

VALLEY NEWS

Walking Along the Paths of History

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POMFRET — Fallen leaves, lightly dusted with snow, blanketed the path. At another time of the year, it might have looked like any other hiking trail, but the trees on the hill stood bare, showing rows of old maples lining both sides.

That means it wasn't cut through the woods any-time recently. In fact, 150 years ago, it was a main road in Pomfret called the King's Highway. Now it's occasionally traveled by hikers and deer hunters, and on this afternoon, a couple of cellar-hole hunters, David Allen and Sarah Hollister.

Allen's fascination with old maps and a genealogical bent is what led them to this place.

He has recently published, on CD-ROM, maps of every county in Vermont from the 1850s. The maps on the CD are scanned from large, detailed wall maps that showed locations of every home in a county and noted the name of its owner in the mid-1800s.

Old Maps Help Man Chart Vermont's Past

Allen, who lives in West Chesterfield, N.H., had been interested in finding the homesteads of some ancestors in Pomfret.

He had planned to overlay his 1856 map of Windsor County, which noted his forebears' houses, with modern terrain and road maps. In doing so, he thought he could reliably match up any existing homes with ones shown on the old maps.

But he didn't need to do that. A phone call to Elaine Chase at the Pomfret Historical Society led him to John Leavitt, a Pomfret man with an interest in local history. Leavitt, it turned out, not only knew the places, but also happens to be a relative.

"She didn't tell me anything about him being a cousin. She just told me that he knew a lot," Allen said.

The two men share a great, great grandfather, making them third cousins. Leavitt said he would

be happy to show Allen the houses.

There was something else that intrigued Allen, though. In comparing maps of various vintages, he noticed that some roads on the 1856 map had disappeared. One of those was King's Highway, which no longer appeared on maps by 1910.

Leavitt said he knew the road, that it was a good hike, and that one might find some nice cellar holes up there. So, accompanied by his friend Hollister and a reporter, Allen set out to find them.

A private driveway makes up the first half-mile of the old King's Highway. Leavitt led the way in his pickup truck, stopping to talk with the property owner. A friendly word from Leavitt gained access to the property. Then he bid the party farewell — he had work to do on his farm — and the trio struck out into the woods.

Where wooden wheels once clattered in wagon ruts, hiking boots now crunched on leaves and twigs.

The trail was steep, but Allen and Hollister kept up a brisk pace. They often spend weekends doing

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this for fun.

It's also relevant to Allen's business. He owns a surveying company, which is sometimes involved in road disputes when a landowner closes a trail to the public, and townspeople argue that the trail is a public road. In such cases, old maps often add evidence to bolster the public's case. (Disputes over old roads have flared in recent years in Bethel and Barnard, among other Vermont towns.)

Hollister stopped to point out a tree trunk that had grown over a strand of barbed wire. The wire protruded from near the center of the wide trunk. "If we find wire fencing, that means there was a house up here as late as the 1880s," Allen said. Barbed wire was first used on the Western prairie in 1876.

No one would have tacked up barbed wire in the woods. It would have fenced a pasture. If the attached

farm had been inhabited that late, Allen and Hollister had a good chance of finding a cellar that would be mostly open, and not buried under the duff of the forest.

Icy streams, traversed at a bound, cross King's Highway here and there. So too, at one point, does the Appalachian Trail, marked by white blazes on trees. Further along, the old road runs through a wide gully blocked by deadfall, which the trio skirted.

Hollister spotted the first cellar hole, which was exactly where the old map indicated it should be. In 1856 it was the homestead of one C. Ware. The cellar walls are lined with field-stone, now green with moss. Judging by the placement of the stone base, the house would have had a center chimney, and from the outline of the cellar it was tiny by today's standards.

About a quarter mile from A. Kent

lived S. Kent, according to the old map. The group continued on to visit his place. On the way, Allen noticed that well-preserved stone walls stood on both sides of the trail, 50 feet apart, or three rods, as it would have been measured at the time it was built.

"If you ever find walls like that in the woods, 50 feet apart, start thinking road," Allen said.

The cellar of the home that belonged to S. Kent is much bigger than the others. The house must have been spacious, giving the impression that Kent prospered as a farmer. Across the road lays the stone foundation of what must have been a huge barn, built into the hillside for easy access to the upper levels.

"Kent probably had eight kids, and there are thousands of progeny all over the country," Allen said. "They ought to come see this."

On the north side of the house is a

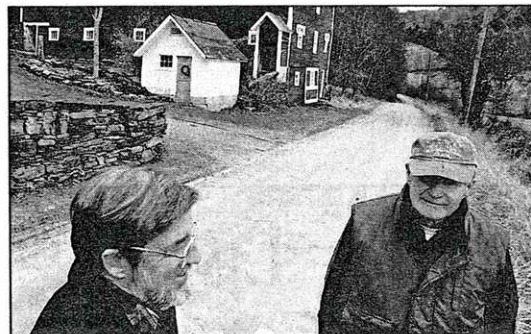
break in the cellar wall, which clearly had been a doorway for steps leading down to the cellar from outdoors. Also, a curious niche topped with a capstone had been built into the wall; for what purpose no one in the party could guess. The cellar is now about waist-deep. A dead tree, having grown to a good size, stands in the middle.

"If you haven't seen cellar holes before, this is primo," Hollister said.

With no foliage, it was easy to imagine the land cleared for pasture and dotted with sheep or cattle, as it would have been in the 1850s.

The hill slopes down from the site of the Kent home, and rolls up again. Two stone walls cross the far hillside, which was the color of bronze in the afternoon light. Beyond, the mountains were a smoky blue.

The group stood on the foundation stones of the barn and gazed out over



David Allen, left, and John Leavitt visit the site of one of their ancestors in Pomfret.

VALLEY NEWS — DAVID M. BARREDA

the scene.

"Look what a spectacular view you'd have," Hollister exclaimed, her voice echoing in the stillness.

(David Allen's CD-ROM maps of

Vermont are sold at Shiretown Books and the Yankee Bookshop in Woodstock and Border's Books in West Lebanon, and online at www.old-maps.com.)