

# **A Young Person's History of Durham**

*Written by Deborah Bartlett and Illustrated by Mrs. Lizotte's 5th Grade Class*

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## **Preface**

If you go to Durham Elementary School in Durham, Maine, you will see a maple tree on the playground. If you're lucky, you'll see a gray squirrel sitting among the many branches. If he is there, sit under the tree, close your eyes and listen very hard. You might be able to hear a tale of long ago because this particular squirrel is from a long line of historians who have kept track of this town's history. His name is Freddy and what he likes best is to have someone listen as he tells a new generation of squirrels about the town. Let's go sit under that tree and see if we can hear Freddy telling some of his stories.

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## **Chapter 1 — Settling Down (1650-1800)**

"All right youngsters, let's settle down. It's time for your history lesson." Benjamin, Elizabeth, Sammy and Mary scrambled around on the branches of the tree to get to their favorite places.

"When can we go play?" asked Benjamin.

Elizabeth nodded her head in agreement. "This is so boring. Why do we have to learn about history anyway? It already happened. I'd rather talk about those new songs I heard playing in my backyard."

"Well, Elizabeth that's true, history has already happened, but it still is important that we remember what's happened. That way we can learn from the mistakes and the successes. We can understand why some things are the way they are now, by studying about how life was. For example, who knows what work, or industry, was first done in this area by white settlers?"

Sammy looked around. "Well, there are a lot of trees," he said.

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"Good thinking. You're right, there are a lot of trees. The early settlers came here for the trees. The lumber was cut here and usually it was sent to Freeport and Yarmouth where ships were being built." Freddy glanced at the young squirrels who had finally settled down and were paying attention.

“What did the town look like then?” asked Mary.

Freddy said, “Close your eyes and see if you can picture what I say.” The young squirrels closed their eyes. “Picture lots of trees with paths and dirt trails wide enough for wagons. The buildings were mostly log houses that were very far apart from each other. Most of the houses were probably near the river so that people could go fishing and get drinking water.”

“Who were some of the people that lived here?” asked Benjamin.

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“There was a man named Judah Chandler who operated a saw mill in Royalsborough as early as 1766.”

“Wait a minute, where’s Royalsborough?” asked Benjamin.

“That was what this area was called at that time. Royalsborough was in the colony of Massachusetts in the British colony of America,” answered Freddy.

“You mean they moved the town?” questioned Elizabeth.

“No,” smiled Freddy, “The United States and the state of Maine weren’t formed yet. This colony wouldn’t be a country until after the American Revolution.”

“Oh, I didn’t know that. Who else was here at that time?” asked Benjamin.

“Samuel Gerrish was one of the first settlers in Royalsborough around 1770 along with John Cushing, Israel Bagley and Ebenezer Newell.”

“What was that rev-o-lu-tion that you talked about?” asked Mary.

“The American Revolution was when the colonists said that they wanted to make their own country because they didn’t like the laws and taxes that England was making them follow. There were many battles between England and the colonists. On July 4, 1776 The Declaration of Independence was signed by John Hancock and many others declaring the 13 colonies an independent nation.”

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“But you said something about Royal...”

“That’s right, Mary. This area was called Royalsborough first and then on February 17, 1789 the town of Durham was incorporated. That means it officially became a town. There were about 700 people living here at that time.”

“What kinds of things did people do back then?” asked Sammy.

“Well, answered Freddy, ” they had to spend most of their time working. It was quite a job to clear your land, grow your own food and hunt. They found ways of having fun, too. When they wanted to clear their land they’d have a ‘rolling bee’. The neighbors would come over and help cut trees, they’d roll them into a big pile and then burn them. There would be food for everyone and they probably played some games. Another thing they’d do is when someone killed a large animal, like a deer, they’d blow a horn and everyone would come and share the food.”

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“That’s pretty nice. It sounds like they had to cooperate,” remarked Elizabeth.

“That’s true. Life was very hard then and cooperation was a way to make life easier and to survive.” Freddy glanced across the field.

“Did they ever leave home?” asked Benjamin.

“Oh, yes. Not as easily as people do today. They had to walk or ride a horse or ride in a wagon to get to nearby towns and that took a lot of time. After the corn crop had been harvested they would put the corn in a bag to carry on their shoulders. Then they’d take a path through the forest to a mill in North Yarmouth which was 12 -15 miles away. There the corn would be ground into cornmeal. They use the cornmeal to make things like cornbread.”

“What kind of buildings were around? Was this school there?”

No, Mary. This school building was built much later. The business center of town was midway between North Yarmouth and the Androscoggin River. About where the Rabbit Road crosses Rte. 136. There was a church there and the first store and public house was also in this area.

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A public house is an inn where people could eat and stay the night. It was owned by Israel Bagley. That building is still standing today and it is still used as an inn because it is now a Bed and Breakfast. Around 1780, the first school was held at the inn.

“Wow, did they use that building as a school for very long?” asked Sammy.

“I’m not sure how long it was used as a school but around 1790 the town had grown enough to have 6 school districts with a one room school in each area.”

Elizabeth and Benjamin started pulling each other's tails. The other squirrels started pushing and things were looking pretty bad. Freddy cleared his throat and then whistled. Everyone stopped and looked at Freddy.

"Well, youngsters I guess that you've listened to enough for today so you can go play. We'll meet back here tomorrow to continue our history lesson.

"All right. Let's go."

The squirrels scampered over the branches and across the playground before you could blink. Freddy chuckled to himself and followed them into the distant trees.

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## **Chapter 2 — Pioneer Times (1800-1900)**

The human children had just gone into the school after lunch recess when Freddy gathered the young squirrels together for their next history lesson.

"Uncle Freddy, I was wondering something," said Elizabeth.

"Yes, what was that?" asked Freddy.

"How did people travel ?" They must have walked and used horses, but were there roads?"

"Good question. They didn't have tar roads like we have now, but there were dirt roads. In 1781 Mr. Bagley 'built' the River road to Minot, which is called Auburn now. That way people in Royalsborough had a better way to get their goods to Lewiston. After this road was finished people began moving into the North side of town. Stackpole Road was built around 1800 and became part of the stage line between Portland and Minot (Auburn)."

Benjamin looked puzzled, "What's a stage line?"

"A stagecoach was a kind of wagon pulled by horses that people could pay to ride on. Sort of like a bus, but no engines."

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"What about crossing the river?" asked Mary.

"Well until about 1818 when the first bridge was built, people crossed on ferries. These were flat boats that used a rope strung across the river to pull the boat and passengers from one side to the other. There were several ferries that were operated in town : The Jones', Beal's, Dyer's and McGray's to name a few."

"Did you have to ask their permission to cross?" asked Sammy.

"You had to pay a toll to cross on their ferry. At first you had to pay a toll to use the bridge, too."

"1820 must have been an important year," remarked Benjamin.

"Why?" asked Mary.

"Wasn't that the year that Maine became a state?" asked Ben.

"Right you are," said Freddy. "Good for you for remembering that fact. That was also the year that John Rogers of Lynn, Massachusetts began a shoe manufacturing business in South Durham. This business eventually gave rise to lots of small shops with 5 or 6 workers in each. At the height of the business there were more than 200 workers."

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"Where did people go shopping?" asked Mary.

"In each of the four sections of town there was a General Store and Post Office," answered Freddy.

"What did the stores look like?" asked Ben.

"What was in them?" Elizabeth wondered.

"Each store sold some groceries like white sugar, flour and special items that came from other places like silk clothing and dishes from other countries."

"They didn't need much food in the stores did they since a lot of people lived on farms." Elizabeth turned to Freddy.

"That's right. These stores were also places where people would gather to find out what was happening."

"Were there any other businesses around?" asked Elizabeth.

"As a matter of fact there were. There were 4 large stores on River Road. Also there was a milliner's, bakery and tailor shops. Near South West Bend in 1820 there was a carding and grist mill owned by John Mayall."

"What did they do there?" asked Sammy.

"Well, a carding mill takes in the wool from sheep and combs it. A grist mill grinds the flour or corn into flour."

"Oh, so they didn't have to go out of town anymore."

"That's right. There was also the Durham Steam Co. which operated from 1837-1842. They would grind grain and card wool, too. They also made Plaster of Paris, processed lumber and cotton and worked with iron and steel."

"Did most of the people work in these places?" asked Mary.

"I don't think that most people did. There were a lot of farms where people grew most of their own food and had animals."

"When did the Civil War happen?" asked Elizabeth.

"Hey, was that when the United States fought um-um-um.." Sammy was rather puzzled.

"It was when the North fought the South right, Freddy?" asked Mary hopping up and down.

"That's right. It was also called the War Between the States because the northern U.S. fought against the southern U.S. It started in April of 1861 and ended in April of 1865."

"Did some of the citizens of Durham fight in that war?" inquired Sammy.

"Yes, some of them did."

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"This building is a school, right?"

"Yes. Elizabeth it is. Why do you ask?" Freddy turned to her.

"Well I was wondering what schools were like. Were they like this?"

"No, at that time there were one room school houses in the town. By 1890 there were 13 school districts with a one room school house in each area."

Just then the red doors exploded outwards and a bunch of little children ran out onto the playground screaming as they went.

"It must be time for afternoon recess," said Mary.

"I believe that you are correct, Mary. Let's call it quits for today and begin again tomorrow." By the time Freddy had finished his sentence the 4 young squirrels had scampered into the trees on the other side of the fence.

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### **Chapter 3 — The Turn of the Century (1900-1920)**

Another day had come to Durham Elementary School and the squirrels were gathering again the maple tree after a long morning of playing. Freddy was beginning to tell the young squirrels what Durham was like at the Turn of the Century.

"Around the year 1900, Durham was arranged so that there were 4 separate settlement. There was Southwest Bend, which is where the school is, West Durham, East Durham and South Durham."

"Were there stores in each area?"

"Yes, Mary, there were. The population of the town had increased to 1,230 people by the year 1900 and would be 1,625 by 1920."

"What sort of work did people do?" asked Sammy.

People worked as farmers, carpenters, masons, mill workers, coopers, or shoemakers.

"Where did people go shopping?" asked Mary.

"In each of the four sections of town there was a General Store and Post Office," answered Freddy.

"What did the stores look like?" asked Ben.

"I heard some people talking once and they described the store in South West Bend. This store was called the George Warren General Store. They said it was a place where people would go to learn the news and maybe play a game of checkers by the wood stove. The mail wagon would come from Yarmouth to deliver the mail. George Warren, the proprietor would read the postcards and packages when he sorted the mail so he always knew what was going on."

"I think it sounds like a friendly place," stated Sammy.

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"I agree," said Freddy. "Across the street was the R.M. Strout Store where people could buy hardware and grain supplies. There was also a Carriage Shop where carriages were made and

repaired and a Corn Shop where corn was processed and wrapped into bundles for commercial use in other Maine cities. If some visitor needed a place to stay then they might have stayed at The Durham House which was owned and operated by Abner Merrill.”

“Where was there a hotel?” asked Mary.

“It stood where the bandstand is today. Later on it was sold to Charles Ford and the name was changed to Ford’s Hotel. There also was a blacksmith in the area to take care of the horses that were an important part of life.”

“Were the other areas like South West Bend?” asked Ben.

“They each had General Stores which included the post offices and each area had their own school. In West Durham the store was the W.H. Merrill and Sons Store and on Route 125 on the southeastern part of town was the A.F. and A. Lunt Store. It sat across from the Friend’s Meeting House.”

“What did that store look like?”

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“Well, Elizabeth, there was a large front door. When you walked in that door there was a counter on the right that ran the length of the store. You could smell many smells as you walked around the store. There was the sweet smell of molasses, salt pork, and coffee that was ground in a large red grinder. If the wood stove was burning, you could smell that and the oiled floor. A glass counter had jars of candy. If you bought some of that candy it was put into a red striped bag.”

“I can picture the whole thing,” said Sammy.

“Did people have to leave town for everything else?” asked Elizabeth.

“There were some other businesses. James Beckett ran a print shop and F.M. Wakeman was an optician so people could take care of their eyes. John Merrill was an insurance agent and the Bowie family ran a dairy farm so people could get their milk.”

The yellow buses began pulling into the parking lot so the squirrels knew it was time to be leaving. They scampered down the tree and raced off into the distance.

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## **Chapter 4 — Durham (1920- 1950)**



The morning dawned clear and cool. The squirrels met in their usual place in the maple tree after the students had gone into the school.

"Well we are almost finished with the history of this town. We are already up to the 1920s."

"Did anything special happen in Durham?" asked Sammy.

"It was a time of changes," answered Freddy. "The car was becoming more common place and that allowed people to leave the town easier. More people worked outside of Durham in these years following World War II. In the following years, the population of Durham dropped.

"In the following years the general stores would be dying out. The post offices were replaced by Rural Free Delivery (R.F.D.) in 1921. The blacksmith business lasted into the 1930s. The Strout Store at South West Bend was used as a grain and livestock store until 1949. Brownie's opened in the 'Bend' to sell supplies and gasoline. In the 1930s electricity was used in houses and roads were improved so cars could travel easier."

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"What was it like to cross the river if they were using cars?" asked Mary.

"There were bridges now. But in 1936 there was a flood that destroyed the bridge. Then they used a lobster boat to cross the river until a new bridge was built. This wasn't the only natural disaster to happen during these years. From 1947-1949 there were forest fires in the town. That led to the Durham Fire Department being founded in 1950."

"What were the schools like? Did they have a school here yet?" asked Sammy.

"In 1920 there were 9 one-teacher schools and 2 two-teacher schools. By 1950 there were 5 schools. They were still one room schools because the town liked that system. The community was closer to the schools and community members could help out."

"What happened here during World War II?" asked Ben.

"Well a lot of the men were gone so the women had to work at places like Bath Iron Works. School children and other residents did drives to gather important materials like paper and scrap iron. They also volunteered to watch the skies for enemy planes."

Suddenly a strange sound was heard from the building.

"Oh-oh, fire drill!" yelled Elizabeth and ran to higher branches. The others followed her.

"I guess this would be a good time for a break," said Freddy.

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## Chapter 5 — Durham (1950–Now)

The squirrels clambered down the branches and got back to their usual positions. The students had all filed back into the building after practicing the fire drill procedures. It had been an interesting thing to watch because the fire trucks had come over and the kids were allowed to look at them after the drill was over.

“Did the population of Durham keep going down?” asked Elizabeth.

“Oh no. It’s been going up for the last ten years.”

“I still want to know about the school,” said Sammy.

“Well, in the 1950s there were 4 separate schools. They were named the Crosman School, the Parker School, South West Bend School and West Durham School. By the middle of the 1950s they were over crowded so in the March Town Meeting of 1960 a decision was made to consolidate the 4 schools into one. Originally this school had 4 classrooms. It opened in the fall of 1960. The Crosman and Parker Schools were still kept open to help with the over crowding problem. As the years went by there were additions to the original 4 rooms. In 1965 4 rooms were added followed by additions in 1972 and again in 1976.”

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“What about the fire station?” asked Mary looking over to make sure they were not going to be disturbed by more sirens.

“That was built in 1981 and the new Town Hall was built just a few years ago.”

“You know, Freddy I wasn’t real excited to have to learn about this history stuff, but it really was pretty interesting,” commented Ben.

The others agreed with Ben.

“I really liked the part about the store. That sounds like a neat place to visit,” said Elizabeth.

“I liked hearing about the school,” said Sammy.

“I didn’t have one favorite part,” grinned Mary.

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“I’m glad that all of you enjoyed my stories. I hope that someday you will tell some youngsters about this town. Right now it is time to go on home. So, I’ll race you to the woods.”

If you had been standing outside of the school right then you would have seen 5 ordinary squirrels running across the playground. But you and I know that they are anything but ordinary.