

A History of Rye Center, New Hampshire - Time Line

Alex Herlihy, Rye Historical Society, May 2019

Native peoples –

In the beginning, native peoples lived and worked this land up to 10,000 years ago and their historic trails became the foot print for many European settler paths and later roads. Indians of the Algonquin stock peopled the eastern part of North America and regionally it was the Penacook and later Abnaki confederation. Locally it was the Piscataqua in the seacoast region and evidence of their habitation was recorded by Champlain in 1606 and 1608. Natives made abundant use of the fruits of the sea and land in both settled communities i.e. near Rye Harbor and in their seasonal migrations. They also had an elaborate network of trails, including one that lead inland from Foss beach, later used by the first settlers, Sandy Beach Rd. (Wash. today).

1600's - Explorers and First European settlers

Berrys and other Founding Families settled following explorations by Champlain and first settlement of town in 1623 by David Thomson and a small group at Odiorne Pt. Some followed path to the ridge in what is now Rye Center. Before 1726 the northern part of the village including the center was mostly part of New Castle and was called Sandy Beach. A series of devastating wars between natives and new comers in the late 1600's and early 1700's, caused by both cultural misunderstanding and deliberate treachery by the new settlers, retarded the growth of Sandy Beach and many other New England communities.

1701 – 1785

In 1701 Richard Goss was granted 20 acres of land on the ridge in the center today there is a house dated 1725, the first church was built on the hill in 1726 and Central Rd from the center to the southern part of the village's coastline was laid out in 1727. Now there were two routes inland from the shore to the center, forming natural routes inland to routes north and south and the hinterlands. The establishment of the parish of Rye in 1726 in the town of New Castle, when the name was changed from Sandy Beach, was the culmination of years of petitions to the Provincial Assembly and granted the town the right to elect town officials, thus inaugurating the history of Rye town government.

In the first half of the 1700's more homes and other structures were built in the center including a town pound, a second, more substantial church on the hill in 1756 and in that same year Garland's Tavern opened opposite the church thus merging the sacred and the profane on Sundays. In the coming years the tavern became the hot bed of revolutionary ideas that would propel many Rye men to fight in the war against the British, 38 of them giving their lives, including two freed enslaved people, a devastating loss to the small town.

1783 – New Road (Lang today) laid out from center to Long Lane (Lafayette Rd)

1785 - the parish of Rye was granted incorporation status as an independent town with fixed borders by the new state government in Concord. By this time the center had an established cluster of homes, public places and businesses. In spite of the challenges facing the new nation, Rye Center and the rest of the town faced the new century with a lot more confidence than they faced the last one.

1799 – historic houses: five houses built in the 1700's remain in the center today

1800 – Wallis Rd from center to Lang's corner and on to the beach

1805 - Messrs. Carroll and Goss built a large structure hard on the corner of New (Lang) and Washington roads and open it as a store on first floor and a large dance hall-entertainment center on the 2nd

1810 – Goss and Carroll do the same thing at 1 Central Rd., when they build the lovely Georgian style structure at the top of the hill, the only one in Rye in that style.

1810 –Second Parsonage for Congregational church built across the road; sold privately in 1830's; becomes an parsonage Inn in 1920's, privately owned apartments in the 1950's and eventually owned by the town as affordable housing and managed by the Housing Partnership which is about to end forcing the town to decide the fate of the building

1820's – selectmen deal with many complaints about public drunkenness

1827 – First school built in the center of brick where Grange Park is today

1837 – The 2nd Congregational Church is replaced by a third on the hill

1839 – Methodist Episcopal Church built at bottom of Center (or Break back) Hill followed by the first Christian Church where fire/police station parking lot is today

1840's and beyond – beginning of Victorian resort era of hotels and boarding houses stimulated by coming of the Railroad to the seacoast in 1840

???? – Wallis Rd laid out connecting to Sagamore Rd. to Portsmouth; this brings five different roads to the center, connecting it to the north, west and south

???? - First center school built

1870 – Walkers Variety Store opens where Tate and Foss is today

1873 – Methodist Episcopal Church sold to town for \$1000 – converted to town hall when very soon it becomes used by many groups beyond town government and for entertainment

1874 – International telegraph cable comes to Rye from Europe linking the US to the old world

1880's – Rye loses opportunity to have first library in the county (bequest) when two votes conflict and the money ends up being wasted in court a court battle between those supporting and opposing the library

1889 – Christian Church burns; replaced by a second Victorian styled brown church in 1890

1893 – Brick Wedgwood school built, replacing the first central school (located where playing field is today). The Grange may have used the abandoned school hence the name Grange Park, but later they, along with most every other group in town, met at town hall.

1893 – Central Cemetery opens; first section is where the most mature trees are today; over time other sections are opened; the historic town green adjacent to Central Rd. creates an open town center for functions such as where the Memorial Day service is held annually today.

1890's? – The Grange has a small building on or nearby where Grange Park is today; when the building can no longer be used the Grange moves its meeting to town hall

1890's and turn of the century – additions and upgrades to town hall; regular entertainment on the big stage for over 200 people including the comedy “Freezing a Mother in Law.” (Playbills from this era at town museum).

1899 – Trolley comes to Rye center from Portsmouth via Sagamore and Wallis Roads; trolley battery storage barn built across from cemetery

1901 – Historic houses: eleven historic houses built 1800-1900 remain in the district

1910/11 – Mary Tuck Rand gives money (\$7500) and land for a new library making Rye the last town in the county to have one. (moral of the story from the 1880's – vote early and often)

1919 – the town votes \$1500 to erect a war monument with names of all those who served in wars of the 1800's through WWI in which Rye lost three men; missing from the monument – names of those who died in the Rev. War and those who served and died in wars since 1950.

1920's – Rye center and the rest of the country must upgrade their roads to accommodate automobiles; semi pro basketball games test the strength of town hall 2nd floor; Walkers Store is now Jenness Store with post office and gas pumps.

1925 – Trolley comes to an end due to increasing availability of automobiles; town takes over battery storage barn for dept. of public works

c. **1930** Mildred Wilson builds an antique shop next to the library

c. 1930 – Jess Walker, WWI vet, moves out of Rye Center family home and builds a small cottage and out buildings in the woods behind the church where he keeps guns, distills liquor, plays pranks on neighbors who he doesn't like, rings the church bell in the middle of the night and does not welcome strangers, including the police; he dies in 1967; photos and some remnants of his "village" are in the town museum.

1932 – Wedgwood school burns when boiler blows up raining burning textbooks down on Dona Berry's house across the road; kids rejoice, but are soon back at school in the church and new Rye consolidated school, incorporating the other three neighborhood schools, opens 1934.

1939 – Ed and Jessie Herlihy, Lang Rd., plant Norway spruce trees in L shaped pattern along edge of school property

1940 – Three historic buildings built between 1901 and 1940, all public, remain in the district

1940 – Darning Needle Club stitches flag with stars for each Rye man who volunteers for the military prior to entry into WWII; it hangs in town hall and today is in town museum.

After 1945 – Christmas fairs were held at the town hall, filling it with the sights and sounds and smells of everything home-made, in those evocative, pre-plastic days of old.

1949 – Addition built off south side of school.

1950's – square dancing in town hall again tests the floor of the auditorium

1950's – Parsonage Inn along with antique shop converts to privately owned apartments

1952 – Planning and Zoning Board established; probably met in auditorium of town hall

1954 – First Rye fire station opened where fire station parking lot is today, incorporating equipment stored in Rye Beach; also used as first Rye Police Station and as meeting space for selectmen and other town boards

1956 – Elementary school opens off Sagamore Rd., thus creating a Junior high school in the center (grades 6-8)

1958 - Parish Hall is added to church

1959 – A terrible March fire destroys the Congregational church but the Parish hall is saved.

c.1960 - local municipal court for misdemeanors opened in new room on 1st floor of town hall

1961 – The 4th Congregational Church, a beacon since 1726, rises from the ashes on the hill

1964 – First National Bank of Portsmouth opens a branch bank across from the school on land sold to them by Esther Parsons on the condition that it is in keeping with surrounding architecture

c. 1965 – House at 2 Lang Rd, cor. of Wash., moved back from the corner for safety reasons

1966 – Rye Historic District Commission established, from war monument to Grange Park and 500' on both sides of Washington Rd.

1966 – Gymnasium added to Rye Junior High thus moving town meeting, graduation and other events to this new public space

Late 1960's – Parish house of former Methodist church (town hall) moved from Central Rd to bottom of newly built Old Parish Rd., which is later extended for more house lots

1968 – Planning Board makes significant progress in establishing zoning regulations for Rye

1968 – Rye Civic League established by three civic minded women, a non-profit organization for the purpose of monitoring and reporting on town government with monthly newsletter.

1969 – Jennens Store and post office closes after a century of service; new post office was located on Wallis Rd. where Carey and Gimp real estate office is today

1960's – Rye Conservation Commission and Rye Recreation Commission established

1973/74 – Rye's Battle of the Century, the struggle to oppose a large oil refinery in Durham which would have had a strong impact on Rye; early opposition from Rye center families and a special town meeting and vote to oppose was held at Jr high.

1975 – A grassroots, citizen effort secures revenue sharing funds to renovate the downstairs of town hall for the current office space we see today: town clerk, planning and building inspector

1975 – Huge all day 4th of July celebration in anticipation of the Bi-Centennial; Esther Parsons loans her field for events.

1976 – three day Bi-Centennial celebration including a play commemorating the 250th anniversary of the church, town hall event honoring the revived Rye Militia and speeches about the Bi-Centennial, huge parade from Jr high to town green for speeches, lunch and games in Parsons field, art and history shows, evening concert in the field. etc.

1976 – Rye Historical Society established as a legacy project from the Bicentennial; library is used as its base while it looks for a museum

1977 – Recycling center at Grove and Washington opens, including DPW, freeing up old trolley battery barn building across from cemetery

1977 and beyond for a few years – 4th of July celebration – a day to celebrate the town

Late 70's and early 80; s – Rye Militia joined by many other militias hold encampments and re-enact historic battles in Parsons Field

1980 – Parsons Homestead and barn, subdivided and sold privately.

1983 – First National Bank proposes to build an additional facility behind the bank; HDC holds a public hearing in town hall; overwhelming opposition; HDC votes against it and proposal is withdrawn

1977- 80 – The Parsons Park Corporation, a grassroots effort consisting of 151 families, formed in order to purchase 50 acres of field and forest belonging to Esther Parsons to prevent it from being developed. Esther cooperated with the effort and waited until \$50,000 had been raised from the families for the down payment on the property. After three years of votes the town finally bought the approx.. 50 acres of field and forest for public use and a committee was created to oversee it. The plaque on boulder in corner near Washington Rd., not see by many, commemorates the 151 families efforts to save the land.

1984 – Selectmen propose to develop Parsons Field with a gazebo, stage and entry arch, against the written intent of the Parsons Park Corporation which stated no permanent structures. The Historic District commission and many citizens strongly oppose this idea and the arch, after being spray painted with graffiti by a local, was removed. The stage on which the gazebo was to be built and electricity connection to it remain.

1980's and beyond – Louise and Charles Tallman and others develop trail system in Parsons Woods, leading to Recreation area. Scouts and other groups have continued to maintain trails.

c. 1980's/90's – Trolley battery barn across from cemetery is used for teen center and police station and today a storage – what to do with this small lot and building?

1985 – The Bicentennial of Rye, 1785-1985 is celebrated in a three day event including two days in which the town hall auditorium is filled with loans and donations of items relating to Rye history and culture; this is the last public event held in the auditorium.

c.1985 – town proposes to build a large town complex in Parsons Woods behind the bank for all departments; it is overwhelmingly defeated, thus preserving the integrity of the woods.

1986 – large addition to and renovation of church interior completed

1986 – Selectmen vote to renovate part of upstairs of town hall for temporary office space and meeting space; Rye Historical society is allowed to use part of upstairs for a museum

c. 1986 – historical society sponsors a Christmas stroll from Jr high, visiting decorated homes and ending at town hall for refreshments.

1989 – Town proposes to build a new police station beside town hall on the edge of the cemetery; it is defeated by one vote with recount confirming the result.

1990- 1999 – “Our Town” program inaugurated at Jr High where town mentors meet with student groups one period a week for the year, working on a Rye project to display at the end; very successful, but ended by new principal in 2000 (see one i.e. in RPL – large map of Rye)

Early 1990’s – Cumberland Farms built a store on Wallis Rd. near the school where the attorney’s office is today. A few years later they proposed to install gas pumps and there was great opposition and the proposal was defeated and soon thereafter the store closed.

c. 1990- Early 1993 – Thanks to three years of citizen efforts, especially Dane Crook in conservation law and Ray Jarvis, Parsons Park receives permanent conservation protection (easement) from Rockingham County Conservation district, thus ensuring no further development threats in the future. This was no easy task as the Recreation commission was aggressively seeking at least 1/3 or more of the Parsons Woods to develop for recreation.

Early 1990’s – the town votes to go the SB 2 form of town meeting where a mid- winter deliberative session will consider the warrant articles, but the vote will occur at the March election, thus insuring more voters but not necessarily more informed ones since only a maximum of 150 attend deliberative sessions.

1990’s - church offers several proposals to sell part of its land for a large retirement home, etc. they are all rejected by the town

1993 – Rye Civic League disbands due to lack of participants

1997 – Large addition and new parking lot for library makes former antique shop expendable and it is given to the Rye Historical Society to move 300’ and renovate as a museum

1996/97 – large addition to Junior High

c. 1999 or early this century – First Rye Visioning Session about town center – details?; this was prompted due to threats from those who wanted to develop Parsons Park and the large proposals from the church to develop some of their land in the early 90’s; some of issues that came up in the sessions were: new fire/police station, side walk connecting RJH and Lib.; coffee shop, revive all day town celebration - that is happening in 2020.

2000 – Due to different philosophies and expansion challenges, Congregational church splits; those who want a different kind of church build one on Breakfast Hill Rd. in Greenland

Early 2000’s – “Our Town” revived with an all-day, beyond the school community celebration for a few years until it ends due to lack of volunteers

2002 – Rye Historical Society opens the Town Museum with generic Rye history exhibit

2002 – The rest of town hall 2nd floor and stage is turned into temporary office space

2004 – By a margin of 12 votes and against significant opposition due to its large size, a new fire/police station is passed and construction begins; historic 19th c. house is moved to Central Rd to make way for new building. The town was told that space above fire apparatus could be used for office space, but that has not been acted upon; large meeting space in basement needs to be used more by the public so security concerns need to be resolved.

2005 – Town museum mounts its first professionally grant funded exhibit: Summering in Rye: the hotels and boarding houses of Rye's Victorian resort era

???? – Some land has been put into conservation such as by the Josephs family

2009 – Rye Civic League is revived with new monthly E-newsletter and other efforts to educate people about town government

2011 – Beginning of a nine year struggle over the fate of town hall with various warrant articles for renovation and expansion as well as ones to tear it down and build a new one – all defeated

2017 – TD bank closes; started as 1st National bank of Portsmouth in 1964; sold to Dan Philbrick

2018 – after years of neglect, town hall painted after tear down article defeated

2019 – Town election in March - 75% majority vote to save and upgrade town hall

2019 – Controversy over walking dogs in a section of Parsons Woods adjacent to private property; dogs must be leashed in that area
