collections.

(1741-1780); Jeremiah Hill (1780-1788).²² Although it seems likely that the most able men in town filled these types of positions, the names that so continually recur in secondary accounts were the most prosperous in each community as well.

Many of the most prominent men in Biddeford and Pepperrellborough played important roles in the development of the upriver community of Buxton as well. Buxton's political evolution was considerably different, but it, too, was influenced by the French and Indian wars. The lands comprising present-day Buxton were part of the grant made by the

General Court of Massachusetts in 1728 to the 840 men in that colony who participated in the expedition against the Naragansett Indians in King Phillip's War in 1675. Each proprietary of 120 members was directed to settle at least sixty families within seven years and to work towards the establishment of a formal town structure through such tasks as the erection of a meetinghouse and school and the election of a minister.²³ The Buxton area was referred to as Narragansett Township No. 1 until it was incorporated as a separate town in 1772.²⁴

As early as 1741 Samuel Chase of Newbury, Thomas Gage, Nathan Withey, Joseph Simpson, and John Bryant had settled in the township at the behest of the proprietors.²⁵ In 1742 the sixty-two inhabitants of Biddeford and Scarborough sent a petition to the General Court claiming that the proprietors of Narragansett Township, No. 1 had not settled their lots in accordance with the stipulations of the grant. They requested that the lots be forfeited and that "the Petitioners be admitted in their stead." They noted that they had considerably improved transportation facilities in the vicinity of the township in order to carry on their masting business.²⁶ On this same date, those residing with the township submitted a petition requesting essentially the same thing – that the absentee proprietary land be declared forfeited. The following twelve names appear as signatories:

Robert Brooks	Nathaniel Durel
John Davis, Jr.	Nathan Whitney
Ichabod Auston	Samuel Ingalls
Joseph Woodman	M (obliterated)
Magnes Redlen	John Brooks
Samuel Chase	James....., Jr. ²⁷

The General Court voted to defer action on the petitioners' request after being informed by proprietors that attempts would be made to meet the conditions of the grant.²⁸ During a meeting on June 15, 1742, the proprietors in Newbury agreed to raise money to assist those already established in the township by assessing each proprietor a fixed fee. Part of this revenue was used to entice new settlers into the region.²⁹ In October and December the proprietors met to appoint committees to carry out the sale of lands belonging to delinquent proprietors.³⁰ The sales began in February, 1743.³¹ This prompt action convinced the General Court to pursue the matter no further. A perusal of the proprietary records during this period suggests that the proprietors acted in good faith. Sub-

stantial subsidies were available for individuals interested in settling in the township, and those proprietors who were delinquent in meeting proprietary assessments were quickly dispossessed of their holdings. The petitions of 1742 imply that the concern of those in surrounding communities was motivated by economic opportunism.

Apparently there was a great deal of concern on the part of the proprietors regarding the possibility of renewed hostilities between England and France through 1743 and into the early part of 1744. The defense of the community and the need for a highway between the Narragansett Township and the lower towns were issues that continually surfaced in the records.³² During the 1750s, proprietary business was still conducted at meetings held in Newbury and Rowley, although there is increasing evidence of activity within the township itself. The records of these meetings reveal little evidence of dissension between the absentee proprietors and the resident proprietors and subscribers.

In April 1764 residents of Narragansett Township No. 1 indicated their desire for formal incorporation as a town by submitting a request to the proprietors. Although times were changing rapidly, absentee proprietors still exercised ultimate authority in proprietary affairs. The following year proprietors elected Tristram Jordan of the newly incorporated town of Pepperrellborough as the proprietor clerk for the Narragansett Township, and from then until 1772 evidence reveals that the Pepperrellborough and Biddeford proprietors were quite busy increasing their real estate holdings upriver, all the while maintaining their residences in the downriver towns. Finally in 1772 the Narragansett inhabitants and proprietors petitioned the General Court for incorporation, and later that year they incorporated as Buxton.³³ From all indications, the transition occurred with little dissent, implying that by this time, the great majority of proprietors must have become permanent residents of Buxton.³⁴

The story behind the development of Biddeford, Saco, and Buxton reveals the influence of a small group of wealthy men who managed to increase their land ownership throughout the region and wield considerable political power in all three communities. It was the Saco River that connected these men to the extended communities along her banks. As their holdings along the river matured into three distinct communities at the end of the eighteenth century, their influence waned, but their impact remains to this day.

The development of Saco, Biddeford, and Buxton illustrates the many ways politics, economics, and geography dictates history. While economic



Prominent men in Biddeford and Pepperrellborough played an important role in developing the upriver community of Buxton (adjacent to the boundary in the upper right). Folsom, *History of Saco and Biddeford* (1830).

leaders were important in shaping the towns, the river itself was also an important influence, connecting and at the same time dividing the people who lived along its banks. The river provided energy and transportation for the local sawmill and ship-mast industries, and drew inhabitants together in a common endeavor. It represented the wellspring of resources the communities depended upon as the towns grew and matured over time. But the river also divided those living along its banks, and as these connections were loosened, each community formed its own identity. Ultimately, the river that linked the settlers came to divide them, resulting in the formation of three distinct Maine communities.

Robbins' preliminary research was motivated by a desire to determine whether political and economic democracy in eighteenth-century Maine was more widespread than historians had assumed. From an initial evaluation of the data included above, one would be compelled to conclude that a very small minority held the bulk of economic and political power. However, the research reflects only a small portion of the existing and still largely unexamined records. For those with access to the archives of these three Maine communities, research opportunities still exist.

An analysis of the land records, tax lists, rolls of freemen, lists of office-holders, voting records, and suffrage qualifications might lead to conclusions different than those contained in the article above. One might be interested in exploring the size and the number of land holdings within the local tax lists and land records of early Biddeford and Pepperrellborough residents. These records might determine, for instance, which sections of Pepperrell lands were purchased by Thomas Cutts during the Revolutionary period, indicating something about Cutts's financial standing and the role of other proprietors. While on the surface, they appear to be a small, wealthy elite, records might tell a different story of the origins or nature of their influence in these communities. Along this same vein, an analysis of local politics and the accompanying social and economic structure after 1762 might reveal continuity rather than change in political power. Here an inquiry into the size of land holdings required for possession of the franchise might illuminate some opposing conclusions to those in the above article. Related to this, it might be useful to explore the suffrage qualifications and voting records to determine the extent of political participation by ordinary men, and then compare the number and extent of land holdings and land holders to those who did not own land.

Analyzing the relationships between various groups would illuminate the nature of political democracy and economic opportunity in these com-

munities. Certainly a closer examination of tax lists and land holdings is necessary for a better understanding of the relationship between Narragansett Township No. 1 and the down-river communities. Here, one could compare the list of actual residents with absentee owners in the Narragansett Township to determine the influence of the proprietors of Biddeford and Saco in the development of Buxton. It might be interesting to investigate whether or not there were struggles between the old proprietors and the new town government of Buxton; answers to this inquiry might be found in Buxton's early town records.

From Robbins' research, it would appear that the transition to incorporation occurred with little dissent. A more definite conclusion awaits tabulation and evaluation of complete lists of proprietors, non-proprietors, tax lists, freehold lists, local voting qualifications, and land transfers between 1733, when the township was formed, and 1772, when the town was incorporated. Overall, a broad analysis of all economic groups in the three communities is necessary in order to comprehend the social structure of colonial southern Maine. Robbins's work offers a hint at the rewards awaiting the researcher. And in unearthing these records, inevitably new questions will emerge. Such is the promise of what we still call the new social history: some forty years after it emerged, we are still combing these rich documents for preliminary conclusions. This methodology presents an unending journey of exploration into the lives of ordinary Mainers.

Abigail Smith

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NOTES

1. *Collections of the Maine Historical Society*, Second Series, vol. 117 (hereafter MHSC; all volumes in this paper are from the second series.)
2. MHSC, p. 121.
3. William D. Williamson, *The History of the State of Maine* (Hallowell: Glazier, Masters, 1832), vol. 2, p. 395n; W. Woodford Clayton, *History of York County* (Philadelphia: Everts and Peck, 1880), p. 150.
4. George Folsom, *History of Saco and Biddeford* (Saco, Maine: Alex C. Putnam, 1830), p. 203. Williamson, *History of the State of Maine*, p. 395. See Elizabeth Ring, *Reference List of Manuscripts Relating to the History of Maine* (Orono, Maine: University of Maine Studies, 1938); Roy P. Fairfield, *Sands, Spindles, Steeples: A History of Saco, Maine* (Portland: House of Falmouth, 1956). Fairfield is valuable for sources of manuscripts, especially for the later period of Saco history.
5. Folsom, *History of Saco and Biddeford*, p. 205.
6. Clayton, *History of York County*, p. 150. Williamson, *History of the State of Maine*, p. 394.
7. Fairfield, *Sands, Spindles, Steeples*, p. 13.

8. This is the same tract granted to Richard Bonighton in 1630. It is this writer's assumption that Bonighton and Bonython were one and the same person.

9. Daniel E. Owen, *Old Times in Saco* (Saco, 1891), p. 52.

10. Clayton, *History of York County*, pp. 155-156; Owen, *Old Times in Saco*, pp. 66-67. Owen claims that the four acres granted by Pepperrell to the town in 1752 was the only land a Pepperrell ever granted to Saco. See also George Addison Emery, *Colonel Thomas Cutts* (Saco, 1917), p. 9.

11. Emery, *Colonel Thomas Cutts*, pp. 7-9.

12. Emery, *Colonel Thomas Cutts*, p. 12. Cutts does not appear to have been as avid for public office as some of his contemporaries. Emery lists the following: selectman, 1767-1769; chairman of the board, 1771; town treasurer, 1772-1794; representative to the General Court, 1780; councillor of Massachusetts, 1810. See MHSC, vol. 22, pp. 12-13.

13. Owen, *Old Times in Saco*, p. 66; Folsom, *History of Saco and Biddeford*, p. 265.

14. Folsom, *History of Saco and Biddeford*, p. 265.

15. Folsom, *History of Saco and Biddeford*, p. 266.

16. MHSC, vol. 13, p. 271.

17. MHSC, vol. 13, p. 279.

18. MHSC, vol. 13, p. 282.

19. Owen, *Old Times in Saco*, p. 70-71. The first Robert Patterson settled on Rendezvous Point in 1729. He died in 1769 at the age of ninety-seven. His son Robert lived to be eighty-four years old. Amos Chase came to Biddeford and located on the east side of the ferry, as he had purchased a portion of Humphrey Scamman's estate there. He worked the ferry several years. Tristram Jordan was the third son of Samuel Jordan and the brother of Rishworth Jordan of Biddeford. He was one of the ablest and most popular young men in town. In 1754 at the age of twenty-three he was elected selectman from Biddeford. See Clayton, *History of York County*, p. 152.

20. These figures are based on the lists of office holders in Clayton, *History of York County*, p. 157. The lists are incomplete and have serious gaps with no accompanying explanations.

21. Clayton, *History of York County*, p. 157.

22. Clayton, *History of York County*, p. 194.

23. Clayton, *History of York County*, p. 249.

24. *Records of the Proprietors of Narragansett Township, No. 1* (Privately printed, 1871; hereafter *Records*.), p. 77; MHSC, vol. 14, p. 160.

25. MHSC, vol. 14, p. 250; G. T. Redlon, *Saco Valley Settlements and Families* (Portland: by the author, 1897), p. 153. The author confuses Samuel Chase with Amos Chase (p. 25), who did not come to the area until later. Samuel Chase was an original proprietor of the township.

26. MHSC, vol. 11, p. 244.

27. MHSC, vol. 11, pp. 241-242. At least four of these men received original proprietary grants.

28. MHSC, vol. 11, p. 246.

29. *Records*, p. 125.

30. *Records*, pp. 126-127.

31. *Records*, p. 128.

32. *Records*, pp. 141-142. The death of Samuel Chase was mentioned at the proprietors' meeting of February 14, 1743.

33. MHSC, vol. 14, pp. 159-160, 181.

34. MHSC, vol. 14, p. 253. Earlier this same year the records mention the sale of a lot to Jordan. Because Jordan was one the wealthier citizens in early Pepperrellborough, it probably would be safe to assume that he had considerable economic interest in the welfare of the neighboring township. See J. M. Marshall, *Buxton Centennial* (Portland: Dresser, McLellan, 1874), p. 77.