

A History of Bates Land as told by Natica Bates

After the 35th Anniversary Get Together some of you asked me if I would write up a bit of the story of my mother, Mrs. Bates, and Puritan Hill Farm, especially the Indian Hill Area.

She and my father, Oric Bates, were married in June of 1913. Five years later he joined the Army and died at Fort Zachary Taylor in October of 1918 during the flu epidemic. Because of the shortage of trained nurses my mother, though pregnant and not a nurse, had gone down to care for him (in those days properly chaperoned by an elderly relative of course!) During the short time they were married he and my mother had bought from Mrs. William Peabody the 80 acres which made up Puritan Hill Farm as we knew it. It consisted of about 40 acres that sloped down the side of Indian Hill to a flatter meadow and swamp through which ran Cady and James Brooks joining just a few feet from Donald Priest's land and Fannie Wood's remaining Glen Echo building.

This piece was separated by the Old Ayer Rd. from another 40 acres on which, today, stand the house, the cottage and the bam. Its other borders were Donald Priest's orchard, the railroad track and Peabody St. When my parents bought the place my father was in the Archaeology Department at Harvard University (in, coincidentally, the Peabody Museum!) He and my mother wanted a place with easy access to a railroad station over which trains would run stopping in Cambridge. At that time passenger trains ran through Groton making a stop before continuing to Ayer where passengers could catch a Boston train that made a Cambridge stop. This, added to the fact that some of their friends already lived there, persuaded them that Groton would be a good place for them. They bought the place after a fire, started by hot coals from the railroad engine, spread across dry hayland, burned the house and barns and, most tragically, took the life of Will Woods as he tried to rescue the cows trapped in the bam.

The first thing my parents did was build a cottage right on the corner of land made where the Old Ayer Rd. and Peabody St. join. There, for some years it stood, lighted, at first by candles and kerosene lamps, heated by fireplaces and a coal cook-stove and furnished with water pumped by hand into the cistern in the attic. Water was heated by running through a pipe that lined the firebox of the stove. Once heated it was stored in a 30 gallon copper boiler. There was no telephone in those early years; for that, when needed, we were hospitably welcomed to the Durlbut's. Short as the time was that they had together, my parents worked hard on their new home. They planted a cutleaf weeping birch near the house and with the help of Malcolm MacGregor, they planted a row of white pine trees along Old Ayer Rd. near their boundary with Donald Priest. The two families shared their "newcomer" status; Malcolm MacGregor and his wife having just moved into their place further down the road when they came from Prince Edward Island to work for James Bailey, Donald Priest's predecessor.

The two men also worked together on the fencing across the road adjacent to the Durlbut place and Mr. Durlbut's cows were often turned out in that field and Mother took me over there to see my first newborn large animal!

Alas! My parents' long term plans were cut short by my father's death, but for my mother Puritan Hill was always "their home", the place to which we came from Boston for the winter and spring holidays

and the place where on the foundations of the old Peabody Farm, Mother built the house in which she was to live for nearly sixty years until her death. She had the original cottage moved up to the site and connected it to the new house by two sheds separated by a garage. The cottage then became the home of the caretakers..

The house and the grounds were designed by Constance Peters and Elizabeth Pattee, teachers at the Lowthorpe School. Faced with the variations in level caused by the nature of terrain and the bam cellar hole, they very cleverly, at the last minute, planned the downstairs on three separate levels connected by little flights of stairs. The second floor was the same to allow for the height of the rooms below, imaginative and charming. From the beginning Mother called the hill where the original house had stood, "Puritan Hill" because of Indian Hill opposite and all the old tales about Puritans and Indians. She always kept alive for us, never erasing from her heart or ours the tales of the few years she had on the place with my father, and the story of Will Wood's sacrifice and of his family.

She always loved Indian Hill, walking up there with picnic baskets after splashing across the brooks; gathering blueberries for her wonderful highbush blueberry jam; trudging up in the snow to look at the village, the Groton School Chapel tower and Mount Wachusett, all easily seen in those days before so many trees had grown to such a size. She rode up there, too, in the days when we had horses, going down the road to the present entrance, crossing on the bridge over James Brook, riding along the edge of the swamp and, until the bridge was built, jumping Cady Brook.

By then the W.P.A. had widened and deepened James Brook. The muskrats were devastated; the horses learned to jump instead of wading; and we fished out the little puppies who tried to cross on their own, bravely jumping but unable to climb the steep bank on the other side, until, what with one thing and another, the "new" brook became a part of Indian Hill life.

So it was that I found myself with George and Mr. MacGregor learning how to put down a galvanized metal pipe packed in carefully graded stone. First we put in large boulders filling the spaces between them with rocks; the spaces between the rocks with coarse gravel and finally topping it off with soil seeded with hay seed. A Bridge over Cady Brook, a bridge that lasted nearly fifty years! So you can see that it was natural, when the Groton Conservation Trust was formed, she thought immediately of giving them Indian Hill to preserve for its rightful owners, the People of Groton, and giving them the opportunities she had so long enjoyed: the chance to wander about, pick berries and view the world. I can still see her followed by two of her favorite dogs, a little Scotty and a playful Collie, walking her place, enjoying it and making plans for its welfare. She would be pleased, I know, to see the care it gets and the pleasure it gives others today.