

George Peirce, first settler of Otisfield

Presented by Jean Hankins

I'm George Peirce. No, my grave isn't here, and most of you probably don't even recognize my name, but you should. After all, I was the first real settler of Otisfield. I got here in 1775, when the place was a howling wilderness loosely attached to Bridgton. Furthermore, I wasn't buried in what's now Otisfield but in the part of town that became Naples in 1849. My original grave was marked with a nice stone situated not far from the fine brick home I built in what's now Naples, back in 1792, but, I've heard, a later landowner smashed the gravestone and plowed the whole grave area into oblivion. So there's no formal memorial for the illustrious George Peirce!

I was born in 1734 in Watertown, Massachusetts, to a good English family. I had a good education and early became skilled in masonry and carpentry. I also learned how to write good script and was as familiar with legal terms as many attorneys. I had previously worked in the Boston area for several of the proprietors of the large piece of land that became Otisfield. So in 1771, when the Otisfield proprietors first met at the Bunch of Grapes Tavern in Boston to begin the long process of forming the town just granted to them, I was the one they chose to travel north to get things started.

The contract I signed with them in February 1774 stipulated that I was to build a saw mill for the new town, and also a gristmill. I was paid 80 pounds cash and was granted a deed to the mill lot, #65. I was also given the use of the proprietors' boat to ferry people and goods up the Songo and Crooked Rivers into what's now Otisfield. The mills I built were at what's now called Edes Falls, and although well built, they lasted only a few years before being taken out during a large spring freshet.

Creating the infrastructure for the new town was a huge job. I laid out the first roads and built the first bridge across the Crooked River. A few hardy souls began to trickle in, mostly single men, mostly veterans from the Revolutionary War. I surveyed all the lots and established the town lines. Although I had little medical training, for lack of anyone better to serve as physician, I set bones and even amputated limbs of the first settlers when necessary. Over the years I acquired several hundred acres of land. Married twice, I raised a family of two sons and two daughters. My son Levi drowned in the Crooked River.

In 1787, my youngest child, Molly, then 19, became the object of a Scotsman's unwanted attention. When the Scotsman, named McIntosh, assaulted her, I came to her defense. McIntosh attacked me with an axe. I responded, in self-defense, by striking him with a heavy wooden mallet. He died, and I was thrown in jail in Portland. Eventually I was acquitted of murder but convicted of manslaughter. Fortunately public opinion was very much on my side. The 8-month prison sentence was somehow suspended, which meant I was able to continue my ordinary civic duties.

And so, despite this unfortunate episode, the citizens of Otisfield continued to honor me with positions of leadership. They elected me the town's first constable and first tax collector after the town was incorporated in 1798. And I was much involved in building the first meetinghouse on Bell Hill, along with David Ray.

Please don't forget my name -- George Peirce. And remember how important I was to the history of Otisfield!