

Roger Williams University

DOCS@RWU

Documentation

September 2022

Houghton-Sprague House: History of the Town of Harvard, Massachusetts, 1732 - 1893

Follow this and additional works at: https://docs.rwu.edu/baker_documentation



Part of the [Historic Preservation and Conservation Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

"Houghton-Sprague House: History of the Town of Harvard, Massachusetts, 1732 - 1893" (2022).
Documentation. 160.
https://docs.rwu.edu/baker_documentation/160

This Documentation is brought to you for free and open access by DOCS@RWU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Documentation by an authorized administrator of DOCS@RWU. For more information, please contact mwu@rwu.edu.



*Your Obedt. Servt.
W. Hapgood.*

HISTORY

OF THE

TOWN OF HARVARD

MASSACHUSETTS.

1732-1893.

BY

HENRY S. NOURSE, A. M.

HARVARD:

PRINTED FOR WARREN HAPGOOD.

1894.

On the thirtieth of October, 1805, while gathering walnuts upon his intervale, he fell from a tree and so paralyzed his spinal column that his lower limbs were ever after totally useless. Though a dead man below the waist, his will-power was as alive as ever, and his arms and hands retained their strength unimpaired. He learned and practiced the art of shoemaking, and by means of cords and pulleys attached to the ceiling of his room could move himself within certain limits at pleasure. He survived his fall over twenty-five years, dying March 17, 1831, at the age of seventy-four.

It was in this Atherton house that, during the Revolution, two paroled British officers were for some time quartered. The land about it formed a part of Major Simon Willard's one hundred and ninety-six acres which was called ye Great Farm at Still River."

Ensign Joseph Atherton, oldest son of Joshua, married Hannah, the daughter of Samuel Rogers, in 1720, and received land from his father described as "where I the said Joshua Atherton formerly lived.....bounded west on the river." The deed also mentions "the cellar where the old house stood." Joseph died in 1735, leaving sons Oliver and Joseph, and daughters Mary, Elizabeth, Hannah and Patience. His homestead was then described as one hundred and twenty-seven acres, bounded west by the river, and having upon it his own residence and an "old house called Hoult's." The venerable dwelling under a noble elm, on the brow of the hill east from the Still River station, and now the home of Oliver H. and Galen Atherton, probably covers the site of one of the old houses, while the cellar of the other, a short distance southward across the county road, was filled up many years ago. In the present house Oliver Atherton kept a well-known inn in Revolutionary days.

Between the homesteads of John Willard and Joshua Atherton was that of Joseph and Elizabeth (Wilder) Hutchins, which he bought A. D. 1700, of Benjamin, son of Major Simon Willard, it being the southernmost portion of the Major's Still River farm. Joseph and Elizabeth died within our months, in 1757, and probably childless, for they willed their whole estate to a "kinsman," Joshua Church, even in-

cluding their "negro, Neptune." The farm was soon after purchased by Samuel Haskell, whose widow sold it to Joseph Atherton. Samuel Dudley, in 1797, bought the estate of the Atherton heirs and built the house now owned by Mrs. Jonathan W. Lawrence. The ancient dwelling occupied by Thomas Atherton Bigelow was probably the house of Joseph Hutchins, and if so, is nearly two hundred years old.

No pioneer's home now standing in the town offers more of interest to the antiquary than the James Houghton garrison house, which has been handed down from father to son through five generations, with only those alterations and additions which the comfort and accommodation of successive families made imperative. No homestead in Harvard has remained thus permanently in the same family. The capacious farm-house, lovingly cared for by the present owner, Edward Warren Houghton, is obviously the sum of at least three structures, all ancient; the western end being the original garrison house, built between 1692 and 1704.

The first chimney was of stone, the huge foundation of which yet fills half the cellar. This was very early replaced by the present many-flued brick pile, with its eight fire-places, oven, cupboard niches, and a smoke closet in which there is room enough to hang for curing the hams and shoulders of a score of swine. Many of the little windows, though the sash are modern, remain at nearly double the height from the floor which is now thought convenient, and the walls below and around them are filled in solidly with brick and stone, so as to be completely bullet-proof. The huge oaken beams and plates, from twelve to fourteen inches square, show for a third of their thickness below the lath and plaster of the ceiling. It became necessary to remove the paneled wainscot during some renovations. It was unpainted of the softest pine in which neither knot nor shake nor sap could be found, fastened with wooden pins and faultless in workmanship. It was doubtless the handiwork of the owner and builder of the house, who was a carpenter, and the portions of it preserved afford evidence of his practiced skill. Wherever iron was used in any part of the construction, even in fastening the rived clapboards, it was the wrought work of the blacksmith.

THE LAST OF THE QUAREL GLASS
DIAMOND CASSEMENT WINDOWS WERE
SAID TO HAVE BEEN SOLD OFF BY
THE SPRAGUES !!

The successive occupants of this interesting homestead have been: 1, the builder of the garrison, James Houghton, the son of Ralph and Jane. His will was proved September 11, 1711. 2, Thomas Houghton, the third son of James, who married Mariah Moore, December 2, 1725, had one son, Elijah, and died at the age of sixty-eight, April 10, 1764. His widow survived him over twenty-six years. 3, Elijah, married Mercy Whitney and had eleven children, the oldest, Thomas, coming into possession of the house. 4, Thomas, by his wife Betsy White, had thirteen children, of whom (5) Cephas retained the homestead, and his son is the present owner. The next home eastward, now owned by John Sprague, was that of Elijah Houghton, Jr., sold to Abraham Lawrence in 1809.

Five or six years before the birth of Harvard, Stephen and Abigail Houghton set up their roof-tree beside the highway opposite where Benjamin K. Barnard now lives. In 1743 Benjamin Barnard bought Houghton's house and lands, and his descendants have ever since occupied the place. The present dwelling is the third built here.

The guests at the first Harvard ordination in 1733 were entertained at the house of Joseph Willard, son of the first Henry. This dwelling stands in excellent preservation, in North Still River, at the junction of the Groton and Harvard roads, being now the home of Reverend John B. Willard and his sisters. They are direct descendants of the first owner. The roof at the rear originally sloped to a single story, and other alterations have given the house a somewhat modern appearance. In making these changes it was found that the outer walls were lined with brick laid in clay; and upon beams and joist were several memoranda dated between 1730 and 1740, and one or more dates of the previous century. The south-west room was known as the "dower room," being fitted for the residence of the dowager with a special stairway to cellar, and oven and closet conveniences. This feature was quite usual in old country houses. The mansion, if a new one when Joseph and Elizabeth Willard began house-keeping, was built about 1712; but there is some reason to believe that it dates from about 1730, though very probably

in part a reconstruction from the materials, or built upon the site, of an older edifice.

Beside the highway about midway between Still River and Harvard Centre, on a hill-sheltered slope facing the south, there stood, until 1881, a large and venerable dwelling, removed by Absalom B. Gale when he built the house which is his present home. The main part of the old structure now stands at the eastern end of the barn, shorn of the rear portion which was but one storied. In the huge chimney demolished were bricks in which figures were plainly impressed, but these give no clue to its age or builder. It no doubt dates from 1744, when Jeremiah Foster made a home here. He sold to John Willard in 1750. Robert Holland kept an inn here, having bought the place of Willard, and the farm has had many owners since.

A somewhat older building is concealed under the modern exterior of the residence next to Mr. Gale's, on the west. In 1743, Benjamin Nurse transferred to Richard Harris and Jeremiah Foster, of Ipswich, a farm of about one hundred and twenty acres here, and in the division of this between them, Foster took the eastern half, and Harris the western, with the buildings. Richard Harris is said to have come from the seaside to the hills of Worcester County to keep his sons from becoming sailors. He was a weaver by trade. He died in 1776, and his heirs near the close of the century sold house and lands to Oliver Hill. Benjamin Nurse was a carpenter from Reading, and bought this estate shortly after the incorporation of Harvard, from Jonathan Houghton and Ebenezer Wilder of Lancaster. He first built here.

A large house at the south-west corner of the town's common, one of the most weather-beaten in appearance in Harvard, was reconstructed to form the mansion in which Dr. Herbert B. Royal now lives. It dated from the earliest years of John Seccomb's ministry, when it was the home of John and Phebe Atherton. Here he was a licensed inn-keeper in 1734. He died in 1755, and Richard Harris, Jr., a carpenter who married his daughter Lydia, succeeded him. Silas Parkhurst, a tanner from Pepperell, bought the place in 1772, from the Atherton heirs, and in Revolutionary times kept a tavern