

# THE SHIRETOWN CONSERVER

The Dover-Foxcroft Historical Society Newsletter

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Autumn 2005

## The 1869 Diary of Laura Maria Johnson By Roberta Fitzgerald



Laura M. Johnson. DFHS Collection

Laura Maria Johnson, daughter of Dr. Benjamin Johnson and his first wife, Susan Louisa Wellington, was born October 12, 1837 and died at the age of 101 on January 3, 1939. Dr. Benjamin Johnson, along with his wife Susan and his two children, Seth Wellington Johnson (b. 1840) and Laura Maria, came to Dover in 1841. Susan died on July 2, 1852. On July 24, 1854, Dr. Johnson married his second wife, Eliza Bacon Chadbourne. A widow with two young children, Eliza and Frank, she met Dr. Johnson when visiting with her sister, Joan Bacon Mayo, wife of John G. Mayo of Foxcroft.

In addition to his medical practice in Dover, Dr. Johnson served as a trustee of Foxcroft Academy and was a member and supporter of the Congregational Church, one of 15 men who pledged to "make up any deficiency in the \$450 salary" of the minister. Dr. Johnson was the great-great uncle to my grandmother, Hattie Ellen Johnson Washburn.

Laura was 31 years old when she recorded this diary found with other Johnson family letters and documents in the 1970's in the house then known as the Francis C. Peaks House. Mr. Peaks was the son of Col. Joseph B. and Eliza Chadbourne Peaks (daughter of Eliza Bacon Chadbourne and her first husband). Eliza and her daughter, step-mother, and step-sister to Laura Johnson, are often mentioned in this diary, as are the Mayos and many other residents of Dover and Foxcroft.

Per Mr. Peaks' bequest, the house was turned over to the Piscataquis County Court House upon his death.

Why only one diary was found is a mystery because Laura's faithfully made recordings indicate that she kept a journal for years. 1869 is the year Dr. Benjamin Johnson died on November 20<sup>th</sup> at 9:40 p.m. and Laura notes his illness for several weeks prior to his death. (Continues on Page 7)

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**The Dover-Foxcroft Historical Society  
The Shiretown Conserver**

*The Shiretown Conserver* is published quarterly by the Dover-Foxcroft Historical Society which reserves all rights to its contents. Memberships in the Society which includes a subscription to the *Conserver* may be had by sending \$5.00 to: 28 Orchard Road, Dover-Foxcroft, Me 04426.

Submissions to the *Conserver* should be sent to the editor at 308 Foxcroft Center Road, Dover-Foxcroft, ME 04426, Photo submissions will be returned unharmed. You can reach editor Nancy Battick by e-mail at [battick@midmaine.com](mailto:battick@midmaine.com)

**Officers of the Society, 2005-6**

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James Annis	Treasurer
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Leilani Stites	Textiles & Costumes

**The Shiretown Conserver**

Nancy Battick	Editor
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Back numbers of the *Conserver* are available at \$5

**New Members**

We welcome the following new members to the Society and hope they enjoy their memberships.

William Grimm	Maryland
Sheila Ruksznis	Maine
Carlson & Carolyn Williams	Connecticut
Sumner F. Richards	Maine
Richard Washburn	Washington

Mr. & Mrs. Leon Palmer	Oregon
Linda J. Huff	Maine
Matthew & Caroline Goggin	Maine
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Paul & Clarese Page	Maine
Irene Bonsey	Maine
Ashley Powell	Maine
Charleen Lambert	Mass
Mr. & Mrs. James Senior	Penn
Ronnie Towne	Maine
Ronald Perry	Maine

And a last farewell to Society members Ward Webber and Phil Weatherbee. The Society extends our condolences to their families.

Editor's Note: If you know of a member who has died recently, please let me know.

**Our Sponsors**

Once again we wish to thank our generous business sponsors.

**Dr. Ellen Anderson**

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## Civil War Day, July 2, 2005



Members of the DFHS, Sons & Daughters of Union Veterans, 20<sup>th</sup> Maine Co. B & 29<sup>th</sup> Georgia, and other reenactors pose following the rededication ceremony.



The color guard consisting of members of the Sons of Union Veterans and 20<sup>th</sup> Maine reenactors.



Congressman Mike Michaud at the rededication ceremony.

Civil War Day was a resounding success. We had over 155 visitors to the Observer Building Museum and earned over \$700 in donations and sales. Thank you to all who helped make the day memorable.



The newly installed Center Theatre marquee proclaims Civil War Day



The 29<sup>th</sup> Georgia & 20<sup>th</sup> Maine, Co. B conduct a musket drill.



The wagon rides to Dover Cemetery proved popular.



Leilani Stites (Sarah Elizabeth Palmer) with a young Union admirer.



Mary Annis, Steve Hildreth, & Rich Stites enjoy a moment.



All the speakers drew sizeable crowds. Here Jack Battick talks about what really happened at the Battle of Little Round Top.

## The Society's Unknown



The caption on this photo says Pleasant Street School, taken around 1910. Do any of you know who the teacher or any of the pupils are?

### Our Raffle Winners

The winners of the Society's 2005 raffle are as follows:

Family Membership, YMCA - Miriam MacArthur

\$200 heating oil from A.E. Robinson - Michelle Connelly

Hand Knit afghan donated by Mary Annis - Ven Chambers

\$50 Gift Certificate, Green Door Gallery - Jack Battick

Set of D-F histories, Lou Stevens - Richard Nutting

Historical Society Throw - Rosalie Leighton

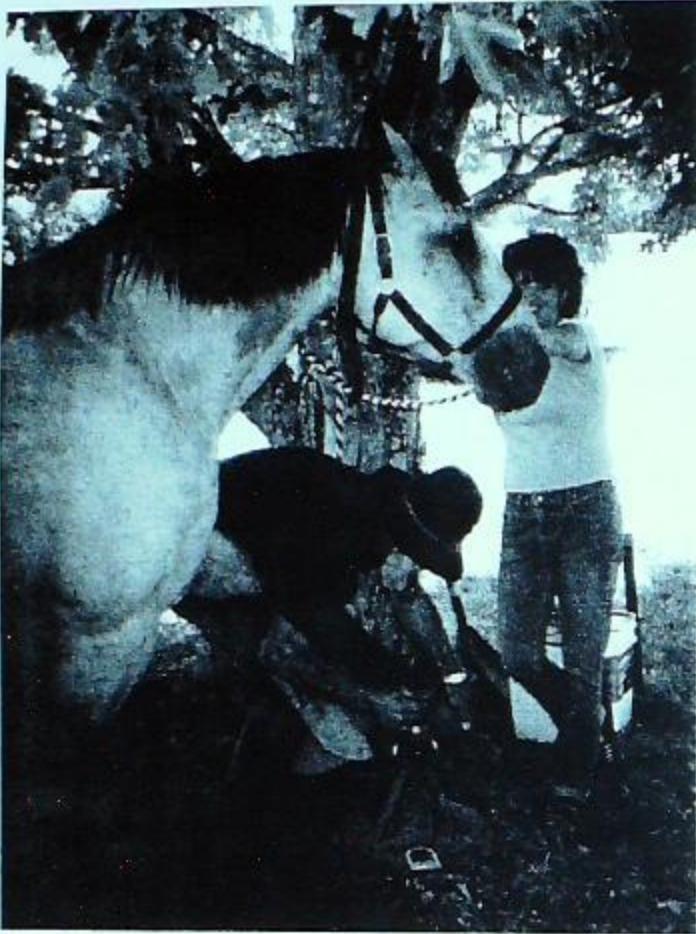
\$25 savings account, Bangor Savings Bank - Nina Brawn

\$25 gift certificate, Mary Kay - Terry Wikoff

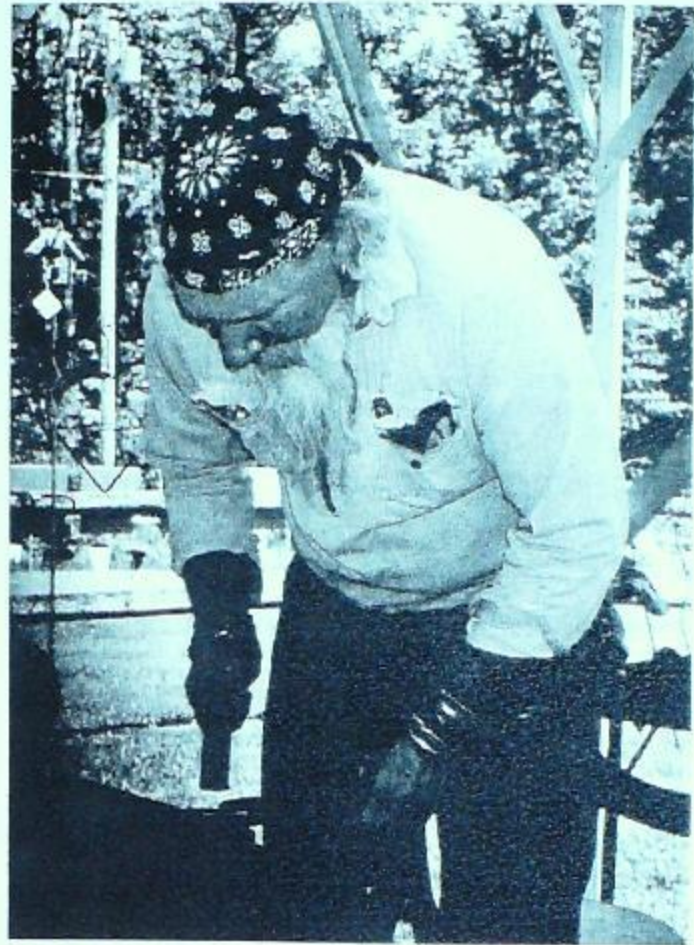
Length & Breadth of Maine - Beth Stephens

The Society wishes to thank our generous donors and all those who helped to make the raffle a success.

## Homecoming Day



At the Blacksmith Shop, a farrier works with a satisfied customer.



One of the blacksmiths demonstrating techniques



At the Observer Building Museum, Lou Stevens answers a question.



Dot Greenlaw greets a former pupil.



Visitors enjoyed the displays & the great bargains at the book sale.

### Johnson Diary (Continued from page 1)

Laura provides the reader, some 136 years later, with a delightful picture of life in Dover and Foxcroft as she records the weather, visitors to the house on Main Street, her visits to others in town, books she read that year, household chores, and church Bible readings.

On January 13<sup>th</sup> she writes "about fifty friends came in the evening to a surprise party & gave father a purse of sixty-nine dollars. They left about half past nine." Yes, Dr. Johnson was



Dr. Benjamin Johnson. Photo by D.C. Dinsmore. DFHS Collection

sixty-nine years old on this, his last birthday.

Many evenings were spent sewing, either clothes for herself or helping her step-mother, Eliza. On Tuesday, April 13<sup>th</sup> she notes: "Pleasant. Mother went away about six down to Mrs. Brown's & they went up to Mrs. Jackson's [etc.] & returned about 11. I shook the back entry & stair carpeting before breakfast. Then



Eliza Bacon Chadbourne Johnson. Scanned from a tintype. DFHS Collection.

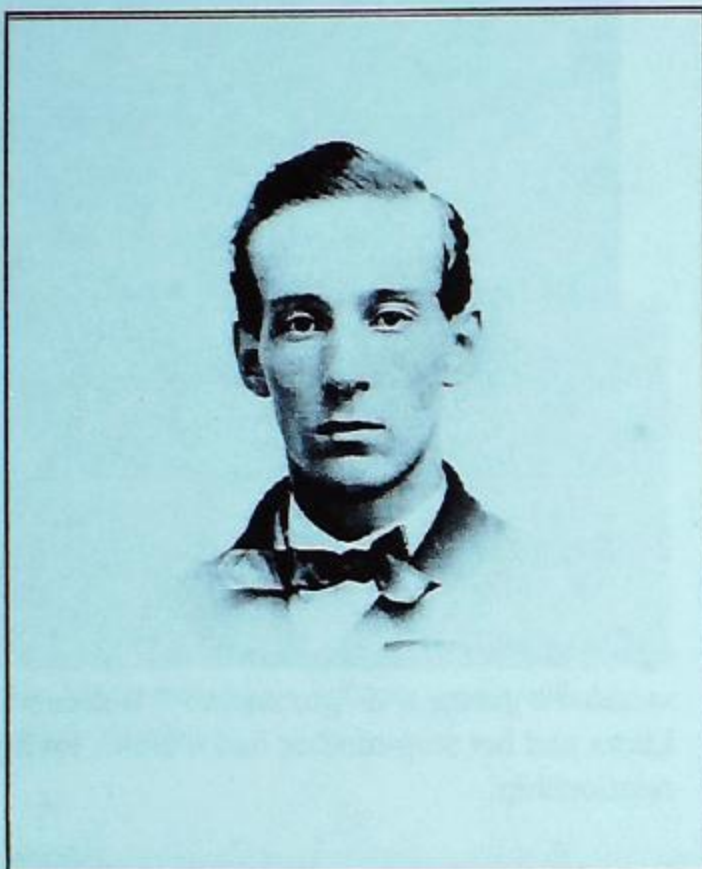
*ironed & put the carpets down. Wrote to Seth, mended a garment & got supper* "It seems that Laura and her step-mother had a close, loving relationship.

Friends and relatives called for tea or Laura went calling to tea. Sometimes the visits were in the afternoon; others were in the evening. Laura mentions Mrs. Goodwin, the Mayos, Mrs. Brown, Mrs. Douty, Mrs. Dinsmore, Mrs. Crocker, Mrs. Vaughn, Mrs. Dr. Thompson (her childhood friend Mary Elizabeth Mayo), and others.

Laura, with her mother, attended the tin wedding for Mrs. Cochran's on April 1<sup>st</sup> and for Aunt Hannah C. on April 23<sup>rd</sup>. She helped Mrs. Brown work on a quilt "as long as I could see" and another day she "made a square for Mrs. Cook's album quilt".

The only way to keep in touch with family and (Continues on Page 8)

**Johnson Diary.** friends in distant towns was letter-writing and Laura wrote many. She kept a log of letters written, as well as received, in the back of her diary. By 1869, brother Seth had left home (perhaps to study in Massachusetts) and there was regular correspondence between brother and sister.



Seth Johnson. Photo by S. Masury, Boston.  
DFHS Collection

In the back of the diary she recorded the books read during the year. Most were borrowed from the library; she notes in her diary entries the book she is currently reading and, on occasion, reading to her father.

On Thursday, January 21<sup>st</sup>, she writes, *"I was ordered about four by mother's calling to me that there was a fire near by. Mother, E (Eliza) & I went to see where it was & found it to be the saw mill & tannery which all in flames. E & I came home before five & I tried to sleep in my chair until six o'clk."* This was the second fire

at Levi Farnham's tannery and Gilman's sawmill on Main Street. Perhaps Laura and Eliza were two of the ladies helping put out the fire as mentioned by editor George Edes in the *Piscataquis Observer*, January 28, 1869.

### Teacher In Brownville

It's not clear whether Laura Maria Johnson taught school in Dover or Foxcroft, but in January she writes of visits or other activities "after school". On Monday, April 26, she writes: *"After tea I went down to see lawyer Robinson about having a school in the Academy"*. Presumably, this was Foxcroft Academy.

On May 18, 1869, she left Dover for a teaching position in Brownville. She writes: *"Tuesday, May 18, 1869: Quite Pleasant. I sewed some in a.m. About eleven Mr. Jenks called and a little past one we started for Brownville and had quite a pleasant ride over going through Sebec village. I am to board at Mr. Nason's & think that I shall like."*

Wednesday, May 19 she began her teaching assignment in Brownville with 27 scholars. She notes that there were only 5 boys in attendance. A few days later, more students joined her school.

During her stay in Brownville, Laura boarded with the Nason family who lived very close to the school, according to the 1853 map. Although she arrived on the 18<sup>th</sup>, her trunk was not delivered until May 25<sup>th</sup>. On Sunday, May 23<sup>rd</sup> she writes, *"I could not go to church as I had no hat to wear."*

There were children in the Nason home, as well as other boarders, Laura spent time before school and in the evening tating, sewing, and visiting with Mrs. Jenks (perhaps another boarder at Nason's). Laura also mentions visiting and having tea with many residents of Brownville: Mrs. M. Brown, Mrs. Perham (lived across the road from the school), Mr. and Mrs. Morrill,



Mrs. Page, Mrs. Gould, and others.

While teaching in Brownville, she read *Helen Maurice*, a Sunday school book, *Pictures from Italy* by Charles Dickens, *The I wills of Christ*, *The Village School Mistress*, another Sunday School book, *Opposite a Jail*, *Guardian Angel* by Oliver Wendall Holmes, *Children of Cloverly*, *Hopes of Hopes Castle*, *Times of Knox & Mary Stuart*, and *Gates Ajar*. She also mentions reading *the Atlantic Monthly*, a popular publication even 136 years ago.

She taught in Brownville from May 18 until August 11, 1869, returning home after receiving word that her father was quite ill and not expected to live. She writes, "*Wednesday, August 11, 1869: . . . I arose about five and left in the stage about ½ past six. I met Eliza & Quincy at Chase's corner and had a nice ride home. About noon Asa [her first cousin] brought cousin Samuel [Asa's brother] and Hattie [Samuel's daughter]. On the afternoon we played "Jack straws", "Great Events" and Croquet. At evening devotions led by S. [Samuel] he repeated "The Old Old Story".*"

October 4-8, 1869, Laura attended the Institute in Gorham with her Uncle Samuel Johnson. There she heard lectures on school government, geology, language, spelling, the science of teaching, arithmetic, history, human knowledge, and whispering. It seems that this Institute was similar to advanced learning seminars teachers today attend. Teachers throughout the state were in attendance. Laura mentions teachers from Westbrook, Portland, and Jackson. The final discussion at the Institute was on the qualifications of teachers.

On October 11<sup>th</sup>, Laura began her next teaching assignment in Scarborough, Maine, with 39 students. She was called home to Dover, returning on October 23<sup>rd</sup>, to be with her father in his final days. She writes on October 22, "*After school I received a letter from Uncle Mayo requesting me to come home immediately*

*on account of father.*"

Laura returned to Scarborough on November 13, 1869, beginning her teaching on Monday, November 15<sup>th</sup> with 44 students saying, "*it hardly seemed as though I had been away.*" Dr. Johnson died just a few days later and Laura notes in her diary on November 20, "*Father died at twenty min. before ten this evening.*"

Christmas 1869, Laura received the following gifts: a bell from her scholars, a book from Uncle Seth, a bottle of perfumery, and a work basket. On the last day of the year, she writes, "*This closing evening of the year I feel that I have reason to express my gratitude to my Heavenly Father for his great goodness to me.*"

Laura Maria Johnson provides a marvelous glimpse of what life was like for a single woman in 1869. Many activities are no different than what young women today are accustomed to doing. Technology has changed a lot of the daily routine, but many still enjoy reading a good book and writing letters, as well as completing daily household chores.

### **Own & Read the Complete 1869 Diary of Laura Maria Johnson**

The Society has for sale CDs with the complete scanned diary of Laura Maria Johnson, along with a verbatim transcript. The CD also contains family photos not shown in this article, a record of expenses, and other items. Not suitable for MACS.

To purchase the CD: send a check for \$13 (includes postage and handling), made out to the Dover-Foxcroft Historical Society, 308 Foxcroft Center Road, Dover-Foxcroft, ME 04426.

## Well Deserved Thank Yous

To: *Sharon Phillips & Rich Stites* for weed whacking, plant care at the Observer Building Museum \* *Jim Brown* for painting the Library \* *Leilani Stites* for reenacting, hosting far beyond the call of duty \* *Cornerstone Flooring* for donating the floor in the bathroom at the Observer Building \* *Hope Lacourciere* for donation of an air condition for the library at the Observer Building \* *Finest Kind Tree Farms, Laurelyn Buie, Midnight Flyer, Tootie & Wayne Bennett, the Sons & Daughters of Union Veterans, Mister Paperback, the Community Band, Patrick Meyers, Center Theatre, Police Chief Dennis Dyer, Town Manager Jack Clukey,* and all who helped make Civil War Day a great success \* *Mary Annis* for organizing volunteers and offering unlimited support, *Jack Battick* for organizing Civil War Day, the facade grant, and numerous other projects, & all who hosted this summer & volunteered.

## Editor's Corner

Where did summer go? Fall is just around the corner and the last months have just flown at the Historical Society. The fall months will be busy with efforts to complete our library, continue archiving efforts, working with our photo collection, and planning ahead to next year's season.

Volunteers are always needed, so if you'd like to learn more about cataloging, archiving, or museum work in general now's the time to let us know.

As always, the editor wants to offer a tip of the hat to those who contributed or helped get out this issue of the *Conserver* . . . . Roberta Fitzgerald, Sharon Phillips, Jack Battick, Jim Brown, and Mary Annis.

## Work On The Museums

2005 has been an especially busy year as work on both our museums took center stage. The new windows are in at the Blacksmith Shop and the casements will be painted soon. Also, on tap at the Blacksmith Shop is a new roof (on the north side) scheduled for completion this month. Next year's major project will be raising money to replace the badly deteriorated sills.

The Observer Building Museum has had its damaged clapboards replaced and a new roof and paint job are in the works. While grant money will pay for the lion's share of the costs of these two projects, the Society has still has to raise funds for the match. In addition, a new, much-needed bathroom has been installed downstairs.

## Civil War Booklet For Sale

Among the items for sale in the Society's gift shop is a spiral-bound booklet, *Dover & Foxcroft in the Civil War 1861-1865*. The booklet was written by the *Conserver's* editor, Nancy Battick, and features sketches on the lives of several men and one woman who served in the Civil War and who called Dover-Foxcroft their home. Also included is a complete list of names of the men who served in the Civil War from both towns, and those who are buried in a town cemetery but came from another community. If you're a Civil War buff this booklet is for you.

The booklet is available for \$5 plus \$3 shipping and handling. All proceeds benefit the Historical Society. Send checks made out to the Dover-Foxcroft Historical Society to 308 Foxcroft Center Road, Dover-Foxcroft, ME 04426.

## A Message From Mary Annis, Society President

Here we are in the midst of a beautiful Maine summer and a busy one it's been. July was a great time as we held our Civil War Day. The weather was gorgeous, the attendance good, and the activities went off like clockwork. We had many helpers who made the day a success.

Homecoming found us holding another book sale at the Observer Building and this year the Blacksmith Shop was busy with the "smithies" working their trade. The attendance was great there, too.

We have been open most Sundays and Fridays. Member Leilani Stites is portraying our own Civil War nurse, Sarah Elizabeth Palmer.

And to top it all off a new roof is being put on the Observer Building and painting will soon begin thanks in part to a facade grant. The final part of the Blacksmith Shop roof will be done this summer and most of the new windows are in. Thanks to the Society's generous members all 11 of the windows have been "purchased". Many things are happening at the Society. The summer is a busy time. Stop by and see us.

### \* Upcoming Programs \*

All programs held at Thayer Parkway, 7 p.m. Call 564-0820 for information.

September 7    **Helen Kelly** will speak on a major new county-wide book project entitled *Piscataquis Landscapes*.

October 5      **Roxanne Moore Saucier**, author of *Family Ties* (*Bangor Daily News*) will speak on "Cousins". Come and learn how to figure the degrees of cousinhood, including what "removed" means, and other kinship puzzles.

\* \* \* \*

### The Dover-Foxcroft Historical Society Membership Application & Donation Form

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Town/City: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ e-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

Annual Dues (\$5.00 per person):\$ \_\_\_\_\_ Donation: \$ \_\_\_\_\_ (tax deductible)

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Dr. Benjamin Johnson (center) & his family on the steps of the Peaks House. Laura stands at the left rear.

**In 1869 a young woman faithfully wrote in her diary, recording her impressions of Dover, Foxcroft, Brownville, and her family.**

**She was a remarkable young woman, her father was a respected physician and her home is now part of the County Courthouse. Her story begins on page 1.**