

## 14 - Blue Hills History - Brookwood Farm

### The history:

We tend to think of the area around the Blue Hills as “typical suburban Boston.” But, of course, it hasn’t always been such. In 1620 it was home to the Massachusetts tribe. In 1720 it was rural “English” land. In 1820 it was starting to be populated. Things were building up along what we call Rt 138, but what was then just called “Taunton Road.” But off the main road most places were still farms.



This 1831 Canton Map<sup>[i]</sup> shows the area:

Note Blue Hill and Little Blue Hill to orient yourself. Taunton Road is what we know as Washington St/Rt. 138. It shows I. Davenport owning the corner lot, then N. Farrington and last E. Hunt. Based on the Milton Line at the edge, it appears that E. Hunt would have owned the ‘Brookwood Farm’ property in 1831. I have found no information on him, and don’t know who first called the farm “Brookwood Farm.”

In 1857 Bernard Clinton purchased the property.<sup>[ii]</sup> I don’t have any other information on him either.

Later Brookwood Farm was owned by General Samuel Parker<sup>[iii]</sup>. You have probably never heard of him, but if you had been around 100 years ago his name would have been more familiar. He was involved in suppressing the 1919 Boston Police Strike. Without getting *too far* off track, the short story is the Boston Police, who had many valid concerns about low pay, long hours, etc. wanted to join the AFL (American Federation of Labor) union. The Police Commissioner refused to negotiate with them, and suspended some for joining the union. At that point the police voted 1134 to 2 to go on strike. At the Mayor’s request Governor Calvin Coolidge sent in 5000 troops under the command of Brig. Gen. Samuel D. Parker to patrol the city. The Police Commissioner ended up firing all of the police and hiring new recruits who, ironically, were paid more than the original officers and that they replaced. They also received more vacation time and had their uniform costs covered by the department, while the original officers had been paying for their own uniforms.<sup>[iv]</sup>

The last private owner of Brookwood Farm was Henry Saltonstall Howe who was an insurance executive. He bought the property in 1951, converted the old hunting lodge into the large house located at the end of the driveway, and lived there as a gentleman farmer until his death in 1994.

While he was alive Brookwood farm had sheep and cattle. <sup>[v]</sup> He left the property to the state, so that it could be preserved.

Brookwood Farm was registered in the National Register of Historic Places on 9/25/1980.

#### Buildings:



The small Cape style home located right on Blue Hill River Road was built in 1800.

The North Bennet Street School (NBSS) Restoration Carpentry Program has done extensive work restoring this building.

#### Main house

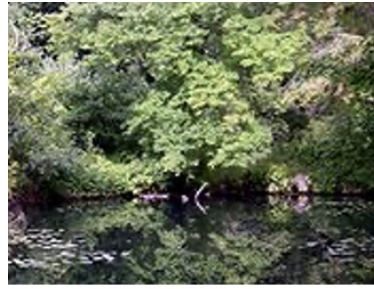


After Brookwood Farm came into the possession of the State, this property was considered as a potential Governor's mansion for the state.

#### The land



Maple lane in the fall



Upper pond



Lower pond

The farm is about 70 acres, which are a mix of woods, fields, gardens with three ponds. It is bounded on the south side by 'New' Route 128/Rt 93, and on the north edge by Blue Hill River Road Canton)/Hillside Street (Milton), which used to be the old Route 128. It is relatively flat, and much less hiked than some of the other portions of the Blue Hills. One day when I drove past a packed Houghton Pond lot there was only one car in the Brookwood lot when I got there. And I never did pass that person on the trails. [Note: The left field does contain some poison ivy. Watch your step.]

**'Old Barn':** The oldest building on the property is the 'Old Barn'. At one time it was thought that it was originally built c.1690-1720<sup>[vii]</sup>, however as we shall see below that turned out to be wrong.

After DCR took possession of Brookwood Farm there was an accident. Someone ran a tractor into the corner of the barn. When they investigated the damage, they realized that the timbers of the barn were hand hewn, which meant that it was quite old. One thing led to another, and it was believed that the barn was one of the oldest, if not *the* oldest 2 bay English style barn left in New England. Eventually the North Bennet Street School became involved in restoring the barn. One of the folks who was involved was Bill Rainford. Fortunately for you and I he has documented this restoration at:

<https://rainfordrestorations.com/tag/brookwood-farm/>

The NBSS class of 2009 and 2010 started the restoration by dismantling the barn, and cataloging all the pieces. Many had suffered from rot and needed replacement. So they set to work reproducing those parts. Below are some of the highlights from Bill's blog:







Gable end rafters being set in place



Dave and others working on the rafters and purlins



As a student Bill worked on some of the joists and sills for the floor system. He also helped cut some of the vertical gunstock posts. (Gunstock posts, difficult to see in the pictures, flare out at the top to provide space for all the complex joinery needed.) The classes after his continued working on making replacement parts, and milling new siding for the barn, then laid the stone foundation.

Eventually 5/18/12 there was a barn raising at Brookwood Farm, as the newly restored barn was again assembled. Bill was back and involved in this as well, so we have pictures of that barn raising. All photos from Bill's website:

<https://rainfordrestorations.com/tag/brookwood-farm/>

Later in the project, for the roof of the barn, Eastern White Pine shingles were riven and shaved with draw knives and planed with bench planes by first and second year NBSS Preservation Carpentry students before being installed on the roof of the barn.

America's oldest known house is the Fairbanks House in Dedham, just 5 miles from Brookwood Farm. The logs for it were cut in the winter of 1637 or 1638. How do we know that? Dendrochronology. OK 99.99% of you are asking, "*What the heck is Dendrochronology?*" Dendrochronology is the study of data from tree ring growth. Basically, every year a tree's growth varies. Variation results from the weather (rain, or lack thereof, sunshine, temperatures and other factors.) By looking at older trees that are being cut down and studying the varying width of their rings over the past years we can then look at wood that was cut in the past and match up the ring patterns and date that wood. Let's look at a **very** simplified example: Let's assume all seasons produce either (W)ide, (M)edium or (N)arrow growth rings. We have a tree and cut it down, and examine the rings for each year it was growing. Ok, 30+ years old...

We also have a beam from a barn of unknown age. This is a hand-hewn beam, and at places the bark is still on the corners of the beam. For this beam we find the following results:

By matching up the growth rings we can see it was cut down in the 9<sup>th</sup> year of our existing tree's life.

In the real-world things are obviously much more complex, but the concept is the same. And to get past the oldest trees being cut down now? You just match up to boards that overlap that earlier era. In our example, we now know the growth ring pattern back 12 years before the tree we just cut down.

The 'Old Barn' had originally been estimated to be from 1690-1720, based on its architecture. Many of the timbers were hand hewn, while others had been cut by an up and down saw, at a water powered sawmill. Most were of oak. The style matched the 1690-1720 period.

As part of restoring the 'Old Barn', the folks at Oxford Dendrochronology Laboratory in Oxfordshire, England were hired to analyze the age of the beams. Two of the main beams were dated, and it turned out they were cut around 1792, about 70-100 years later than originally thought. Why it was built to an earlier design style at that point is unknown. However, in the big picture, even 1792 was a long time ago, and makes the barn 228 years old.<sup>[viii]</sup>



When they started restoring the, at the time 30' x 20', barn it was determined that a section of it was a later addition. Everyone agreed to restore it to its original, 20' x 20', size.

The barn was also sitting on a quarried granite foundation, which (as we know from the last article) postdated the barn... meaning it had been moved onto that foundation. When they restored it, they built a proper c. 1792 fieldstone foundation for it.

Here is the 20' x 20' barn, restored, as it looks today.

### The present:

Some will know the Brookwood Farm main house as the site of Paul Brookes' great SEM/AMC "Map and Compass" course. It is also used by DCR for other functions, and it's where the first Friends of the Blue Hills Trail Maintenance Workshop was held. (Dexter and I, among others, were there for that. And while we are talking about Friends Trailwork, a special "*Shout Out*" to Bob Flagg, who persevered to get the FBH Trailwork group approved and up and running! The trails are *much* nicer because of his efforts!)



The garage is now used as a "Sugar House" during the maple season. Mass Audubon's Blue Hills Trailside Museum and the DCR join together for this 20-year tradition of making maple syrup. <sup>[ix]</sup> The pandemic interfered this year, hopefully life will have returned to normal by next spring, and you can join them for this event. <sup>[x]</sup>

## Brookwood Community Farm<sup>[xi]</sup>

Today Brookwood Farm serves as a Community Farm.... See <https://brookwoodcommunityfarm.org/> if you are interested. You can also support the Brookwood Farm CSA by buying a membership. Memberships help them donate a significant portion of their harvest to hunger relief organizations and allow them to bring produce to low-income urban farmer's markets.<sup>[xii]</sup>

The farm strives to restore underutilized farmland for agricultural purposes. They currently utilize two sites: Brookwood Farm in the Blue Hills Reservation and the Bradley Estate owned by the Trustees of Reservations, just across Rt. 93 on Rt 138. The Community Supported Agriculture Program has now grown to reach over 250 families.

Brookwood Community Farm is committed to sustainable farming and all crops are grown using organic principles.



Many years North Bennet Street School also builds a couple sheds at Brookwood farm, both stick framed and post and beam construction. So, if you are interested in a shed contact them. 😊

I hope you've found this interesting and educational!

Until next time,

Bob Vogel

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<sup>[i]</sup> <http://www.canton.org/maps/1831b.htm>



[ii] <https://www.thecantoncitizen.com/2012/08/01/true-tales-brookwood-barn/>

[iii] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brookwood\\_Farm](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brookwood_Farm)

[iv] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boston\\_Police\\_Strike](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boston_Police_Strike)

[v] <https://friendsofthebluehills.org/brookwood-farm-transcript/>

[vi] <https://www.pinterest.ie/pin/137711701082934069/visual-search/?x=16&y=12&w=530&h=397>

[vii] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old\\_Barn\\_\(Canton,\\_Massachusetts\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_Barn_(Canton,_Massachusetts))

[viii] <https://www.thecantoncitizen.com/2012/08/01/true-tales-brookwood-barn/>

[ix]

<https://canton.wickedlocal.com/news/20190301/tap-into-cantons-brookwood-farm-during-maple-syrup-season>

[x] <http://miltontoday.net/maple-sugar-days-at-brookwood-farm>

[xi] <https://brookwoodcommunityfarm.org/about/>

[xii]

<https://brookwood-community-farm.myshopify.com/collections/membership/products/2019-brookwood-membership>