



News from the Stow Historical Society

*A newsletter for all friends of Stow history.
Please feel free to pass it along to others who might be interested!*

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The Stow We See: *Three Centuries of Changes in the Land*



Today, Stow's ubiquitous rock walls provide picturesque forest scenes but they were built to delineate the boundaries of open fields.

It's easy for us to take the woodsy landscape we see around us as "the way Stow is supposed to be" – forests of towering pines and hardwoods surrounded by a pervasive undergrowth of saplings, criss-crossed by the scenic rock walls that run through the forests, all punctuated by occasional farmers' fields and pastures.

As the town's population grows and tracts of woods are cleared to make way for housing, we may lament the loss of the "the Natural Stow." Fortunately, the town, the Stow Conservation Trust and state and federal agencies have done an excellent job of preserving much of it as open space.

But the woodsy Stow we see around us has not always existed. Instead, our forests have gone through cycles of growth, clearing and regrowth. Land use and characteristics have evolved continually as residents have adapted to social, economic and technological changes.

To begin with, the Native Americans who inhabited New England first (in our region, mostly the Nipmucs), were farmers themselves who followed a pattern of clearing land for their villages and crops by gridling trees – stripping bark from around the trunks to kill them – and planting their beans, squashes and pumpkins amidst the decaying, still-standing trunks. They tended to work the land until its nutrients were depleted – a period of about 10 years – before moving on and repeating the process in a new location.

The result was more of a patchwork landscape of forests and cleared areas than unmitigated forest primeval. This was beneficial for a hunting culture (yep, it was the women who did the farming; the men hunted) as it fostered the presence of large game like deer, bears and turkeys. Plymouth and Concord were two Massachusetts towns erected on the sites of abandoned Native American villages. Although Stow has many Native American archeological sites, it appears that no villages existed within our town boundaries.

Then the English began coming in the 17th Century. For New Englanders through the mid-19th Century, an imperative was to "improve the land" – that is, to make it productive for farming. Wooded lands were cleared of

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trees, wetlands were drained or filled in to create farmlands. For that matter, many a stream was dammed to support mills – first saw and grist mills, eventually factories like the Gleasondale Mill at Rock Bottom.

The consequence was a changed landscape that we would be hard-pressed to recognize – a countryside that was 80 percent open field, with only 20 percent left as woodlots to provide the 40 to 50 cords of firewood needed to support a farm for a year (Concord’s Henry David Thoreau may be famed for “going to the woods” but the woods he went to were Ralph Waldo Emerson’s woodlot. The wildlife Thoreau knew were meadow denizens like foxes and groundhogs).

The nature of the farming that developed in Massachusetts was dictated by the relentless presence of pebble-to-boulder-size rocks left behind by the glaciers that once covered New England. Our iconic rock walls weren’t built so much to divide fields (split-rail was the initial choice for fences) as to put the rocks somewhere. Essentially, rock walls were rock-storage devices.

Because of the rockiness, a farmer could clear only so much land for growing crops. Four-fifths of the open land was left as pasture. One fifth, typically six to 12 acres, was cleared of as many rocks as possible and intensively cultivated, often with corn, hops, beans, squash and pumpkins. Early on, the livestock of choice were swine, which could be allowed to run loose to forage for roots and nuts, then be rounded up to be driven to market – “delivery on the hoof.”

Although cattle required more attention, most farmers came to keep at least a few of them because they provided meat, milk, cheese, leather and tallow for candles. Most of all, cattle constituted a reliable source of manure, essential for restoring nutrients to croplands.



At first glance, this photograph of Rock Bottom in the late 1870s is remarkable because of the view it gives of the Gleasondale of an earlier time (Rock Bottom’s name was changed to Gleasondale in 1898). At center, of course, is the Gleason Mill, and the Assabet River impoundment of the Gleasondale Dam. At left center, identified by its steeple, is the Rock Bottom Methodist Church, replaced by the existing church building in 1892. The large building second from left in the distance, with the single cupola, was the Humphrey Brigham Shoe Factory, destroyed by fire in 1878. The large barn at right, then owned by the Gleason family, is still in use.

What stands out is the openness of the landscape and the preponderance of rock walls that delineate it. Even in the 1870s, this section of Stow remained cleared of trees – and parts that are still used as pasture remain so today. The apple trees in the foreground reflect another fact of early New England farms: Before the age of commercial orchards, fruit trees tended to be relegated to less productive areas, such as rocky ground and along rock walls.



In a photo from the late 1800s, Mr. Beede, his farmhands and one poor horse make hay while the sun shines. Beede Farm is now the site of Honey Pot Hill Orchard.

As conditions changed, so did the nature of the landscape, especially following the Civil War. Massachusetts farms tended to be small, and they got smaller as estates were divided among successive generations. The opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 and the development of railroads meant that crops from larger, more productive farms in western states like New York and Ohio could be transported to cities like Boston cheaply and competitively.

Some farmers adapted to the competition by focusing on cattle, hay and dairy. By 1850, the Fitchburg railway line (which had a station at South Acton) was providing Boston with more than 14,000 quarts of milk from Central Massachusetts towns each day. By 1871, Stow counted 151 farms within its borders and had some 600 cows. By 1900, it had

fewer farms but 1,000 cows. Still, with the growth of cities, people across New England steadily left the country for factory jobs or to take up farming on more promising lands elsewhere.

As properties were abandoned, cleared lands began reverting back to forest. In open, sunny fields, white pines grew more aggressively than hardwoods, which were left behind as undergrowth. By the late 1800s, entrepreneurs realized they had uniform stands of white pine waiting to be harvested. The era from 1890 to 1920 saw more than 15 billion board feet of lumber harvested – and newly cleared landscapes.

With the pine forests gone, the hardwoods that had survived as undergrowth regrew as the beginnings of the forests we know today.

As the 20th Century began, some farmers shifted from cattle and began to develop commercial apple orchards. Apples had been a staple of New England farms many years, but those apples tended to be unpalatable fruit best-suited for hard cider, long the alcoholic drink of choice.

C.D. Fletcher and the Priest/Frost family were among earliest commercial orchardists in Stow. David Clemmens established Old Elm Farm, the orchard that was the forerunner to Shelburne Farm, around 1910. Clifford Martin established Honey Pot Hill Orchard in 1926. During the first half of 20th Century, more than a dozen commercial orchards were operating in Stow.

And some took yet another approach and focused on poultry. The beginning of today's Stow Shopping Center was the Crowell Farm Market, which began selling poultry and eggs at the Great Road site in the 1920s. In 1950, more than 30,000 chickens, turkeys and ducks were recorded as being raised in Stow.



Hay was such an important crop in Stow that from 1870-1930 the town maintained an immense hay scale in front of Town Hall, where farmers could drive their loaded wagons directly onto it for weighing before taking their loads to market.

But while dairy and poultry farming had strong runs, World War II proved a turning point.

Technology and post-war prosperity brought more change – especially increased mobility. On a national level, that meant goods could be shipped farther even more cheaply. On a local level, it meant people with automobiles could travel farther to live and work. In short, people could move to Stow to live. In 1950, our town counted 1,700 residents; by 2000, 5,900; by 2011, 6,700. The number of houses in Stow increased from 645 in 1950 to 2,300 in 2008.

At the same time, farms and orchards faced the familiar challenge of having to compete with other, more productive regions. Many properties were sold to accommodate housing. Fruit Acres, for example, once Stow’s largest commercial orchard, became the Birch Hill residential area.



In Stow, Wheeler’s Mill on Wheeler’s Pond, above, and Box Mill on Fletcher’s Pond both prospered during the white pine lumber boom between 1890 and 1920. In an age before the cardboard box, pine wood was an important commodity, used for boxes and other items ranging from toothpicks to boot heels.

Several Stow orchards, unable to compete with larger commercial operations, took a new tack – the “pick-your-own” concept that made apple-picking a recreational activity. It draws as many as 10,000 people to our town on some fall weekends. Orchard owners today admit they are in the entertainment business, which accounts for the hay rides, mazes and petting zoos that are features at several Stow orchards.

Other lands went still another way, as golfing became a mass-audience sport following World War II. Golf has long history in Stow, beginning in the 1920s with Assabet Lodge and Mapledale Golf Course – both nine-hole courses. Today, Assabet is the nine-hole Stowaway Golf Course but Mapledale is Stow Acres Country Club, with two 18-hole courses. With the addition of Butternut Golf Club and Wedgewood Pines Country Club, Stow offers golfers the opportunity to play 81 holes on 29,000 yards of fairway.

Still, many forested areas have simply continued to grow. And, we’re hardly at the end of the woody story. Some 75 years ago, the Hurricane of 1938 devastated a wide swatch of New England, passing right over Stow. Regionally, more than 600 people died. It caused much flooding and building destruction. It leveled 70 percent of some forests – heavy rains had weakened the soil surrounding myriads of root balls – taking down 270 million trees. It also created another lumber boom.

In Stow, the Works Progress Administration set up headquarters on West Acton Road to organize workers bused in from other areas. Many of the forests we see today are regrowths following the Hurricane of ’38.

With the continuing expansion of residential housing, the land is, in a way, returning to the patchwork pattern of woods and cleared spaces created by the Native Americans before the arrival of the English colonists in the 1600s.

