

presentation to AHS, Jan. 21, 1996

ON THE STREET WHERE YOU LIVE

One of the serendipitous results of having two expert procrastinators address this group is that neither you nor they have the vaguest idea what they will end up talking about. When our offering was subtitled "How and When Acton Streets Were Named," we realized that it left out the rather important facts that (a) the first streets weren't named at all and (b) the names changed...and so did the streets. When Brewster and I moved to the Conant family farm on Main Street, we got a letter from his Uncle Luther who had been born in the homestead some 90 years before. It was addressed to Elm Street. Proud of our new stationery with the correct address on it, we wrote him right back and mentioned tactfully that the street was no longer Elm. His next letter reached us, even though it was addressed to us on The Lowell Pike. He could have written to us on Centre Road too. All these designations for Main Street had been correct at various times.

A history of Acton streets and roads must begin at the beginning, when the roads were referred to by their destinations. Even before Acton's incorporation as a town in 1735, there were a few roads or ways in use. Concord had built one to Wheeler's mill in North Acton for example. It came from Concord and ended at the mill. Today's Wheeler Lane is just an extension of that early road. The main thoroughfares (if one can call a dirt track a thoroughfare) were throughways...meaning that they went through Acton to get where people were going...to Stow, Littleton, Harvard (town not college), or Lancaster. And that is how they were known. One of our favorite maps is Jabez Brown's 1794 map which shows Littleton Road (Great Road or 2A today) which was Concord's way to Littleton and "The Road from Littleton" which brought Littleton people from Littleton (through what became Central Street) to West Acton and on to South Acton. Over time, two other roads would be called Littleton Road or Littleton Street: Newtown Road, and Nagog Hill Road. Littleton wasn't the only destination with multiple roads leading to and from it. Going to and from Stow there was a Stow Road, an Old Stow Road, not to mention an Upper Stow Road and a Lower Stow Road. (Current day Parker and Independence, Liberty, and Stow.)

Once the town was incorporated and the meetinghouse was built, roads were developed to get to Sunday meeting. Remember, the meeting house was on Meeting House Hill (at today's Nagog Hill Road and Main Street). Hayward Road (today's Hayward Road. It was called many things between 1735 and today) was Sam Hayward's way to meeting. Of course it followed a slightly different path on its way to Meeting House Hill, crossing behind today's Town Hall on its way. Likewise, Hosmer Street was Ashael Hosmer's way to meeting, all the way ... taking in the lower part of today's Nagog Hill Road. These are the only "Ways to Meeting" that still bear, at least in part, their original name... unless you include Laws Brook Road...which was originally John Law's way to meeting. However Law's Way was a pre-1735 road, therefore John Law went to meeting in Concord, not Acton.

When the 2nd meeting house was built, in 1806, "ways to meeting" changed also. Sam Jones realized that and started his Jones Turnpike in the Center (most of it now discontinued) along what is now Wood Lane. (The "Wood" for whom the Lane is named was Oliver D. "Ollie" Wood, not his father, the Rev. Franklin P. Wood who was minister in the Center Church 1871-1874.)

Railroads came in and with them, new businesses. Population doubled between 1810 and 1880, from 885 to 1797. The railroads came to town. In South and West Acton particularly, new businesses were formed and old mills expanded. **BUT NOBODY NAMED THE STREETS.**

Horace Tuttle's 1890 map showing the old homesteads has been a help on this project, especially for the names of people living in the houses. Horace's map, of course, had to show the roads as they were in 1890. He does indicate where some of the old roads went and, as you can see by the collection of maps we have here, the road layouts did change. We personally have found strong evidence in the Robbins papers that at least part of Mass(achusetts) Avenue...called at various times the Harvard Turnpike or the Union Turnpike... was in place before the 1798 date Mr. Tuttle gives. Massachusetts Avenue, incidentally, is an interesting road. One can travel all the way from Harvard the town to Harvard the college on Mass Ave (except as it goes through Concord where it is first the Union and then the Concord Turnpike.) If you follow the current Route 2, take the Route 2A cutoff in Lincoln at Crosby's Corner over the Battle Road; you can follow Lincoln's, Lexington's, Arlington's, and Cambridge's Mass. Avenues all the way to Harvard (the college). Keep going past MIT (over Harvard Bridge) onto Boston's Mass Ave all the way to Everett Square in Dorchester!

To return down to our given topic: we went to Acton's town reports beginning in 1860. And there the fun began. With few, very few, exceptions, roads mentioned in these early town reports were described as "near J. Whitney's" or "near James Wheeler" or "the bridge near A. Chaffin." This left a bit to be desired if you didn't know where these individuals lived. (J. Whitney was on Esterbrook, James Wheeler at 34 Elm, and A. Chaffin lived at 5 Strawberry Hill with the bridge in question being the bridge on the Isaac Davis Trail over Nashoba Brook.) Sometimes a description was a little clearer: "from the centre to the cemetery road near Elbridge Robbins' saw mill." That was our Concord Road, the sawmill in question being across that road from IceHouse Pond. My point is that prior to 1870, the only named roads in the Town Reports were, as they should have been, Gravel Pit Road on which Belle lives and Lowell Road on which Betsy lives. Those two happy discoveries almost made up for the fact that for 60 years one had to know where people lived to identify a street or a corner. We'll get to corners later; but we warn you that not all corners were intersections, some were just sharp turns in a road.

We turned to the Jenks Library for information and there we found a real treasure: A copy of an 1883 Acton Directory, published by W. N. Sharp, a printer on SCHOOL STREET (a named street!) in South Acton. The directory included Rev. Wood's brief History of Acton, a railroad time table, a list of the Town Officers, of Churches and their schedules, and a **map with named streets**. Furthermore, the directory listed who lived where. The weakness lay in the names of the streets some of which, we suspect,

came as surprises to the people living on them. In the south of town there were Common Street (It led to Stow Common), Tuttle Street (one of the few streets in town with no Tuttles living on it), and Junction Street (which led to Concord Junction.). In the west were Milk (Belle's favorite...there were dairies on this road), Leland, Houghton, Wheeler Streets, and (a BIG surprise) Main Street. Main Street in West Acton? We figure that Printer Sharp knew a MAIN street when he saw one and Mass Avenue from the Concord line to Boxboro was definitely a Main Street. What we think of as Main Street, starting at the Westford- Carlisle line, he called Elm Street. It followed present-day Main Street, turning west to include present-day Hayward Road. (In this directory, our Main Street south of Hayward Road became Acton Street until it reached Mill Corner in South Acton, where it changed its name again to Maynard Street.) In the Center one found streets called Fletcher (no Fletchers there either), Monument, and Town (which probably should have read Town Farm Road...that's how it was referred to in the Town Report.) In the East we saw a street name that really rattled us: Buttles. No one by the name of Buttles appeared in the directory, and it couldn't have been *Tuttle*. The Tuttle name was already in use for modern-day Robbins Street. At last we came across the Buttles name on George Walker's 1889 map of Acton. There was H. S. Buttles living on what is now the stretch of School Street between Laws Brook Road and Route 2. That stretch of School Street, plus our Weatherby Street, was Buttles Street and Frank Clifford, Patrick O'Neil, and James Studley lived on it in 1883.

Martin Street was one of the few street with the name it keeps to the present. We don't know if the story of Martin Street told by Paul Richardson is true, but we have always enjoyed it. According to Paul, most of the people living on Martin Street were carpenters. They built martin (the bird) houses by their homes. The bird houses were, according to Paul, built to replicate the owner's dwelling and were occupied year after year until one wet year when no hatchlings survived.

These 1883 street names were so different, we thought we bring the fact home to you by telling how some of you got to this meeting by the old names: (The Klauers who live on Taylor Street, would cross Main Street, following Taylor to Elm, then onto to Littleton Street to the church. Now the Tuttles, who live on Preston Street, would go across Milk to Leland then down Main Street to Elm then to Littleton Street to the church. The Conants living on Elm Street would take Town Street onto Fletcher Street to Littleton Street. If Louise Howard Wetherbee were here, she would have come from her house at the intersection of Junction Street and Barker Street taking Barker to School to Hosmer, following Hosmer across Main to Elm then to Littleton Street.)

No one in the Town Reports paid much attention to these names. The only streets named in the next 20 years were Hammond's Road (not *Fletcher* to them), Hall Road (Windsor), Gould Road (one of the bouncing streets between Prospect and Main), Littleton Road (leading from the Union Turnpike, née Harvard Road currently Mass Ave.), Leland Stevens Road, Great Road, Estabrook Road, Gates Road, Davis Road, and Cash Road. For the most part, roads in the Town Reports still ran from "near the house of Isaac Reed"(344 *Central*) or "by Mr. Warners" or from "C. Wheelers to W. Handley." Kelley's Corner comes in... and we learn that the road to Michael Hannon's

is a private way, although the town agrees to replank his bridge.

And then (Huzzahl) another directory came out. The year was 1902. It was the Maynard and Acton Directory and was published by A. E. Foss Publishing Company of South Framingham. It didn't include a map, but it described streets as being between two points so our multi-talented Belle has created one based on that material.

The 1902 directory street names again were far different...and somewhat confusing to put it mildly. There were three Cross Streets. (Minuteman, Pearl, and Adams) and two Littleton Streets (part of Central and part of Newtown). There is a Mill Court (which is Wheeler Lane) and a Mill Street (part of Parker) and at least a pair of School Streets. Elm Street is now our Elm Street. And there is a Pine Grove Street (now Forest.) This last pleased the two of us particularly because it is in the area of Pine Hill, so designated in the Concord Village Proprietors' book in 1732.

Now we'll bring the same people to this meeting via the 1902 streets. It won't sound the same. (The Klauers who would live on Centre Street (the main drag) would take Centre across Mass Avenue turning onto Gravel Pit Road to the Church. The Tuttle of Arlington Avenue, would cross over Summer Street and Mass Avenue to Stevens Street to the Gravel Pit Road, a much more direct route since Stevens now went all the way through. The Conants on Centre Street would turn onto Nagog Street take Back Street to Gravel Pit Road. Louise who now lives at the intersection of Concord Street and Mill Street (soon to be known as Howard's Corner!) would take Mill Street to School to Hosmer across Mass Ave, following Hosmer to Monument across Centre onto Gravel Pit.

And to add to the confusion, I'll tell how Jane Bulette and I got here...versus how we will get home. We came down Littleton Road and we go home on Gravel Pit road both one and the same road! The descriptions overlap!

Betsy: Where was the gravel pit? Belle: Right across Arlington Street from here (Church of the Good Shepherd) behind Genevieve Anderson's on Newtown Road.

Obviously Acton streets needed **official** naming. In 1914 the Town Meeting was asked to form a committee for that purpose and for the purpose of putting up street signs. The article was passed over. This seems incredible when you realize that the automobile age had arrived. Some people were actually coming to Acton who didn't know (are you ready for this?) Crooker's Corner from Duren's Corner. They were so ill-informed that they probably didn't know that Wheeler's Corner was now Holland's corner. They probably couldn't have told you how to get from W. A. Flint's to Penney's farm (It was a road, Flint Road, and it went all the way to Willow Street, near Mt. Hope Cemetery). Amber Hayward Klauer told us.

It wasn't until 1922 that a committee was formed to name the streets. And a prestigious committee it was: from Precinct 1: Charlotte Conant, J. Sidney White, and Horace F. Tuttle, from Precinct 2: Alice Stiles, Anson Piper, and Lewis Hastings, from Precinct 3: Alice Carlisle, W. E. Whitcomb, and A. Brooks Parker. Parker resigned before the final report and your current speaker misinterpreted the naming of Parker Street because of this. I am one of the great conclusion-jumpers of all time and I

thought that Parker Street had been named in his honor. Not so. Even though most of the people living on Parker Street were named Barker, there already was a Barker Road. Before the divided highway of Route 2 came in, Barker ran along Mass Ave. and up to the small section which remains off Taylor Road. In truth, there was one lone family on Parker Street named Parker, but not it was not Alan B. Parker's family.

The committee's report was published and came up for a vote at the 1923 Town Meeting. The vote, for Acton, was surprisingly simple. Only two street names were changed on the spot: Quimby and Blanchard. Quimby Street, which the committee wanted in honor of Howard L. Quimby who died in France at the end of WW I, was changed to Piper Road. This was understandable since the street ran from Piper's Corner on School Street to Duren's Corner on Mass Ave where it met Taylor Road, and furthermore the Pipers lived on the street. The Town did vote to honor Howard Quimby by changing the name of the Exchange Square (at Main and School Street) to Quimby Square.

There may well have been more local politics involved in the Town Meeting's changing the name of the proposed Blanchard Street to Prospect Street. The collateral descendants of Abner Hosmer (the Goulds and particularly Miss Evelyn Knowlton) had never taken kindly to the memorial stone Luke Blanchard had had erected on the Hosmer farm on the street being named. That monument reads "from this farm Luther and Calvin Blanchard left on the 19th of April." It somewhat tactlessly didn't mention that the farm was a Hosmer farm and that the Hosmer son left too and was killed. No way did they want that street named BLANCHARD. Their arguments probably were based on the fact that Blanchard was more associated with West Acton or at least closer to the Boxborough border. In any event Blanchard became Prospect.

Even this official naming wasn't perfect. There were still two School Streets, a Concord St. and a Concord Road, a Davis Road and a Davis Terrace, a Maple Street and a Maple Avenue, a Woodlawn Lane and a Woodbury Lane. And there was a "G" in Kinsley Street in West Acton... the confusion between the Center Kingsleys (with a G) and the West Acton Kinsleys (without a G) went on.

Years went by...and so did World War II. Route 2, the current highway, came in and the post-war building boom began.

The population had more than doubled between 1920 and 1957, from just over 2000 to over 5000. In 1957 Fire Chief H. Stuart MacGregor went to the Planning Board. He was concerned that duplication of street names might cause a possible tragedy if a fire was called in. An article was placed on the Town Warrant to change the name of seven streets. School Street in West Acton was to be changed to Farm Street. They'd tried changing that name before to *Gates* (passed over) and to *Durkee* (passed over.) This time it was changed...but to Spruce, not Farm. Maple Avenue in the Center (once part of Sam Hayward's Way to Meeting) became Minuteman. Davis Terrace (West Acton) became Mead Terrace, meaning that the Wrights lived on Mead Terrace and the Meads lived on Wright Terrace. Woodlawn Lane became Minot Avenue, thereby keeping it from being confused with Woodbury or Wood Lane. Nashoba Road had been divided by Route 2. One section of the road retained the name Nashoba,π

but the section running south off Newtown became Bulette Road for the Bulette farm there. Concord Street in South Acton was changed, part of it to become a continuation of Parker Street. From Howard's Corner north it was suggested that it become *Vallee* Road (Rudy Vallee had spent some time at Vallee House, so-called, at Parker and High Street), but wiser heads prevailed and that part of Concord Street, once the old Stow Road, became Independence. This last was particularly appropriate because it was part of the way used by the Stow minutemen to the bridge at Concord on April 19, 1775.

The naming of streets in developments was a whole new ball game. These names were not to be decided by the Town or by the Planning Board but by the developers themselves. I had a conversation with Bev Jenks Grigg a few months ago which shed a little light on Albert and Porter Jenks' choices of names for streets in their developments. (Albert was Bev's grandfather, Porter her father.) The Jenks would find a theme for their well-designed developments of the 1950s and would then research street names. Their first development was Indian Village, and, having learned of their research, two streets in Indian Village gave us pause. Bev had heard that the Jenks wanted to name the streets for Indian tribes from the northeast. It took us a lot of hunting to find the Quaboags... but it turned out they were a small tribe from around Brookfield, near Palmer where Albert Jenks was born. (There was even once a "praying Indian" village thereabouts named Quaboag.) But no Seminole ever called the northeast home. They were Floridian... and at one stage so was Mr. Jenks. In fact one of his coups as an agriculturalist was to save a Florida bean crop by developing a specific pesticide.

It was with delight we found another glimpse of Albert Jenks' puckish nature. It was in Robbins Park, his second development, There he named his streets for well known New England writers: Alcott, Emerson, Hawthorne, Longfellow, Thoreau, and Whittier. He included *Phalen* for Acton's Harold A. Phalen whose History of Acton was published in 1954. Mr. Jenks was a great enthusiast for Acton history and, of course, a great benefactor to our Society. The other author he included in Robbins Park (which was named for Joseph Robbins, an early owner of the land) was Bromfield. Louis Bromfield was a midwesterner. He must have been much admired by Albert Jenks not only for his novels or his *croix de guerre* from WW I, but for his experimental farm in Ohio. Albert Jenks was by training an agriculturalist, a fine one, and Bromfield was his kind.

And then there was the Jenks' Minuteman Ridge where the streets were named Capt. Brown, Joseph Reed, Deacon Hunt, and Capt. Forbush. Capt. Brown was a Concord minuteman, Joseph Reed and Deacon Simon Hunt were Acton minutemen. Our question came on Capt. Forbush. The only Captain Forbush we could locate was Abel... and he was a Capt. of the Davis Blues of 1812 and later. David Forbush was a Second Lieutenant under Capt. Isaac Davis, and was splattered by Davis' blood when Davis was killed at the bridge in Concord April 19, 1775. Did David ever become a captain? Or did Albert of the twinkling eyes just realize that, hard as it may have been to spell *Quaboag*, no one could ever spell *Lieutenant*, and who wanted to live on a lieutenant's street, surrounded by captains and a deacon? The Jenks were, after all, businessmen and they had to market that development.

Let's move on to other developments. When the Sweeney farm was being developed, Beatrice Sweeney picked the first names for the streets. Duggan, Smart, and Townsend were named for young Acton men who had died in World War II: Peter Duggan, Ansel Smart, and Robert Townsend. She had planned to use the names of other WW II heroes or casualties for the other streets, but those streets ultimately became Windemere, Woodchester, Gristmill, etc. much to her dislike. She thought those names were just awful, according to her son Kevin Sweeney, because they had no meaning. In naming his streets today, Kevin follows his mother's philosophy and chooses names with a meaning. He tries for a connection to the families who once owned the land or names with some connection to Acton. And many of those names have to do with mothers: Kingman Road (his mother's maiden name was King), MacLeod Lane (MacLeod was the maiden name of Mrs. Hayes whose husband owned the land and the mother of Kay Arnold who sold the land), Ayer (the maiden name of the former owner's mother but I can't remember who that was !!) and Isabella's Way for Isabella Counselman Choate, my mother.

Jim Fenton follows much the same philosophy, using names connected to the former owners or to Acton. Thus Kennedy Lane, MacGregor Way, Perkins Lane and Maddy Lane. Maddy being for Madeleine Brown the former owner.

You now know more than you wanted to about the naming of Acton streets. You may know more than we do in some cases. Nowhere could we discover the origin of Wampus Avenue. A dictionary told us that wampus was a "strange, objectionable, or monstrous person or thing." Surely no developer wanted that word to get around. And we can't even image what the "wood" developer was after with Brucewood, Fernwood, Guswood, Robinwood, etc. But we'll bet he knows a Bruce, a Fern, a Gus and a Robin. We have the ridges (Birch, Juniper, Cherry) ...but Pine Ridge is nowhere near them. And the Nuts have just come to town. In Acorn Park, off Great Road in North Acton, we have Beechnut, Hazelnut, and Chestnut.

The most satiric street name has to be Hatch.

The builder, working fast to beat the new state wetlands law that would be known as the Hatch Act for its sponsor, the representative from Beverly, named the street to thumb his nose at the act!

We haven't gotten to all the so-called corners or their names but we have a list of them here that you can see later. Corners, corners, corners. As my father used to say, "Run into the roundhouse, Nellie. He can't corner you there."

Good night.

Belle Choate
Betsy Conant

Corners and Crossings

Merriam's Corner...School Street
Crooker's Corner...Hosmer and Mass Ave. (Route 2)
(Jock) Wheeler's (later Holland's) Corner...Main and Great Road
Richardson's Corner (also Crossing)...Central where the railroad crosses
Kelley's Corner...Mass and Main. E goes in and out. It become Kelley's corner early.
named for Kelleys on the NW corner of intersection.
Duren's Corner...Piper, Mass Ave (Route 2), Taylor
Parker's Crossing...RR at Parker near River
Fletcher's Corner...Parker and High
Gallagher's Crossing...N. Acton...Main and railroad near Somerville Lumber
Hayward's Corner...Martin and Stow
Waite's Corner...186 School Street
Crosby's Corner...Main just below Maple (where the house used to jut out just over the
bridge.
Piper Corner...School and Piper
Howard's Corner... Independence and Parker
Conant's Corner... Great Road and Brook.