

The History Corner

The Personal Library of Judge Stephen G. Nash

A great book is a great thing. The spine tingles when one enters a library – it is like entering a room full of heroes.

Many of us know the story of how in the late 1800s New Hampton native son Judge Stephen Gordon Nash had a dream to create a library – and did so! Judge Nash was born in New Hampton Village in 1822. His father, John Nash was an early treasurer of New Hampton School and his mother, Abigail Gordon, provided housing for students at the female seminary. The earliest library in town, the New Hampton Social Library (1813), was located in their home on Main Street.

In 1838 Judge Nash graduated from New Hampton School at age sixteen. After completing his B.A. at Dartmouth in 1842, he returned to NHS to teach for a year. Choosing law as a vocation, he became a barrister in Boston and then the youngest Superior Court Judge appointed by the Commonwealth. Upon retirement, the Judge and his wife, Mary Upton, were determined to give back to the town and school that built the foundation for a successful life.

In 1887 the Judge petitioned the New Hampshire State Legislature to incorporate a library, using the surname of both his parents as its name - The Gordon-Nash Library – and the seeds were sown. While the Judge died before full fruition, his wife, Mary Upton Nash, and other long-time friends (many associated with New Hampton School) worked tirelessly to ensure the beautiful library was built, endowed, and populated with 6000 books from the Judge's library and 4000 books from New Hampton School's literary societies. The majority of the Judge's estate was dedicated to establishing, "a public library and reading room in 'Smith's Village' in New Hampton, New Hampshire, my native place, for the free use of said town, whether residents, students or sojourners."

As the books from the Judge's private library made up the core of the library's holdings, they circulated freely among residents, students and sojourners. After several decades of hard use, library trustees made the wise decision to remove the books from general circulation and tuck them away. The case below, in the newly renovated Judge Nash Room, holds a small sample of the 2500 books that remain from the gift of the Judge and his wife, Mary Nash.

In almost all of his books, the Judge signed his name and recorded the date – and often the place – he acquired the volume. In many books he used triangles and circles to note something – but we have not cracked his code (yet!). He also underlined and wrote many notes in the margins – as the Judge was an avid reader in many genres.

The next History Corner will feature a “book report” on one of the books from the Judge’s library. Spoiler Alert: while many of us might feel proud to have another native son, Franklin Pierce, as our state’s only member to hold the office of President, be prepared for Judge Nash’s not so enthusiastic comments on his contemporary, President Pierce. Stay tuned!



Books from the Library of the Judge on Display in the Renovated Judge Nash Room

For more information on the history of the town, please visit the New Hampton Historical Society website at <https://www.newhamptonhistory.org/>

Kent Bicknell
Historian, NHHS
Curator of Special Collections
The Gordon-Nash Library at New Hampton School
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