

Talk on the History of the Ridge Hill Area

Thank you so much to Jeff & Kelly Gould for hosting us in this beautiful, historic home—known as the David Robinson House. Research has told us that this house was built circa 1850, and it first appears on a map in 1857 as the home of an “I. Burrill.” But houses are often named after their most famous resident—not necessarily after the person who built the home. I’ll mention later why David Robinson is well-known in Norwell, but I think you’ll agree that the Robinson home is aptly named.

First, I’d like to give a very brief history of Norwell, its original settlements, and its naming (and re-naming).

In 1634 (only 14 years after the Pilgrims arrived) Cornet Robert Stetson and his wife Honour were granted land on the North River in the vicinity of what is today Stetson Road. The Stetsons were among the original “Men of Kent” who settled in Scituate Harbor after originally arriving in Plymouth from Kent, England. While most of the other Scituate residents stayed in the harbor area, the Stetsons decided to make their fortune “up river” in Norwell. They are the first known settlers in our town.

The Town of Scituate was officially incorporated in 1636, and at that time the boundaries of Scituate included all of Norwell, parts of Hanover, and parts of Marshfield.

In the early- to mid-1600s the main “highway” through town was the North River. Hence, most settlers lived on or near the river. The original Indian paths included what-is-today Main Street and Washington Street.

What we know today as the Town of Norwell broke off from Scituate in 1849 and established itself as South Scituate. There are many theories as to why we separated from Scituate, but the prevailing belief is that the interests of the “inlanders” varied greatly from those of the “coast dwellers”—the primary difference being how to manage the town’s finances.

In 1888, the town was again renamed—after Boston businessman and summer resident Henry Norwell. Mr. Norwell pledged \$2,500/year for 10 years to the town for road maintenance. When a vote was taken on a new name, the name “Norwell” won hands-down.

Now on to the history of the Ridge Hill area in particular. “Ridge Hill” is typically defined as the west end of Norwell. It’s a neighborhood beginning on Route 53 (west of Jacobs Pond and Assinippi)

going to Oak Street, High Street, Pond Street and upper Grove Street. It's named for the clearly defined ridge on Washington Street between Farrar Farm Road and Oak Street.

The first settler on Ridge Hill was Benjamin Farrow, who built a Cape Cod-style house in 1720 on Washington Street (near what is today 263 Washington Street—the strip mall with the Tease Hair Boutique). The Farrow house was destroyed by fire in 1970s. I have a photo of the house taken from the book *A History of Ridge Hill* by Carol & John Mesheau. (Much of the information gathered for this research is from Carol's book).

What makes Ridge Hill so special among Norwell neighborhoods is that it developed a tight-knit neighborhood society separate from the rest of the town—mostly because of its geographical isolation. Remember: Grove Street (from Route 53 up to School Street) was only a footpath through Valley Swamp. Ridge Hill residents worked, shopped, and attended social events in Ridge Hill—or in Rockland or Hanover—not in today's Norwell Center. The “road” to Norwell's center was not direct.

One of the social hubs in Ridge Hill was Leonard's Tavern (an impressive three story inn and livery located at the intersection of Grove and Route 53). The Tavern was also called the Half Way House and was built as a stage coach stop on the post road (today's Route 53) between Boston and Plymouth. The Tavern was frequented by Daniel Webster when he would return home to Marshfield from Washington, DC—at the time the Tavern was owned by Richmond Farrar. Norwell historian Sam Olson tells a story in his book *A Narrative of South Scituate/Norwell*. Sam says that Mr. Farrar allowed Mr. Webster to drink in his tavern because “although Richmond Farrar was a Jacksonian Democrat, he held the Whig Webster in high regard.” Sadly, the Tavern was destroyed by a fire in 1885.

By 1849, the Ridge Hill area was often referred to as the West Ward and (according to Carol Meshau) “its businesses were thriving, the stage coach came through on a regular schedule and connected with the trains, and Henry Groce built his early Victorian house on High Street next to his father Ansel.”

In 1850, the Ridge Hill district school was built at the corner of Oak and Washington Streets. That building still stands today as the office of Dr. Timothy Colton. The school closed in 1943.

The economic depression of the mid-1850s, followed by the Civil War, brought about a need for employment other than farming; and Ridge Hill, with its easy access to Queen Anne's Corner and Hanover, was an ideal location for new businesses. Norwell was a hub of shoemaking and in 1855 a

third of the working people in the town were either in shoemaking or a working in a related industry like tack manufacturing or box manufacturing.

Originally shoes were made by individuals for themselves and their families, but increasingly in the 1800s, shoe making became more specialized and small shoe shops, often referred to as “10 x 10’s” (due to their typical dimensions) were built. The shoe shop of David Robinson (who was a well-known shoe and boot maker) sits on this property and is the only “10x10” shoe shop still standing in Norwell.

It wasn’t until the mid-1800s that Grove Street became a passable road for horses and carriages and Ridge Hill residents could more easily travel to Norwell Center. In 1855, the town hired Charles Simmons (who lived on the other side of Valley Swamp on what is today the “Hingham side” of Prospect Street) to cut the road through the swamp.

The Ridge Hill area has an abundance of Civil War history—some of it yet to be uncovered—and Society Board member Janet Watson is diligently working on this research. The Civil War monument in Norwell Center lists 24 soldiers and sailors who died in that war and 6 of them were Ridge Hill residents. Many more West End residents served and survived the war.

One of the most heart-wrenching stories is that of 15-year old D. Willard Robinson and his father David (who both lived in this house). Father and son went off to war together, and both were captured in July of 1864 and sent to the notorious Andersonville Prison in Georgia. Father and son were sharing a blanket to stay warm one night, and David Robinson awoke in the morning to find his son dead. The Historical Society has a very large drawing of Andersonville—which was notorious for its deplorable conditions for prisoners-of-war.

Another Ridge Hill Civil War family was the Gardner family of 151 High Street. Richmond Gardner fought in many battles including Chancellorsville, Antietam, and Gettysburg. Richmond and was eventually killed by sniper fire while in camp, but his brother Charles Gardner survived and was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Civil War veteran Beza Drake lived with his mother and sister at what was 110 Washington Street (now the location of Kappy’s Liquor Store.) Beza’s father had died in a wagon accident when he was an infant. Beza Drake was captured and sent to Andersonville Prison and a report by another soldier said the following: “B.W. Drake, a lad about 18 years of age, a victim of despondence and starvation. He wasted away to a mere skeleton and finally died.”

Following the Civil War, the GAR (Grand Army of the Republic) Post #112 was established. Eventually the post was re-named the D. Willard Robinson Post after the son of David Robinson (after whom this house is named). In 1900, the Post was moved to the site of the Webster Cushing Shoe Shop—which is the Ridge Hill School today. The GAR post was active for many years and when it finally closed, much of its memorabilia was donated to the Norwell Historical Society.

In the 1870's the invention of the sewing machine transformed the shoe industry and it became more profitable to manufacture shoes in big factories. In 1898, Charles Groce built a two-story shoe factory on High Street (at what is now 121 and 123 High Street). The factory burned down in 1901.

Ridge Hill was also the home of several large poultry farms and plucking houses (including the Farrar Poultry Farm and the Curtis Poultry Farm). Carol Meshau said that during funerals at the Washington Street cemetery there were times when feathers rained down on the mourners like snow!

In the 1880's, the Hanover Street Railway was built between Ridge Hill and the towns of Abington, Brockton and Hanover. While the trolleys were meant to ease the commute for men employed in the shoe factories, they also allowed families from Ridge Hill to access downtown Rockland (which was a hub of weekend social activities!) and Nantasket Beach in the summer. These trolleys ran down High Street from 1893 to 1921 and the yards of the houses now at 99 and 101 High Street once housed the trolley barns!

In 1921, residents of Ridge Hill organized the Union Athletic Association and purchased Asa Robinson's Grove on Hatch Pond (which is the site of the Cole School today), and built the Ridge Hill Grove. The UAA sponsored sports clubs, held dances, and ran a recreational area with refreshment stands. In 1955, the UAA disbanded and the Association gave the Grove to the Town of Norwell for \$1 on condition that the land be used for an elementary school. Ground was broken for the Grace Farrer Cole School in 1955.

Ridge Hill has a rich and unique history—in many ways quite different from the rest of Norwell. Because it was geographically remote for many years “Ridge Hill developed a resourceful, close-knit neighborhood culture with a personality and way of life all its own.” (Meshau)

From the 1700s until the early 1900s, Ridge Hill had taverns, large farms, shoe factories, and a trolley! In the mid-1900s, Route 53 served as the only road to Cape Cod, so it became the home to restaurants, quaint candy shops, and vegetable stands—lining the road and catering to travelers.

When Washington Street was commercially zoned in the 1950s, the area was forever altered. But... there are still many signs of Ridge Hill's rich history, if you just know where to look.