

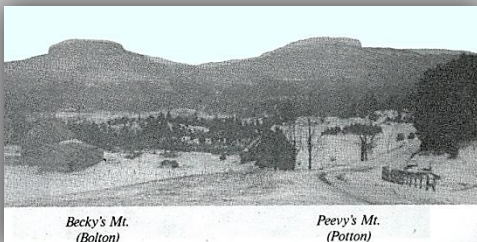
Traver Road by Marguerite McNeil

Traver Road

Looking east into the valley, as I sit here on this hill
I see the ruins of Willard's Old Mill
The edger, the planer, the old board saws
The bang of the planks with so many flaws
The whistle too. No more does it call.
They are still. We miss them all.

There are the mountains – Hog's Back and Owl's Head,
Sugar Loaf & Aunt Becky, it is said
Has a hidden treasure on her some place,
Put there by none of this race.
Owl's Head has a natural room – a Lodge –
And at her feet lies Lake Memphremagog.
In the west I see the River Missisquoi
It must have been named by a squaw,
It winds its way to Mansonville
It lends its strength to Rag's feed mill
It carries its load to Lake Champlain,
And never once does it complain.

There are mountains, too, to the west.
They aren't quite as high as all the rest,
But they stretch out there through Bolton Pass
Where the sky is a flaming scarlet mass,
When the evening sun is going to rest
And now come the stars, and the evening's rest.



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Brome County Historical Society, 1980, p. 143,
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Managing Director, BCHS.

About the author – and her poem ... by Sandra Jewett

Marguerite (Peggy) McNeil is thought to have penned this nostalgic poem about the road on which she lived, in the 1930's. Her affection for the natural features of her surroundings is evident and her wistful words about the changing world around her are charming, given our perspective of more than 85 years later.

Marguerite Elizabeth McNeil was born here in 1912, was educated and grew up in Potton, the younger daughter of Otis McNeil and his wife Elizabeth (Willey) McNeil, whose farm was located on Traver Road. Marguerite later married Berend Schipper, moved to St. Jean where they brought up two daughters. Her niece, Dorothy, recalls that her Aunt Peggy was "a remarkable seamstress, fun loving and just an all-around wonderful lady." Marguerite McNeil died in 1969.



Marguerite (Peggy) McNeil, on the right, is shown here with her sister Marjorie, her brother Ross, and their father, Otis McNeil. Picture is courtesy of Dorothy McNeil, Ross' daughter, who kindly provided biographical details about her Aunt Peggy.

And now a little history of the places Peggy McNeil writes about!

Why the name Traver Road?

Traver Road is named for Jacob Traver (1799-1884), a weaver and pioneer farmer, who with his wife and seven sons settled in Potton in the mid-1800's. Only one of the seven sons, Orrin J., born in 1839, remained on the family farm. He married Elvira Woodbury, born in 1848, the daughter of an original Potton family. The couple remained on the home farm to raise their three sons. Over time, the Traver family built a large and successful farm, which later included a bottling plant for Traverland Dairy milk, which supplied local needs, then owned by Ernest Bradley and Lilian Traver Bradley.

The McNeil farm is situated closer to Route 243 than is the Traver homestead, at 103 Traver Road. Miss McNeil would have had a view of Becky's Mountain similar to the one recently taken by Gérard Leduc from the McNeil property (shown below):



**Becky's Mountain,
photo from Gérard Leduc, 2017**

Becky's Mountain, or Aunt Becky's Mountain, in the mid-background, has an interesting history. It is very likely to have been named

for Rebecca Holland, one of four daughters of Richard Holland and his wife, Sarah Ballard, who came from Lebanon, N.H., with "two yoke of oxen and a sled" in January of 1810, and settled for two years at Magoon's Point, in Stanstead, on Lake Memphremagog. Magoon's Point, on the east shore, is roughly opposite Owl's Head Mountain.

It is for very practical reasons of transportation that many settlers came in the winter with their household possessions. Heavily loaded sleds were far easier to pull over frozen ground and marshy areas, especially when covered with a light snow cover. The lack of leaves on trees would also allow for better visibility – not to mention the lack of flies and mosquitoes!

In 1814, Richard Holland "*removed to the Coolidge Place on the west side of the Lake near Knowlton Landing. ... and three years later, in 1817, he removed to South Bolton on the banks of the Missisquoi River where he built first a saw mill and later a grist mill ... the first mills constructed at South Bolton, which gave rise to the name Holland's Mills. Mr. Holland also conducted a potashery, a pearlshery, and a brickyard.*"

The production of potash and the more refined pearl ash provided early settlers with a way to obtain badly needed cash. Potash, principally made by leaching the ashes of hardwood trees, was used in bleaching textiles, glass and making the soap used for the preparation of wool for yarn production. Pearl ash was produced by baking potash in a kiln to remove impurities. The fine white powder remaining was the pearl ash. Before the development of baking powder in 1843, pearl ash was used as a leavening agent in baking, in addition to being used in glass and ceramics.

But, we digress! Let us return to the naming of Becky's Mountain! Rev. E. M. Taylor tells us more of the story.

Richard and Sarah Holland had four daughters, the oldest of whom was Rebecca, "*who never married, but lived alone on land given her by her father, and on which the South Bolton Railroad Station now stands.*"

Both the station and the rail line have long since disappeared. However it is interesting to note that the first sharp "S" curve in the rise up the flank of Becky's Mountain, on Chemin Mountain, is still called "Station Hill" by many to this day!

Becky is the diminutive of Rebecca – hence – Becky's Mountain. Incidentally, in her second marriage Susannah, Becky's sister, married Nathan Banfill, who might well have been the man credited with discovering Potton Springs.

The rail line was part of the Orford Mountain Railway which passed through South Bolton, south to the Potton Springs station, McNeil's Crossing, Peabody Crossing and on into Mansonville. In her poem, McNeil writes with nostalgia of the train whistle – and of the noisy trappings of (George) Willard's last block mill located down the road from their farm. The train provided transport not only for the tourist, but also played an integral role in the early commerce of this place by doing what trains still do – move goods to market!

Once important in shoe-making, wood last blocks have long since been replaced by plastic and other materials. Though increasingly rare and difficult to source, the close grain of Canadian rock maple and beech make them the woods of choice for the age old profession of a hand making shoes by stretching and tacking leather over a foot formed 'last'.



Shoe-making factory at McNeil's Crossing, 1907

Photo Archives APPHA

Plate 89 of *Potton d'antan – Yesterdays of Potton* shows the Willard last block mill at McNeil's Crossing, on Traver Road, around 1907. Seventeen persons stand before the rough mill buildings, including what appear to be two young boys. One wonders if these youngsters were employees of the mill?

Service on the OMR line from Mansonville to Eastman officially stopped on April 1st, 1936. The OMR train whistle echoing through the hamlets of the Missisquoi is now but a faded memory.

Did Peggy McNeil know the history of Aunt Becky's namesake? Possibly, since in her poem, she also speaks of a long held legend that a treasure is buried somewhere on Becky's Mountain. Truth or fiction? According to Quebec historian Marcel Trudel: "*Legends are the memory of people, and there is often a kernel of truth within.*"

She mentions the Missisquoi winding its way to Mansonville, to Rag's feed mill (a name which we have yet to track down!), thence to Lake Champlain. She and her sister may have paddled along this particularly lovely part of the Missisquoi shown from the Traver Road Bridge in 2017, or at the very least they could have taken many a cooling swim there!



Missisquoi Nord River

Photo from Gérard Leduc, 2017

And now a word about the winter scene picture depicted beneath the poem in its original publication in Volume 4 of *Yesterdays of Brome County*.

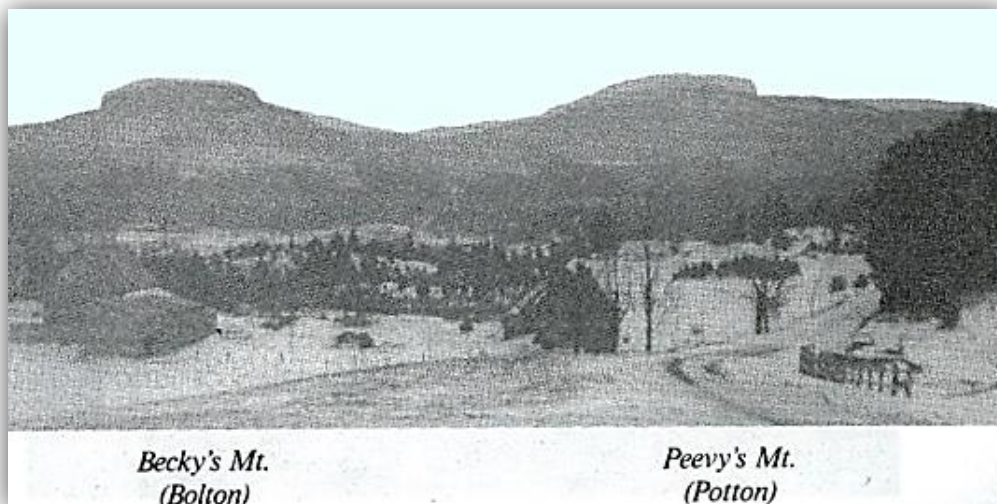


Photo Brome County Historical Society, 1980

This vintage picture of Becky and Peavey Mountains, was taken from Route 243 South, entering South Bolton. In the foreground to the left is the former Coates farm, to the southeast of which Russell Coates eventually built a business called Perma Crete, now closed, which specialised in the manufacture of cast concrete structures.

Peavey Mountain receives its names from early settler Joshua Peavey, one of Nicholas Austin's associates.

Bibliography

- The history of the Holland & Traver families is extracted from Volume II of Ernest Taylor's *History of Brome County, Quebec*, published by John Lovell & Son, Limited, 1937 (p. 145-46 and 297).