

A Brief History of St. Johnsbury



The first settler in St. Johnsbury was Jonathan Arnold, a native of Rhode Island. In 1787 he built the first framed dwelling in town on a spot at the north end of Main Street now known as Arnold Park. In 1790 St. Johnsbury was officially organized and given its name at the first town meeting. Colonel Ethan Allen had suggested that since there were many places called "St. John" already in existence, this one might be given the name of "St. Johnsbury" – thus making our town unique as there was no other St. Johnsbury in the world. This distinction remains today.

Much of the town's heritage comes from the invention of the platform scale by Thaddeus Fairbanks, who established a business in 1830 that made the name "Fairbanks" synonymous with scales; and from George C. Carey, who founded the Carey Maple Sugar Co. in 1904. Cary was a prominent salesman who successfully promoted the use of maple sugar to flavor plug tobacco – and later cigarettes – as a moisturizing and non-fermenting flavor agent.

During each March and April sugar makers tap maple trees and gather the sap to boil down and produce maple syrup. It takes 40 gallons of sap to make one gallon of syrup. Around 1915 the production of Maple Grove Candies was started at an area farm by Katharine Ide Gray and her daughter, Helen, and by 1920 had moved to "Pinehurst" (a former Fairbanks home), now the Elks Club on Western Avenue. Meanwhile, Mr. Carey had built a large plant at the east end of Portland Street to house his maple sugar distribution operation; he subsequently built the adjoining facility, which is now known as Maple Grove Farms of Vermont. St. Johnsbury justly became known as "The Maple Center of the World."

With the success and growth of the scale, maple sugar, and wood product industries, so grew St. Johnsbury. Due to its rapid growth, St. Johnsbury had become the Caledonia County seat in 1856. It also became a rail and highway junction, as well as industrial, commercial, and cultural crossroads of the region – a position in which it is firmly secure today.

Starting in 1850, railroads became a major factor in St. Johnsbury's growth and industry. Our handsome late Nineteenth Century brick railway station has been preserved. At one time, four lines merged here, and the tracks are all intact and still used for freight, as well as occasional tourist excursions.

St. Johnsbury Academy, a private school founded by the Fairbanks family in 1842, is our high school and provides fine education in both college preparation and vocational training. There are a large number of boarding students from many parts of the world. Other area educational facilities include Lyndon State College, the Community College of Vermont, and Lyndon Institute.

Many cultural centers were built by the Fairbanks family including the Fairbanks Museum & Planetarium, a museum of natural science and history (1891), and the St. Johnsbury Athenaeum (1871), which houses a library of over 45,000 books and includes a children's library. The adjoining Art Gallery (1873) is the oldest unchanged gallery of its type in the country. It has on display a collection of outstanding paintings by American and European artists, with special emphasis on works by the Hudson River School painters. Featured is the massive 10' x 15' "Domes of the Yosemite," by Albert Bierstadt.

Several visitors enjoy Courthouse Park and inquire about the Civil War monument. Titled "America," this is an original Italian marble figure, designed by Larkin Mead and sculpted in Florence, Italy. It was dedicated in 1868.

St. Johnsbury continues its tradition of local cultural activities. Area events include summer fairs, weekly band concerts (the St. Johnsbury Town Band's roots go back to 1880), old fashioned hymn songs, locally produced plays, an arts and film center, etc. St. Johnsbury even has been the site of independently produced motion pictures.

Successful business and industry resulted in many outstanding homes and churches being built during the last quarter of the Nineteenth Century. A descriptive walking tour of Main Street details the diversity of architectural design. Copies are distributed free at the Athenaeum and Welcome Center.

The town has a town meeting form of government with selectmen and a manager. It enjoys a population of about 8,000 and "a million assets," quoting from the *Boston Sunday Globe*.

Prepared by the
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A History of the St. Johnsbury Railroad Depot



When the Connecticut and Passumpsic Railroad reached St. Johnsbury in 1850, a 30x75 foot wood depot was hastily erected on this site to accommodate the traveling public. It soon proved inadequate when additional rail lines were built, and proved unsafe when a woman was struck and killed by a train shortly after disembarking. The Boston firm of R.C.Glancey was contracted to build a new depot in 1883. The earlier structure was moved north to serve as a warehouse and burned in the great fire of 1892.

The three story Queen Anne Victorian built by Glancey measures 39x116 and was constructed of brick with granite trim. The roof was slate with copper filigrees. The interior finish was varnished southern yellow pine wainscoting with hardwood trim and maple floors. The total cost was \$12,000. In the original configuration, as today, the central lobby with 14-foot ceilings served as a waiting room, with the ticket agent and telegraph office centered against the track side wall. Public restrooms were where the elevator and stair well are now, a crew office adjoined the agent's office, and a news stand was where the sink and counter are today.

The room to the left served as a second waiting room and also had a small restaurant for a while before increased passenger use demanded all of that space. The present restrooms were added during recent renovations. That portion of the building to the right of the lobby was given over to baggage and freight offices. There were steps up to a floor at loading dock height. While heavy carts entered through a track level bay. The operators of the railroads had offices on the second floor. There was also

an apartment for the superintendent and his family at the south end, and a dining area for crews. The third floor had additional apartments and crew barracks.

It was a busy place. There were twenty or more passenger trains every day with express service to Boston, Montreal, Portland, and Lake Champlain as well as telegraphy services. In 1888 rail operations were taken over by the Boston & Maine. Extensive additions were made to the depot in 1900 with the construction of long track-side passenger sheds and a separate Railway Express office. The distinctive B&M waiting benches displayed today were probably installed at that time. By the 1920's, B&M operations were in turn taken over by the Canadian Pacific on the north-south route, the Maine Central running west. Yard and depot operations were handled by the St. J&LC.

Passenger operations dwindled rapidly after WWII and the last ticket was sold in January of 1965. The passenger sheds were torn down shortly afterwards. Freight operations continued to be run from the depot until 1977, when the building and adjacent grounds, which included track spurs and warehouses to the south, were sold to real estate developer Anthony Pomerleau. A small freight office was built across the tracks and the yard became a shopping plaza. The depot housed various shops, restaurants, and second floor offices until it was gifted to the town by Pomerleau in 2003. The subsequent renovations returned the building to its original as closely as possible, while adding modern facilities. The original overhead lighting fixtures, B&M benches, and agent's ticketing and telegraphy equipment were also rediscovered and restored.