



*Indications of Stow's immigrant past are all around us. The small chimney identifies this building on the shore of Lake Boon as a one-time sauna, a reminder of the arrival of Finnish immigrants in Stow in the early 20th Century.*

## 18. Immigrant Things

**R**egardless of whether Governor Simon Bradstreet picked the name Stow for our community because he had a friend with the name, it was in his mind in the first place as part of a list of “comely English names” to choose from. And our roads and landmarks still bear English names like Boon, Tuttle and Randall. Not to mention the comely Gates, Weatherbee, Whitney and Hale.

**Yet over its three centuries,** Stow's citizens have come from places as far afield as Canada, Scotland, Ireland, Russia, Denmark, Sweden and Finland.

Many came to work in textile mills in Gleasondale and Maynard and, once they could manage it, bought land in Stow. Names like Eriksen and Wanahatalo settled in alongside English ones like Wheeler and Whitman.

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*There may be nothing more American than apple pie, but the Clemens brothers, who founded orchards in Stow and Bolton around 1910, came from Ontario, Canada.*

*Still standing behind the Nason Street shopping area in Maynard are oil tanks that originally were part of a Finish co-op that operated a store and gas station on the site.*



**To be sure, the region's first occupants** were the Native Americans, whose presence dated back thousands of years. Before Matthew Boon's arrival in 1660, the region was occupied by members of the Nipmuk and Nashaway tribes.

At first, throughout Massachusetts, Indians and settlers lived peacefully. But as colonists' numbers and land needs grew, relations deteriorated. After King Philip's War (1675-76), Native Americans essentially disappeared from the region.

**Stow's citizenry during the 1700s** seems to have been resolutely English – not surprising in a colony born as a theocratic society of English dissidents. And Stow may have been a hotbed of rebellion in the 1770s, but the starting point for rebellion was protecting patriots' rights as English subjects.

**The following century was a different matter.** When Benjamin Gleason and the Dale brothers expanded the Rock Bottom woolen mills, many of their early employees were experienced textile workers from Scotland and England. And millwork brought Irish workers to Stow and Assabet Village as part of the great wave of immi-

gration to America that began in the 1850s.

In mid-century it was the Irish. In the later 1800s, Russians came – enough to build a Russian Orthodox church in Maynard, onion domes included. At the end of the century, the Danes came. Around World War I, it was the Finns.

**Germans, Norwegians and others** also found their way to Stow. One, Swedish immigrant Karl Zander, purchased property at Delaney Pond in 1904 and operated a prominent cider mill.

**Based on listings of births through the years,** Stow attracted a smorgasbord of nationalities in the 19th Century. The town report for 1856 indicates more babies born to immigrant parents than to native citizens: Of 42 babies, the parents of only 20 were American-born. For 1879, that report notes, of the 15 babies born in Stow, “10 were from American parents and 5 were from foreign parents.”

For 15 babies born in Stow in 1892, only two of the thirty parents were indicated as born in Stow itself. Two were born in New Brunswick, two in Nova Scotia, four in Russia, two in England and one in Norway. Also, one in South Acton.



*A younger Otto Geers posed in his U.S. Navy uniform during the Civil War.*

**O**ne Finnish immigrant had a head start on his fellow Scandinavians in finding a home in Stow.

**Otto Geers came to the United States** from his native Finland at age 27 and served in the U.S. Navy during and after the Civil War. He was simply on leave, touring the countryside outside Boston in 1877, when he stopped at the West Acton Road farm of widow Lydia Whitman to ask for a drink of water.

**A year later, he came back** with a wagonload of barrels for Lydia's apple crop. They married a few years later.

**Otto proved to be an excellent farmer** and became a prominent citizen in Stow. He died in 1912.

**And four in Denmark.** Denmark deserves its own mention. In the 1890s, Stow had a wave of Danish immigrants who formed a close-knit community. The Danes had their own social club, the Danish Brotherhood, with a hall on Hastings Street.

Notable in the Danish community was Peter Larsen, who bought a farm on Great Road in 1908 and located a blacksmith shop there. Already serving as a constable, he became the town's first police chief in 1928, running the force from his home.

**Two Danish brothers, Hans and John Eriksen,** settled on White Pond Road, where Hans operated a dairy farm. In the 1920s, he sold his cows and established a dairy on Great Road, buying his milk from Stow farmers and delivering throughout the area.

When Hans, Jr., took over the business, he moved it over the town line to Maynard – and changed Eriksen to the more Americanized Erikson. In the 1990s, the milk operation was closed, but the business continues today as Erikson's Ice Cream.

**Hans, Sr.'s brother John – also an Eriksen who became an Erikson** – was a carpenter (and also a constable under police chief Peter Larsen).

His son Henry started a poultry business off Great Road, raised livestock on land on Boxborough Road and acquired a feed-and-grain store in South Acton. An interest in aviation led to development of an airstrip – Erikson Field – on the Boxborough Road property.

Following his death in 1966, the airstrip was expanded to become Minute Man Air Field. The feed-and-grain store in South Acton is still operated as Erikson's Grain.

**Finland's turn came between 1910 and 1925,** as Finnish immigrants were drawn to the Maynard mills. For a period, it wasn't unusual to hear Finnish spoken on the sidewalks of Maynard.

Many Finns settled on Taylor Road, in the northwestern corner of Stow, and Finnish was widely spoken there. At least one Finnish-American Stow native who grew up on Taylor Road didn't learn English until he started school.

*Danish immigrant/farmer/blacksmith  
Peter Larsen served as a town constable  
before he became Stow's first police chief.*



**Many immigrants turned to farming.**

A number of Finnish and Danish-owned farms were located in the present Assabet River National Wildlife Refuge.

For a while. During World War II, their properties disappeared into the U.S. Government ammunition dump that preceded the wildlife refuge.

**Unlike the Danes, the Finns tended to separate** into like-minded factions – such as the “Red Finns,” the “White Finns,” the “Temperance Finns.”

Still, they opened thriving co-ops that sold oil, coal, grain, groceries and other essentials.

The Finns and their descendants have served many roles in Stow. Vallama Ojalehto was a town and school nurse whose good works became known as “Val’s Project.” Today, it continues as Warm Hearts.

To name only a few who have been involved in town government, Wayne Erkkinen served as a selectmen, John Makey as superintendent of streets, his wife Eila as town treasurer.

**Following World War II, a new kind of immigrant** appeared in Stow – the suburbanite. With post-war prosperity and mobility, Stow began a steady transition to a residential community drawing people from throughout the region.

*Center School was built on the site of Peter Larsen's Great Road farm and "the Stone Building" was a landmark for generations of kids. Historically, the building was "the Apple Barn," constructed by Larsen in the 1930s with extra-thick walls and a recessed floor to store his and other farmers' produce.*

*The structure was due to be razed in 2010 as part of Center School's expansion. Larsen's farmhouse was long ago moved next door, where it's still in use as a private residence.*

