

Historic and Archaeological Resources

The Belgrade area, first called Washington Plantation, West Ponds, and/or Prescott's and Carr's Plantation, lies at the western edge of the Kennebec Purchase, which was comprised of large blocks of land 15 miles east and west of the Kennebec River. The land was part of the Kennebec Proprietors purchase agreement of the land surrounding the Kennebec River. Due to the distance from the shores of the Kennebec, it took several years for the bravest of settlers to begin venturing into the Belgrade area. These early explorers were hunters, trappers, and farmers looking for game or to establish a homestead. Gradually, the Kennebec Proprietors' lots began to be sold. Some of the earliest settlers had money to buy land; some were veterans of the American Revolution claiming their recompense. Some did not have the cash but came anyway and paid for the property later when the Proprietors in their Boston office offered a low price to "quiet" the squatters who had no deeds.

By 1790, the first Federal Census gives these names of families in Belgrade, names we see on cemetery stones and on old deeds: Bean, Blake, Crosby, Crowell, Fall, Gilman, Hall, Leighton, Linnell, McGrath, Mosher, Page, Philbrick, Rankins, Richardson, Snow, Staples, Taylor, Tilton, Tozier, and Wyman. Twenty-two years after the first settlers' arrival, on February 3, 1796, Belgrade was incorporated as a town in Lincoln County with about 250 inhabitants. The town was named after Belgrade, Serbia.

When the town was incorporated in 1796, residents could not name the newly created town the same as another town in Massachusetts, nor could it be an Indigenous name. At the time, John V. Davis was the man selected to lead the down and determine the town name. It is thought that he chose the name Belgrade to honor the Serbian city due to his travels through Europe, although it is not known for sure on if he ever visited Belgrade, Serbia.

Over the next 20 years, Belgrade gained a bit of property from other towns and territories. An act passed in 1839 gave Belgrade portions of what was formally known as Dearborn, and an additional 300 residents, enlarging the town to the size and boundaries of present-day Belgrade. Not until 1834 was the Belgrade town office constructed. However, when a smallpox victim was quarantined in the building, community members refused to use the building any further. As the town grew and more buildings were constructed, the Grange Hall, school gymnasium, and community center all became important meeting locations. The original town hall, believed to have been constructed around 1815, still stands in the Pine Grove Cemetery and is maintained and cared for by the Belgrade Historical Society.

The historical economy of Belgrade was based on farming through the 19th century. In the early days, each family or cluster of farms was self-sufficient – clearing their land, depending on their own crops and livestock. Sheep became important locally in the first half of the 1800's, first for domestic use and then for the woolen mills prospering off the importation and breeding of high-quality stock. Sheep's wool yielded to the Jersey cow's

milk as a cash crop, and trains that first came through in 1849 increasingly took milk, wood products, and apples to ready markets in Boston.

It is thought that roads and settlements were first clustered around waterways and trails used by the indigenous peoples that lived on this land before the explorers. The earliest roadmap, dated 1858, shows roads just about where they are now with indications of sawmills at natural dam sites. These mills were constructed to grind corn and wheat, as well as to mill the boxes and barrels to ship products. These factories provided key products and employment opportunities allowing Belgrade to grow in population.

By 1840, the population of Belgrade had peaked at over 1,700 and was starting to decline, probably from a combination of severely cold weather and westward migration, which started before the Civil War. During the years of the Civil War, Belgrade along with most Maine towns, saw a decrease in population, development and industry from many young men leaving to fight in the war. Also, the westward migration continued for some time afterward, taking the traditional workforce of the town with it.

The installation and development of the rail line in 1849 was a key developmental milestone for Belgrade. This allowed for not only the transportation of goods but the installation of the ever-present and booming tourism industry. The rail line connected Belgrade with Augusta and Waterville to the east, Lewiston/Auburn to the west, and Portland to the south. There were two stops in Belgrade, one at the Depot and the other located in North Belgrade. By this point, the economic basis of the town had begun the transition to relying on tourism.



Photo: Belgrade Historical Society

Fishing was the primary draw, the multiple lakes providing a range of species to target. In 1900, The Belgrade Hotel (see image above) was built to entice summer visitors to vacation by the clear waters of Long and Great Ponds. Allowing for both sporting and

recreation, it complemented the inns and more rustic lodgings around Belgrade's lakeshores. At about the same time, the numbers of new private cottages and summer youth camps were growing. Over 100 businesses eventually joined the list of accommodations in operation in those decades before World War II.

Automobiles became the new vacation travel mode after World War I. The number of cottages continued to increase. Since that era, hundreds of private cottages have dotted the lakeshores. A few children's camps remain active. Many sets of camps have been sold separately. One or two farms are still viable, and many families continue to maintain vegetable gardens for family use, but the truck farms that sustained the hotels and camps' centralized dining halls are gone.

The businesses that sustain the town now include the camps and vacation rentals, small retail stores, a large lumberyard, a cement/stone business, a building supply company, steel fabrication, storage units, gravel mining, and lake-related businesses.

We have John Clair Minot's writings and his grandfather's good memory to thank for much of Belgrade's written history. It was published as a chapter in the "Illustrated History of Kennebec County" in 1892.

Historic Properties

The Maine Historic Preservation Commission is responsible for identifying archeological sites, helping towns enhance measures to protect sites and to encourage research at significant sites. The primary focus of archeologic research in Maine is the early colonial period. This period is then divided into three time periods: Early Settlement (1604-1675), Indian Wars (1676 to early 18th century) and Resettlement Period (early to mid-18th century). Other sites of importance represent the earliest introduction of Europeans or Early Americans into an area, regardless of the time period.

The small but active and diligent Belgrade Historical Society is working to save and document the rich cultural heritage of the town. Like its predecessor, the Belgrade Heritage Society, the Historical Society is always looking to augment its corps of members to capture memories, work on preservation projects and bring an awareness of local history through local interpretative programs.

There are four buildings in Belgrade listed on the National Register of Historic Places, with numerous others eligible. A locally based inventory and map of historic homes and buildings was started for the 1998 rendition of this plan; however, it is unknown if that was ever completed. The four properties listed on the National Register are:

- Chandler's Store – Built in 1838 by John Chandler of granite sourced in Vienna, Maine, the now private residence is in the Belgrade Lakes Village.
- Chandler's Store Carriage Barn – Built in 1850 to service patrons of Chandlers Store. The barn is still attached to the original private residence.
- Barn at Winterberry Farm – The barn is original to the farm and was built between 1900 and 1910.

- The Birches – This cottage was built in 1916 as part of The Belgrade Hotel complex. The cottage has since been improved to allow for year-round use as a private residence.

Archeological Sites

According to local knowledge, when Central Maine Power sought relicensing on the dams owned by the company, there were up to 10 archaeological sites identified. However, the Maine Historic Preservation Commission does not have any data readily available to confirm or deny these findings.

All professional archeological work in Belgrade has been limited to work on the shores of Messalonskee Lake. Archaeologists know from stone and pottery artifacts recovered that Indigenous peoples have been using lake shores for thousands of years, however due to time and erosion there is little evidence available to reconstruct details and the extent of an area's usage.

It is known that the indigenous populations relied on the interconnected lakes for travel and fishing. It is highly likely archeological sites exist that contain significant archeological resources, particularly along the lakes and streams. The homesteads and mills of the first settlers of this region have deteriorated to the point of non-existence or faint footprints. There may be anecdotal evidence in old records or among residents of the locations of cellar holes or cold storage, but no effort has been made to document these.

Prehistoric Sites

The Maine Historic Preservation Commission has not identified any prehistoric sites in Belgrade. There have not been any studies conducted to determine possible sites either.

Locally Important Places

Cemeteries are a critical link to our heritage. The town has an obligation to protect and maintain some cemeteries, while others are private or family cemeteries. A combination of Town-employed Sextons, local historic society members, and volunteer groups work to maintain and manage the cemetery grounds, monuments, and markers.

There are seven cemeteries in Belgrade:

Ellis Cemetery	Smithfield Road
Quaker Cemetery	Oakland Road
Pine Grove Cemetery	Cemetery Road
Woodside Cemetery	Cemetery Road
Bickford Cemetery	Private Driveway
Dunn Cemetery	Dunn Road
Hersum Cemetery	Sahagian Road

Of the above listed cemeteries, only Pine Grove Cemetery is open for burials.

There are several other structures in Belgrade that are important cultural landmarks that, while not on the National Register of Historic Places, are nonetheless historic and valued by the community. One is the Old Town Meeting House. As discussed above, the building was once actively used by town members. It was also once used by the operators of the Woodside Cemetery until it fell into disuse. Through an agreement between the Belgrade Historical Society and the town, the historical society was able to preserve and restore the building. It will be used for meeting space and educational purposes in the future. There is some consideration to submitting the building for review to be listed on the National Register of Historic Places.



There are two original schoolhouses in Belgrade, though both are now privately owned. While the exterior structures of the schools have been maintained, the use has not; one is now a private residence and the other serves as the site of a food pantry and senior center.

Based on information gathered by the Belgrade Historical Society, there are two churches of note in town, The Old South Church in Belgrade Depot and the Union Church in the Village. Both date back to the 1800's and are still in use as places of worship.

A foundational element of Belgrade is Day's Store. While the name and ownership have changed through the decades, the store still maintains the original footprint of the location that was created to serve early residents. Due to its longevity, much of the identity of the town is rooted around the store, and it has become synonymous with Belgrade.

Threats to Historic Resources

There are no historic districts in Belgrade, and of the four historic properties in Belgrade, none are owned by the town. Additionally, none of the eligible locations in Belgrade are owned by a government entity.

The threat to the historic resources of not only Belgrade but, to all of Maine, extends to the effects that weather events and the climate have. These structures and sites have withstood the test of time to this point, and communities should be cognizant of recognizing their cultural and historical importance when planning for weather events. The MHPD has established a website to assist entities across the state with planning for the effects that climate events have on historic and cultural resources.

Discussion

As stated above, there is no historical district in Belgrade. The historic nature of the town is one of the components of its identity, and as such, it should be a consideration to actively preserve and maintain the integrity of the resources.

The Belgrade Historical Society is an active group in town and maintains a wealth of knowledge of the town and its past. This resource should be maintained to keep the valuable history of the town intact. Based on conversations with the Historical Society, some newer residents have been surprised by the lack of a historic district in the town.

Analysis

- Consideration should be given to the history of Belgrade when developing and improving. It is important to not lose the historic character of the town.
- The town should address the creation of a historic district, at the minimum in the Village. The creation of such a district would allow for development and improvement while keeping the historic beauty of the town.
- Programs to highlight the history of Belgrade as well as encourage new residents to become more involved in town committees.