

Now train-less Hinsdale rides quiet life

Low-key New Hampshire town embraces easy pace, freedom from big-city stressors

By Ken Knutson

kknutson@thehinsdalean.com

"Whoops," I moaned as I blew past the Hinsdale Historical Society.

We were heading into Hinsdale, N.H., for a second day of exploration. The historical society, which occupies the old Ebenezer Hinsdale homestead, sits about three miles outside of town, between Hinsdale and Brattleboro, Vt.

Its small sign and location on a speedy thoroughfare had conspired against me.

"What dad?" Wyatt asked.

"I didn't grow up here, but I think it stopped before I was born," I responded, before hedging. "Or maybe not."

A good politician's answer. We descended the hill and pulled up to Hinsdale Town Hall, housed in an early 20th-century opera hall. Town clerk Jody Moreau greeted us and, like most, was intrigued by our project. She directed us to town tax collector James MacDonell, whose office sat in the converted bowels of the theater.

In addition to his day job, MacDonell sits on the zoning board and the budget committee.

"4,000 people — you've got to wear a lot of hats," remarked the affable New Jersey transplant.

Stepping outside, MacDonell said he prefers the down-to-earth attitude here to the social-climbing undercurrents of his upbringing outside New York City.

"It's a nice, relaxed town. We have one traffic light and two 'blinkies.' And the only reason we have the second blinkie is because Walmart moved," he said.

Most of those not employed by the retail behemoth commute to either Brattleboro or Keene (30-minute drive) for their jobs. MacDonell remarked that this corner of the Granite State feel often like the ugly stepchild.

"We're in the Monadnock Region, and this area of the state is pretty much forgotten by the rest of the state," he lamented.

the scene, however, the greater was my impression that the station had been re-purposed into a private residence. Back in the Equinox.

The tracks were long gone, but the path they cut through the woods northeast to Keene was still discernible. I could tell Wyatt was trying to figure out how this history thing worked.

"Dad, was the train here when you were a boy?" he asked.

"I didn't grow up here, but I think it stopped before I was born," I responded, before hedging. "Or maybe not."

A good politician's answer. We descended the hill and pulled up to Hinsdale Town Hall, housed in an early 20th-century opera hall. Town clerk Jody Moreau greeted us and, like most, was intrigued by our project. She directed us to town tax collector James MacDonell, whose office sat in the converted bowels of the theater.

■ HINSDALE 03451

This is the fifth in a six-part series on visits to towns named Hinsdale in Massachusetts and New Hampshire

Residents are eagerly awaiting a new bridge over the Connecticut River to replace two century-old spans and ease traffic snarls on the Brattleboro side. The earliest ETA on that is 2019.

The real estate market is definitely a buyer's one, although the school districts have mediocre ratings. He picked up his 135-year-old home for a song two years ago.

"My escrow is more than my mortgage," he said. "I live right off the river, and I can hear the river as I go to bed."

He suggested we walk across the street to the police station, which opened just last year.

Inside, dispatcher Michelle Rideout told us of her special connection to Hinsdale, Ill.

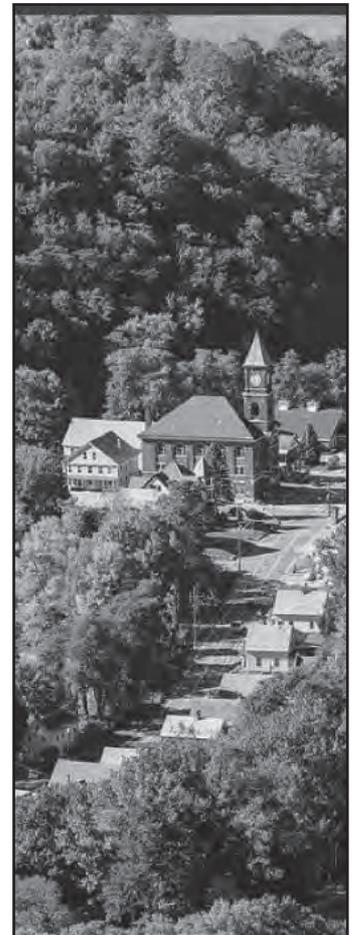
"Someone will call and give a street name that I've never heard of," she said. "Then I'll find out they're calling from Illinois."

Drug activity is prevalent, she said, along with crimes by transients that plague border towns.

It was time to go back to the historical society. Which was now closed. We checked out the grounds and peeked in the home's windows, getting a glimpse of recreated 17th-century living. Thankfully, local media personality Fred "Fritz" Wetherbee had recently posted a video online detailing the life of the man who gave Hinsdale its name.

Ebenezer Hinsdale was born in 1706 to a well-to-do family whose settlement faced constant ambush by French-allied Native Americans. His parents had twice been taken captive and marched to Canada.

After graduating from Harvard University, Ebenezer actually became a missionary to the local



James MacDonell, tax collector for the town of Hinsdale, N.H., said he enjoys working in the converted old opera house that now serves as the town hall, relishing discoveries like the theater's ticket window that now serves as a broom closet. The town hugs the Ashuelot River, once the economic engine powering the region's paper mills and now just another winsome element in the sleepy Monadnock Region. (Ken Knutson photo; photo courtesy of Kathryn Lynch)

tribes.

"He was appointed chaplain to the troops stationed at Fort Dummer on the Connecticut River at what is now Brattleboro," Wetherbee narrated, with an accent right out of central casting.

Apparently Ebenezer grew discouraged at his soul-conversion rate.

"He changed his vocation from the ministry to become an officer in the Army," Wetherbee related.

In 1742, he built Fort Hinsdale on the west side of the river, which gave birth to the town. He died on Jan. 6, 1763, at the age of 56.

What would Ebenezer think of today's 100,000-square-foot trading posts? I dreamed of going Colonial on roll-back pricing as Wyatt and I strolled from the Walmart parking lot and fully re-entered 2016.

Hello Hinsdale, N.H.

Population: 3,954
Year incorporated: 1753

Special events: Colonial Encampment in late July; Memorial Day parade

Local talent: Charles Anderson Dana, top aide to prominent abolitionist Horace Greeley as managing editor of the "New York Tribune" and assistant secretary of war during the Civil War; Anna Hunt Marsh, the first woman credited with starting a hospital for the mentally ill with the Vermont Asylum for the Insane in 1834. Noteworthy government posts: Cemetery Trustees and Cemetery Sexton; Forest Fire Warden; Overseer of Charities