

MAINE STATE LEGISLATURE

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THE LEGISLATURE

OF THE

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FORTY-FOURTH LEGISLATURE.

HOUSE.

No. 53.

MAJORITY REPORT

OF THE

DELEGATION OF SOMERSET COUNTY

ON THE

CHANGE OF SHIRE TOWN OF THAT COUNTY.

The undersigned, members of the delegation from the county of Somerset, who believe that a change of the shire town of said county is necessary, being informed that it is the intention of the minority of said delegation to present a special report, beg leave to submit to the consideration of the Legislature the following facts :

The county of Somerset was incorporated March 1, 1809, through the efforts of John Ware of Norridgewock, then a member of the Massachusetts Legislature. The population was sparse—a few thousands only—chiefly in the vicinity of Norridgewock, which, being then the business centre of the county, and very near its geographical centre on the south line, was, through the influence of Mr. Ware, made the shire town. The officers of the new county were twelve in number, of which Norridgewock alone furnished *six*—just as many as all the rest of the county. At that time the geographical position of the population was very different from its present condition. Five towns lay east and easterly of Norridgewock—one south, four north, and *nine* west and westerly. More than half a century has since passed. The current of population has set strongly eastward. During that whole period but

two towns have been incorporated westerly of Norridgewock, two north, while *ten* have grown up in the east and north-east, one of which, in the extreme eastern part of the county, thirty miles from Norridgewock, is the largest town in the county east of the Kennebec river. In the meantime, *eight* towns *westerly of Norridgewock* have been taken away, and incorporated into the county of Franklin. It will at once be perceived that this changes the entire geographical centre of the county of Somerset. Norridgewock is left in the south-west corner. But this is not the only change. According to the valuable and interesting history of Norridgewock by William Allen, Esq., one of her best citizens, the town must have been a thriving, stirring and busy place at the time the county was incorporated. It has changed wonderfully since. Within the recollection of any of the present generation, the hum of business has not been heard in its streets. The long grasses of summer and the snows of winter are equally harmless, and equally undisturbed. A distinguished member of the present Supreme Court, after being there several days, declared that the only sign of life he saw during the whole time was a *funeral procession*, and it was *quite refreshing*. Not a public building of any kind, except an ancient meeting house erected beyond the memory of the present generation, and the court house and jail which the county have been kind enough to build for them and let remain, at their urgent solicitation, until they now claim to retain them as a matter of right—not even children enough in the place to pay for erecting a school house—only two new houses built for more than thirty years—while two or three small shops where candy, patent medicines and nicknacks are sold during term time, with a few barrels of flour in one, and a small quantity of dry goods in another; an ancient tavern, erected during the war of 1812, filled with small and dilapidated rooms—a milliner's shop, a lawyer's office, a few pretty but ancient private houses, and plenty of dilapidated structures of various descriptions—constitute the present village of Norridgewock on the north side of the river where the county buildings are. The stir of business and of active life long since departed from its streets, without hope of return. For more than a generation it has been going to decay.

The necessary consequence of all this, is a change of the business centre of the county. That centre is now at Skowhegan, which is a large, flourishing, *live* village—the largest in the county.

The railroad, telegraph lines and mail routes all converge there ; and stages come and go every day from all sections of the county on the arrival and departure of the trains. The only *one-horse* vehicle which graces Skowhegan with its presence comes from Norridgewock, and is quite sufficient to accommodate all the travel to and from that place, except in term time, and then persons who come by railroad to attend Court five miles distant, must shift for themselves as best they can.

The great lumbering interests and operations of the county—the merchants and traders with their freights, and teams, and purchases ; the farmers of the county, with their produce to sell and supplies to buy, and the business men of every description who want to reach the telegraph lines and railroad—all centre at Skowhegan. Indeed, almost the whole business of the county gathers there. Its streets are filled with an industrious, active, thriving population. It has three large hotels and private boarding-houses in abundance ; *and more than three-fourths of all the people in the county who attend the various Courts during the year, whether as parties, witnesses or jurors, pass through Skowhegan to Norridgewock.*

Skowhegan is, in fact, the central point through which nearly the whole population of Somerset county pass on their way to the shire town for any purpose. Every man, whether party, witness or juryman, is obliged to travel five miles out and back, making ten miles extra travel over a hard, hilly road, directly away from all other business. For all these reasons, a general desire has arisen throughout almost the entire county that the shire town should be changed. The only question for years has been one of expense. Everybody has regarded the removal as a question of time only—certain to take place eventually. And since the commencement of the present session the undersigned, members of the county delegation, have received urgent requests from county officers, from town officers, and from the principal citizens and leading business men of nearly every town in the county, asking a change. The County Attorney appeared before the delegation at the hearing, and urged it. So did the Sheriff of the county. Two of the three County Commissioners have expressed themselves in favor of it, and it is supposed that the third is also. The late County Attorney, whose term has just expired, and the County Treasurer, are known to favor it. And it is understood that the

present Clerk of the Courts and the Register of Deeds, both of whom reside in Norridgewock, are not *particularly* unfavorable; while it is well known that John H. Webster, Esq., a prominent lawyer of Norridgewock, and former member of the Legislature, openly supports it. So far as is known to the undersigned, a few citizens of Norridgewock are the principal persons who seriously and strenuously oppose it under all circumstances. It is natural that they should. Even of those members of the present delegation who oppose the change, *two* expressed the belief at the hearing that Skowhegan is the proper place for the county seat, and that they should favor the removal if it was not for the expense. The member from Norridgewock alone expressed unconditional opposition.

The county of Somerset now contains 29 towns and 16 plantations, with more than 37,000 inhabitants, and an area of 4,000 square miles. It is the largest county in territorial extent, save one, in the State. The towns of Smithfield and Mercer, and about two thirds of Starks and three fourths of Norridgewock—a population of about 4,500—are better convened, so far as mere distance is concerned, at Norridgewock than at Skowhegan. About one third of Starks, one fourth of Norridgewock, and all the other 25 towns in the county—a population of about 32,500—are better convened at Skowhegan. Better, because it is nearer; its accommodations every way far superior, and it is the common centre of all their business transactions, and the terminus of the railroad and telegraph, mail and stage lines of the county. It is for the common interest and convenience of all this vast majority that the county seat should be changed. It is for the common interest of all the other citizens of the State, also, that it should be changed. Every person living out of Somerset county who may have a suit there pending, is now compelled to take his witnesses with him, and, after getting from Skowhegan (where he leaves the railroad) to Norridgewock the best way he can, must stay there day after day, sometimes blocked in by snow without communication outside, in accommodations which he may not find the most agreeable, waiting his turn of the court wheel, which after all may not come; and then be obliged to go home again, at an expense of hundreds of dollars, nearly all of which might have been saved him, if the county seat had been at Skowhegan where he could telegraph to

his witnesses at any moment, and thus avoid the expense of their attending court till actually wanted.

In the various requests received by the undersigned from different parts of the county for a change of the county seat, nearly all have contained suggestions substantially like the reported bill. From five to ten years has been the period named before incurring any expense of building; and seven years was finally agreed upon by the delegation as a fair average expression; and they feel sure that a very large majority of all the people of the county will approve the provisions of the bill. The expense cannot be large. The first court house was built at a cost of \$4,000—repairs in 1847, \$3,000, and in 1849 about \$2,000 more. So that the whole expense to the county for a court house, for more than half a century, has been about \$9,000, with incidental repairs of a trifling amount—perhaps \$10,000 in all. The jail originally cost \$2,000; has been since rebuilt at an expense of about \$4,500. It is not proposed to change or remove it; and it can be used with but very little inconvenience where it is, for many years to come.

The only material question for the present Legislature to determine, is whether 32,000 citizens of Somerset county shall continue to travel from Skowhegan to Norridgewock, or 5,000 citizens of Norridgewock and vicinity shall travel to Skowhegan.

All which is most respectfully submitted.

DAVID D. STEWART,
OLIVER R. BACHELLER,
ASA HEATH,
ABEL C. FRENCH,
TIMOTHY HAM,
JOHN CARNEY,
ABEL PRESCOTT.

STATE OF MAINE.

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, }
February 18, 1865. }

Reported by Mr. BACHELLER of Solon, from the Somerset delegation, and on his motion laid on the table and 350 copies ordered to be printed for the use of the Legislature.

HORACE STILSON, *Clerk.*