

Was Meredith Really Originally Named 'Palmers Town'?

By John Hopper

Virtually all histories of Meredith tell us that Meredith was originally named Palmers Town (or Palmerstown). Various editors and authors who compiled histories of Belknap County in the late 19th century were among the first to draw this conclusion. They apparently based their view on two key points. The first was the belief that Samuel Palmer was the most important leader in the founding and in the development of the new township. The second key point, one that seemingly substantiated their views about Palmer, was the existence of Jonathan Longfellow's 1753 official survey map of the new township. It bore the label 'Palmers Town'. But a close examination of the documents from the 1740s and 1750s reveals that the township was never formally named 'Palmers Town' and that Palmer played almost no role in its founding and development.

In assessing Palmer's role, early historians assumed his prominence because his name was listed first among the group of 60 colonists who received the grant of the new township in 1748. At the granting, the Masonian proprietors referred to the new township by listing all of the men who applied for the grant. They described it as 'the tract of land granted to Samuel Palmer, Jonathan Shaw, etc., etc. etc.' or as 'the tract of land granted to Samuel Palmer and Associates'. But despite his appearance at the head of the list, a close review of proprietor documents shows that Samuel Palmer played virtually no active role in the effort to obtain the grant or in the later development of the township. He never attended meetings; he never personally paid dues; and he never set foot in the new township. It appears that his name was simply placed at the top of the list by the design of the actual leaders among the grant applicants who felt Palmer's inclusion would give them greater visibility with the Masonians. After all, Palmer had served numerous terms in the colony's Assembly and had previously worked with some of the Masonians on various provincial affairs.

As for the second consideration of the early historians, the 'Palmers Town' label on the 1753 survey was actually a complete aberration. It was the only original document from the 1740s-1750s that used the name 'Palmers Town'. It can be found nowhere else. Moreover, the label was a gross error even then. In 1750, the town was formally named 'Salem' by the township proprietors, and this was formally changed to 'New Salem' by 1753. Longfellow's usage of the 'Palmers Town' label very probably was simply a repeat usage of the label he put on the first survey of the new township that he completed in 1750. No copy of the first survey exists to confirm this assumption, but it bears some logic as the first survey was completed before the town was formally

named 'Salem' in December of that year. In 1750, we surmise that Longfellow simply shortened the Masonians' version of the list of proprietor names. The 'Palmer's Town' name was never used by anyone else or in any other context during the formative decades of the town.

This misinterpretation of Meredith's history is a relatively trivial matter, but it is symptomatic of the broader state of the town's historiography. Much of what we rely upon as fact was printed decades ago when the highly fragmented, original documents were far less accessible and when the focus of most early historians was too broad to allow a thorough review of the available information. As a result, the exploration of Meredith's history is a wide open field for anyone who has the time and patience to explore it.