

## The Barrington Beggars

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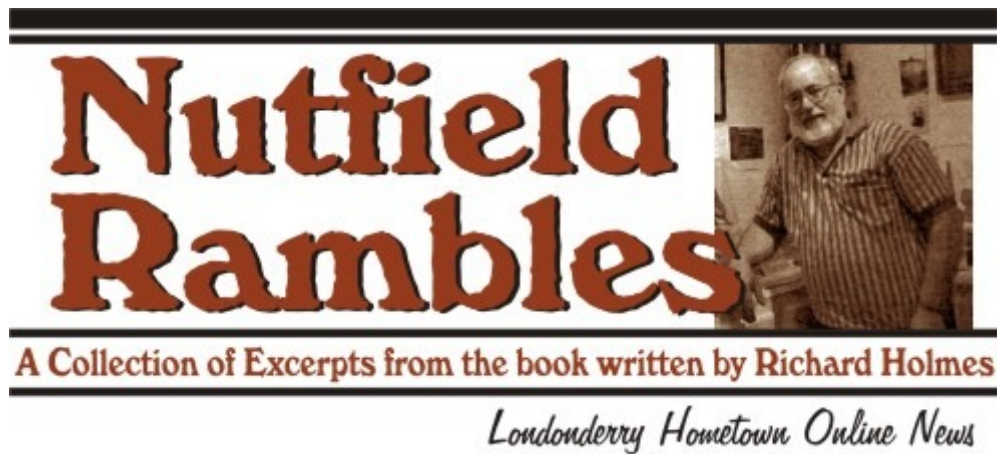
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# The Barrington Beggars

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Barrington is by all accounts a nice little town which is less than an hour's drive from Derry. It was settled in 1722, the same year Nutfield was incorporated as the town of Londonderry. Its early settlers raised flax as did our first inhabitants.

Although the Nutfield towns have always had a sterling reputation for honesty, such was not the case with Barrington. During the first half of the nineteenth century, that town was known as the home to a wandering tribe of vagabonds called the Barrington Beggars. Most of these vagrants bore the surname Leathers. Their existence is even the topic of a short story by John Greenleaf Whittier.

No one really knows the origin of the Barrington Beggars. They were described as having "dark, piercing eyes and Asiatic countenances," indicating to some that they were of Gypsy origin. This ethnic background seems unlikely as the Leathers family first appeared in America in 1667. The family was and is a credit to the New World producing generation after generation of hardworking honest citizens.

There was, though, the black sheep branch of Leatherses who settled in the

Granite State during the mid-seventeenth century. Regrettably, this is the side of the family that has gained the most notoriety and soiled the window through which we view all members of the Leathers family.



In our state they settled in Barrington, where they lived on a sandy plain by a lake in the center of a desolate pine barren. Most locals called this area Leathers City. Here they dwelled in a cluster of about thirty small shacks, having little contact with the rest of this farming community. They all appeared to be related in some way and all shared the family name Leathers somewhere in their family tree. They were probably a matriarchal society, with their leader being an old hag named Patricia Leathers.

It was believed by most outsiders that all members of the Leathers tribe in Barrington shared an aversion to work and instead preferred to avail themselves of the fruits of other people's labor. They reportedly had in common a love of the outdoor life and of singing. In their defense, it must be said that many Barrington Leatherses lived off honest labor. A number of the family members went door-to-door selling hand-made split-ash baskets or skillfully woven coverlets. Other Leatherses were into fortune-telling.

Regretfully, the best-remembered family members were the dishonest Leathers who were beggars specializing in faking debilitating conditions. They also had reputation for stealing and other similar crimes. No man's chickens were considered truly safe while the Barrington Beggars were in town! These merchants of hokum would range through southern New Hampshire and northern Massachusetts soliciting charity at isolated farmhouses. Whittier in a shot story describes a dark, rainy evening when he was surprised by a visit from Stephen Leathers. "I rise and open the door. A tall shambling, loose-jointed figure; a pinched, shrewd face, sun-brown and wind-dried; small, quick-winking black eyes-there he stands, the water dripping from his pulpy hat and ragged elbows."

The silent night visitors gave Whittier a legal-looking document signed by the Italian council in Boston. It purported that the man was "Pietro Frugoni, a mute who had been shipwrecked off New England's coast" and needed the "alms of all charitable Christian persons." Whittier immediately told the man his name was actually Stephen Leathers and then asked him "the news from old Barrington."

With that, the startled beggar knew his cover was blown and admitted his true identity. Leathers confided to the poet that he was just trying to help the real Pietro Frugoni get some money so the man could get by. He further explained that the "poor furrier... couldn't make himself understood any more than a wild goose." With that fanciful tale, Mr. Leathers left the Whittier home in search of an easier piece of change.

Whittier knew well the identity of Stephen Leathers because of his past attempts to separate the poet from his hard-earned money. Sometimes the beggar wrapped himself in a blanket and claimed to be a Penobscot Indian who had lost the use of his hands while trapping to gather food in the frozen north for his starving family. Other times he appeared in the guise of a "farlorn father" of six small children whom a doctor had "pisened and crippled." Frequently he played an unfortunate man who was suffering from the palsy. His hands shook so hard, he could hardly take the charity offered to him.

A regular visit to Derry in the 1840s was Hopping Pat Leathers, "the wise woman of her tribe." She frequently traveled with her grandson. The boy had a "gift for preaching as well as for many other things not exactly compatible with holy orders." For a few coins he would exhort the sacred word but only after he wrapped a white handkerchief around his neck to appear more ecclesiastical. He often had on his shoulder a trained talking crow that Whittier described as a "shrewed, knavish-looking bird."

The grandmother was called "Hopping" Pat because of the peculiar gait with which she walked. She was never thought of as a thing of beauty. In truth she seemed to fit the classic description of an ugly old hag straight out of one of the Grimms' fairy tales. "Have an apple, my pretty!"

On one of her visits to Derry, she cased one of our village homes. Believing the man of the house was absent, she saw the chance to an easy charity handout from the wife and children. An easy mark!

As she approached the house, Hopping Pat distorted her features by appearing to be in unbelievable pain. She fell to the ground in convulsions. She moaned. She groaned. She rolled and tumbled around the front lawn. In the history of Derry, has there ever been a woman in this much agony? The children were terrified and crying hysterically. The mother was near panic for fear that the woman would die on her front lawn. This poor old saint had to be helped! In an act of Christian charity, the wife brought Pat Leathers into the comfort of her house.

The husband walked in just as Hopping Pat was nearing the climax of her performance. Instantly he recognized her to be the leader of the Barrington Beggars. Quickly he thought of a plan to drive her away.

The man called to friend who was walking by and loudly addressed him as "Doctor." He inquired of the faux physician as to the best way to treat such a sick woman. His friend caught on to what was going on and played along. The "doctor" gave an immediate diagnosis and said she must be "blistered" with his "largest cupa"

Blistering was a way of ridding the body of bad humor by drawing blood from the afflicted patient. Cuts were made on the skin and then covered with a heated glass cup (cupa). As the cup cooled, a vacuum was created. Blood filled the cup and a blister formed. The "doctor further prescribed a purgative agent be given her to drink." The ingredients of the cure she was to chug-a-lug were "salt, senna, and rhubarb." Immediately upon hearing this prescription, Hopping Pat miraculously regained control of her faculties. "Looking neither right nor left," she ran out of the house, shaking her fist at the two men and "hurling at them her loudest curses with all the glibness her voluble tongue was capable of projecting."

After the mid-nineteenth century, nothing more was reported of the Barrington Beggars. Did they give up their wicked, wicked ways? Did they just move out of New Hampshire-maybe to that white-marble city on the Virginia-Maryland border? It is recorded that on June 18, 1844, a dozen of the Leathers family of Barrington changed their names. The various tribe members answered to the names Wilson, Tyler, or Banks. By 1900, the Leathers family had become extinct in Barrington.

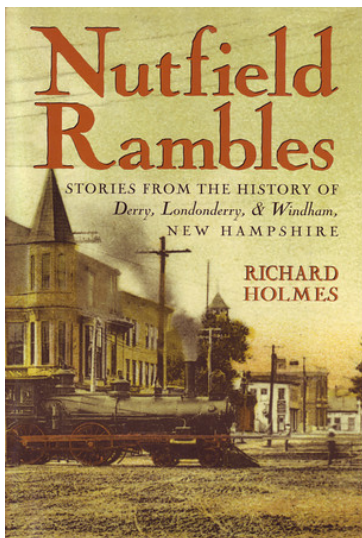
While researching this article, I accidentally stumbled upon the possibility of a connection between the Leathers family and a distinguished American politician. A Manchester, N.H. newspaper in 1867 said Henry Wilson was "true to his gypsy origin" and referred to him as "Henry Leathers." Such a Leathers-Wilson link is unrecorded in any biography of Henry Wilson.

Henry Wilson (1812-1875) was vice president of the United States under President Grant. He had been born in Farmington, NH as Jeremiah Jones Colbath. This eastern New Hampshire town is a near neighbor to Barrington. In 1833, he changed his name to Henry Wilson. There has never been a commonly agreed upon explanation as to why he switched names. Is it possible that the Colbaths

were related to the Leathers clan? Did Henry change his name to distance himself from the reputations of his disreputable cousins? Much more research needs to be done on the origins of Henry Wilson's name.

There were bands of true Gypsies who occasionally visited the Derry area. Their appearances are recorded during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As late as 1950, the police would escort them out of town as soon as their presence became known. Their local unsavory reputation was probably based more on a fear of the unknown than on their being an actual threat to the safety, morals, and well-being of the community.

In July 1902 a Gypsy caravan drove into Derry and remained here for three days. Their wagon-homes were very ornate and colorful and hard not to notice in our staid New Hampshire town. They camped overnight in East Derry before moving to Derry Village. While they were here, their camp was visited by large numbers of locals during the day. Some came to the Gypsies to buy small baskets of sweet grass, others to have their fortune told, but most visited because they were curious about their vagabond way of life. Several farmers bought or swapped horses with the Gypsy men. The Gypsies would however, not do any business on Sunday because of their religious considerations. Although there were no crime wave in Derry because of their visit, the Derry selectmen ordered them to leave town. The local newspaper characterized the Gypsies as a "ragged, desperate lot."



*This excerpt is from "Nutfield Rambles," Richard Holmes' fifth published piece on local history. Richard was born, raised and attended school throughout New Hampshire. He received his Bachelor's Degree in Education from Keene State College and his Master's Degree in History from Rivier College. In 2003 he founded the Derry Museum of History. In 2007 Richard Holmes received an Award of Merit from the American Association for State and Local History. This is the most prestigious recognition one can receive for the preservation and interpretation of state and local history. Richard has also been a columnist for the*

*Derry News, the Lawrence Eagle Tribune, Nutfield News, and the Manchester Union Leader.*

*Leave Richard a comment on the story. Copies of his book are still available at the Derry Public Library.*

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