

Modern-Day Pioneers in Groton

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*In the year fifty-four they left for the west
Three pioneer families so full of zest.
Excitement ran high when in Groton town
They found what they wanted and settled down.*

This is the way Martha C. Hill, a friend of the three families from Greater Boston, began the poem she dedicated to them at a party celebrating the 25th anniversary of year the families established their summer camp on Lowell Road. In 1991, two of the pioneers, Carolyn B. and Arnold P. G. Peterson, compiled a family memoir they called The 'Groton' Story, from which this article derives. This story is especially dear to me because I lived there myself, in the house the Petersons built, for a decade or so when I was married to one of the pioneer daughters, the late Susan Skinner Gordon.

Early in 1954, three families who had known each other as members of First Parish Unitarian Church of Newton found they shared the dream of finding vacation homes in the country with a pond nearby. Arnold and Carolyn Peterson, from Weston, and John and Virginia ("Ginny") Taplin of West Newton, enlisted Joseph Skinner, also of West Newton and with a background in commercial real estate, to search for a likely site, since Joe and his wife, Jeanne, also yearned for a place in the country. Among them the three families had eleven children.

Joe located by April a tract three miles out of the town center off Lowell Road (Route 40), the land rising beyond the far side of a meadow. The convergence of two streams formed a swampy area eventually draining into Whitney's Pond (also called Cow Pond). Delighted by what they saw when they inspected Joe's "find" in rural Groton, the three families purchased 102.6 acres of land on June 14 from Cal (Caroline) Roberts, who lived across the street with her husband, Rex, who a decade later would publish the book *Your Engineered House*. The land, fronting Lowell Road and Whitney Pond, extended back into the woods over glacial terrain of drumlins and eskers all the way to the edge of the Mountain Lakes development.

The families built an access road from Lowell Road and a culvert over the brook that formed a first swimming hole. Joe himself suggested a spot for a well that proved a fine source of drinking water. Their first shelter was a large screened-in structure built by Rex Roberts and called the Pavilion, an open-air affair with a large common room with fireplace and three small rooms off to the sides, one for each family. Amenities included water piped in from the well, an ice box, and a wood-burning stove. Later would come storm windows and electricity.

Cherishing privacy, each family soon created a permanent camp site on which to raise tents. Joe had envisioned a pond situated on the low land through which the combined streams ran. The families hired Winthrop (Win) Parker of Ayer to scoop away the swampy, muddy ground down to a gravel base. Piled-up mud formed the pond's extensive side banks and was fashioned into an earthen dam at the end closest to Whitney Pond--an undertaking that would surely not meet wetlands regulations today but was highly successful then. Loads of sand brought in formed a

suitable beach for this new swimming and boating area. They called the pond Skitapet, a name fashioned from the opening letters of the families' last names—Skinner, Taplin, and Peterson.

Living Close to Nature

By 1960 each family had built their own vacation home, sturdy enough to live in year-round. They divided the land up so that each had a 30-acre section and shared in common a fourth tract next to Lowell Road including the meadow,

The Skinners, first to build, chose the hill overlooking both Whitney and Skitapet ponds. They expanded the house as occasion arose, adding also a substantial barn, chicken house, and other outbuildings and carving out a lower pasture for cattle and horses and an upper pasture for sheep. The Taplins constructed a house perched atop a hog-back directly off Lowell Road, from which they could also look down on both ponds. Below the house, on the Skitapet shore, they added a tennis court and bath house. John's business in the Boston area meant that their enjoyment of this spot was mostly on the weekends. The Petersons had a house constructed on a rise above the far shore of Skitapet, in between the Skinner house and the Taplin house (see drawing).

In 1975 the Skinners sold their home in West Newton and the Petersons their place in Weston and the two families moved fulltime to Groton. Carolyn worked in the Children's Room at Groton Public Library. Joe over time contributed much to Groton zoning and planning, its drinking water resources, and the workings of the Groton Conservation Trust.

In May 1971 Ginny Taplin organized the first "Groton Bird-In" and, except for the year 1980, this was an annual event for family and invited guests each May until 1983. That first year, according to the report, the group sighted 46 varieties of birds. The three families also identified and listed 86 varieties of wildflowers, 37 types of trees and shrubs, and 6 types of ferns.

Changes in the Offing

But people got older, moved away, died. In December 1979 the Petersons moved to Bainbridge Island in Washington State. Susan Skinner and her son, Bela, moved into the former Peterson house, where I joined them in 1984.

In 1983 Jeanne and Joe Skinner moved to a new home in the former upper pasture and sold their house on the hill below. Meanwhile, in 1982 they had purchased a small house on Station Avenue in Groton Center that they had remodeled for use as a winter home. Troubled by suddenly appearing and fast-moving cancer, Joe died there in December 1985, an event the Petersons spoke of as "the saddest change in the community." In 1987 Jeanne sold the house in the upper pasture.

As traveling back and forth between West Newton and Groton became more difficult, the Taplins sold their house on Lowell Road in 1994. Finally, with the sale of the former Peterson (now Gordon) house in January 1998, 44 years after the summer adventure began, the last connection with the founding families was severed.

Cherished Memories

What was it like to live in the woods in Groton in the 50s and 60s and 70s and 80s? The Petersons recorded many happy memories in their memoir. Jeanne Skinner loved "sharing and observing the richness of our land with our naturalist, Alan [Peterson]." Helen Taplin remembered "going barefoot all the time no matter what the terrain." Rick Skinner spoke of the "mysterious places in

the woods” he liked to explore. His twin sister Susan remembered “driving the old faded Chevy step-side pickup truck through the woods with Rick.” Janet Peterson wrote, “I remember how days had no beginning and no end. There was a feeling of endless hours to spend daydreaming, pretending, and working.”

In concluding the memoir, the Petersons said, “Some things haven’t changed. Lady slippers still grow in the woods in the spring. Cardinal flowers bloom in the brook by the culvert. Blueberries, high and low bush, can be picked in the summer, Fish swim in the pond. Turtles sun themselves on the logs. Skinny dipping is possible for those who choose. We remember the wonderful times we spent around the pond, in the woods, by a camp fire, on the beach, at the pavilion, or on the meadow with our life-long friends.”

A Lasting Legacy

The original 17 pioneers have moved on, but they left a permanent legacy to the people of Groton, thanks to generous gifts of conservation land from both the Taplins and the Skinners, more than 250 acres in all. Over the years both John Taplin and Joe Skinner purchased land beyond the original 102 acres and have donated it, in several parcels, to the Groton Conservation Trust. Joe and Jeanne Skinner donated 51 acres they called Skitapet Conservation Land as a tribute to the three pioneer families. After Joe died in 1985, John and Ginny Taplin donated 128 acres of woodlands to be known as Skinner Forest in Joe’s memory. The Taplins also contributed land to the Lost Lake Recreation Area, the Duck Pond Conservation Area, and the Whitney Well Site (under the jurisdiction of the Groton Water Commission), and established the Taplin Wildlife Sanctuary at the edge of Whitney Pond where it meets Lowell Road. The love of the land that brought the Skitapet pioneers to Groton in 1954 lives on through their generosity to the people of Groton, enabling others to get close to nature the way they and their families did fifty years ago.■

Caption:

[drawing of Peterson house]

The Peterson house evolved from a rough-finished camp to a year-round modern residence but never lost its “little house in the woods” look or feel.