

A Brief History of St. Johnsbury

The first settler in St. Johnsbury was Jonathan Arnold, a native of Rhode Island. In 1787 he built the first framed dwelling in town on a spot at the north end of Main Street now known as Arnold Park. In 1790 St. Johnsbury was officially organized and given its name at the first town meeting. Colonel Ethan Allen had suggested the name "St. John" as a tribute to Hector St. Jean de Crevecoeur, French Consul, experimental farmer and writer, who was considered a powerful friend of young America. De Crevecoeur himself suggested that, since there were many places called "St. John" already in existence, this one might be given the name of "St. Johnsbury"... thus making our town unique, as there was no other St. Johnsbury in the world. This distinction remains today.

Much of the town's heritage comes from the invention of the platform scale by Thaddeus Fairbanks, who established a business in 1830 that made the name "Fairbanks" synonymous with scales; and from George C. Cary, who founded the Cary Maple Sugar Co. in 1904. Cary was a prominent salesman who successfully promoted the use of maple sugar to flavor plug tobacco, and later cigarettes, as a moisturizing and non-fermenting flavor agent.

During each March and April, sugar makers tap maple trees and gather the sap to boil down and produce maple syrup. It takes 40 gallons of sap to make one gallon of syrup. Around 1915, production of Maple Grove Candies was started at an area farm by Katharine Ide Gray and her daughter Helen and by 1920 had moved to "Pinehurst" (a former Fairbanks home), now the Elks Club on Western Avenue. Meanwhile, Mr. Cary had built a large plant at the east end of Portland Street to house his maple sugar distribution operation; he subsequently built the adjoining facility, which is now known as Maple Grove Farms of Vermont. St. Johnsbury justly became known as "The Maple Center of the World."

With the success and growth of the scale, maple sugar, and wood products industries, so grew St. Johnsbury. Due to its rapid growth, St. Johnsbury had become the Caledonia County seat in 1856. It also became a rail and highway junction, as well as industrial, commercial, and cultural crossroads of the region - a position in which it is firmly secure today.

Starting in 1850, railroads became a major factor in St. Johnsbury's growth and industry. Our handsome late Nineteenth Century brick railway station has been preserved. At one time, four lines merged here, and the tracks are all intact and still used for freight, as well as for occasional tourist excursions.

St. Johnsbury Academy, a private school founded by the Fairbanks family in 1842, is our high school and provides fine education in both college preparation and vocational training. There are a large number of boarding students from many parts of the world. Other area educational facilities include Lyndon State College, the Community College of Vermont, and Lyndon Institute.

Many cultural centers were built by the Fairbanks family including the Fairbanks Museum & Planetarium, a museum of natural science and history (1891), and the St. Johnsbury Athenaeum (1871), which houses a library of over 45,000 books and includes a children's library. The adjoining Art Gallery (1873) is the oldest unchanged gallery of its type in the country. It has on display a collection of outstanding paintings by American and European artists, with special emphasis on works by the Hudson River School painters. Featured is "Domes of the Yosemite," the largest painting by Albert Bierstadt.

Several visitors enjoy Courthouse Park and inquire about the Civil War monument. Titled "America," this is an original Italian marble figure, designed by Larkin Mead and sculpted in Florence, Italy. It was dedicated in 1868.

St. Johnsbury continues its tradition of local cultural activities. Area events include summer fairs, weekly band concerts (the St. Johnsbury Town Band's roots go back to 1830), old-fashioned hymn sings, locally-produced plays, an arts and film center, etc. St. Johnsbury has even been the site of independently produced motion pictures.

Successful business and industry resulted in many outstanding homes and churches being built during the last quarter of the Nineteenth Century. A descriptive walking tour of Main Street details the diversity of architectural design. Copies are distributed free at the Athenaeum and Chamber of Commerce.

The town has a town meeting form of government with selectmen and a manager. It enjoys a population of about 8,000 and "a million assets," quoting from *The Boston Sunday Globe*.

Prepared by the St. Johnsbury Historical Society