

The Several Washington Total Abstinence Societies
Of Litchfield, Maine

Thanks to the generosity of Mr. Royal Frank of East Poland, Maine, the Litchfield Historic Commission now has an old (circa 1842) Litchfield ledger book. Such books provide invaluable data for genealogists as well as clues to help us better understand what Litchfield was like in the 1840's. We already know that the period from 1840-1860 was a golden age for Litchfield. Its economy, based upon small farms, water-powered mills, and an ample wood supply, prospered. Its population is only now being equaled. An excellent school system was being established which would include two college preparatory boarding schools. The ledger book presented to us by Mr. Frank contains the minutes, constitution and membership lists of the several Litchfield *Washington Total Abstinence Societies* in the years 1842-1844.

The Ledger provides some interesting contrasts with Oliver Barrett Clason's wonderful work, *The History of Litchfield Maine, and an Account of its Centennial Celebration, 1895*, which was written some fifty years after the ledger.

Listed below are some points of interest:

I. According to Clason, the first temperance society was formed at "Litchfield Plains" in 1833. A second was formed at "North Litchfield" and a third at "Litchfield Corners." He records that a union of the societies was formed in 1835.

II. The *Ledger's* account differs from Clason's in several interesting ways.

1. The first entry in the ledger recorded a meeting on 22 Feb. 1842 in "The Baptist Meeting House." The stated purpose of this meeting was to form a union of the "several" Washingtonian Societies. The minutes reveal that there were three societies involved: The Litchfield Society, The Oak Hill Society, and The Center or Central Society.

2. The names of the several societies are worthy of discussion. The Oak Hill Society is not difficult to locate but its size is astounding. The ledger records one hundred and sixty one members in the Oak Hill Society. How many Litchfield organizations today would love to have that many members from the entire town! It should be noted here that the recording secretary for the Union, Nathaniel Frost, was from the Oak Hill Society, and the ledger seems to have been kept by him.

The Litchfield Society could be located only by examining its membership and the location of its meeting place. They met at "The Baptist Meeting House", and after that circa 1840 the term "The Litchfield Society" would have been enough to identify it as being at what Clason called "North Litchfield." The same could be said for, "The Baptist Meeting House". Clason calls this church, "The North Baptist Church". It might be concluded that the term "The North" and "North Litchfield" evolved into common usage after the ledger was written.

The Center or Central Society could also be located by its membership and the location of its meeting place. They met in "The Freewill Baptist Church," and the members obviously came from an area called by Clason "The Plains". It goes without saying that many of us still use "The Plains" to define that part of town. As with "The North", the term "The Plains" never appears in the ledger. The 1879 *Map of The Town of Litchfield*, from the *Atlas of Kennebec County 1879*, uses the term, "The Plains", in identifying the post office at Eben Toothaker's residence. The Post Office at "the North" was called, "The South Litchfield Post Office." It would appear that both "The North, and "The Plains" came into common usage between 1840 and 1895. The minutes of the Center Society refer to meeting at the church and then forming a procession to "the village." The Central Society had an amazing two hundred and nine members!

III. Other branches of the Washington Society listed in The Ledger or Clason that were not part of the first union in 1842:

The Pond Society

The Pond Society was organized in May of 1841 and listed forty one members. A specific meeting place is not mentioned but the membership leaves no doubt as to the geographic location. Names such as Ring, Robinson, Berry, and Buker identify this society as being centered along the western shore of Pleasant Pond. It is interesting that with all the ponds that are located in Litchfield, the members didn't think it necessary to use, "Pleasant Pond Society". Early Town Meeting records corroborate that "The Pond" was understood to mean today's Lower Pleasant Pond. The term "The Pond" has long gone out of usage as a section of Litchfield, but many still think of "The Pond Road" as the road that passes through that part of town.

.

The "Stevens town" Society

The Stevens town branch was organized on May 8, 1842. It had 83 members and while the term "Stevenstown" is still commonly used today, I don't think that it is as well defined in people's minds as "The North" or "The Plains." A point of interest is that of the eighty three members listed in 1842 only four were named Stevens while there were nine Richardsons and seven Harrimans. Cobbossee Stream would seem to have been the focal point for the membership in this branch of the society.

The Litchfield Corner Society

"The Corner" was certainly the cultural center of 19th century Litchfield with its two boarding preparatory schools. We know from Clason that the Corner had an early temperance society and certainly had one in the 1840's. The Corner was one of the earliest settlements in Litchfield and had a very active Congregational church.

There is absolutely no mention of Litchfield Corner in the ledger. One can only guess that the reason is the rift between the Baptists and Congregationalists which eventually led to two preparatory schools in a relatively small town.

IV.

A brief look at portions of The Constitution of the Litchfield Washington Temperance Union is worthwhile.

Article 10.

"No member shall speak for more than twenty minutes at one time...without permission."

Comment: Human nature hasn't changed much. Perhaps present day governing bodies could benefit from this.

Article 11

"No political or religious discussion shall be carried on in any meeting of the Union."

Comment: The societies often met in a church, always had a prayer, and sang hymns. It is interesting that religious discussion was not allowed. The societies often supported political action (legislation) to establish prohibition. It is, therefore, equally interesting that political discussions were not allowed.

Article 12

"No mention is to be made of rewards or punishment in a future state of existence."

Comment: The presence of this article is as interesting as the fact that it was repealed on 23 Nov. 1842, less than a year after it was written. A "repeal" required a two thirds majority of members present. The same meeting also voted to have the Executive Committee attempt to reconcile differences between the Litchfield and Central Societies.

VII. Conclusion.

The Temperance Movement was very important in Litchfield in the early 1840's. *The Ledger* lists about four hundred and ninety four (494) members without any mention of numbers for the Litchfield Society (probably quite large) or the Litchfield Corner Society (also probably quite large.)