

Jacobs Farm, A Personal Reflection

by Harold Melvin Turner, Jr., dated June 27, 1990

[Harold Turner, Jr., born 1927, lived in the east portion of the Jacobs Homestead as a boy from time to time from about 1933 to 1939. The Turners, cousins of the Jacobs family, occupied this portion of the house from about 1897 to 1939. Caretakers Patrick Gammon and Henry Hines, who lived nearby, were hired by Dr. Henry Jacobs, last of this line, to help work the farm from the 1920s until Dr. Jacobs died in Baltimore, Maryland in 1939. While George A. Turner was alive, he was the primary caretaker, but his son Harold Sr. was sometimes away in Canada doing engineering jobs and did not really enjoy farming, but helped his father. In parts, this reminiscence of Harold Jr. bears some evidence of ill feeling toward Dr. Jacobs, though the Turners did derive some benefit from their association with him.

[Editor's notes are in brackets.]

The stubble of the pastures is my most vivid and persistent memory of Jacobs Farm.

One enclosed field was the direct route to Jacobs Pond where my cousin Janice and I were allowed to swim. We climbed the gate across Jacobs Lane past a line of old pear trees. One bite of the sour fruit would unbalance a young stomach in minutes.

There were several hazards in this short trek when we were very young. It was almost always occupied by a number of cows after the early haying season. They looked very large to us and we were unsure of their placid nature. The indiscriminate dropping of what were called "cow flaps" presented an obstacle course of minefield proportions. It required care and a zig-zag trail. Worst of all, the close-cropped hay stalks were pure hell for a tenderfoot, in the literal sense.

Janice lived nearby and was accustomed to bare feet by the time I, her city cousin, arrived from Toronto [Canada]. That stubble was agony for several days before the soles of my feet became hardened to the torture. My progress was not hastened by her teasing.

Looking back, I am not sure what the rush was about, anyway. The place where we swam was used by the cows, too. We returned to the house covered with little specks of dirt that I would resist analyzing, even from this span of time.

Years later, my father took me and a cousin from my mother's family to a secret swimming hole of his youth. It was about a half-mile up Jacobs Lane. We went skinny-dipping in a pool that was clear and cool as crystal.

Puzzled, I asked him why he had never mentioned this bit of heaven when Janice and I were suffering the monster cows, cow flaps, and the painful stubble. He just laughed and left me to deduce that mother did not want us out-of-sight when we were still young and non-swimmers. It made sense and my question was silly. Subsequently, I learned that my older cousins knew where it was and were co-conspirators.

From my earliest memories, I looked forward to the visits to Jacobs Farm. It was during the years of the Great Depression and I am sure that the economy deeply affected the Turners and other relations who lived in Norwell and Hanover. I can only recall endless days of sunshine and laughter and comfortable nights with my mother, grandfather and Aunt Katherine, "Tat," my father's youngest sister who had not yet married. She looked after "Pa" [George], as they called their father.

The original farm was built by the Jacobs family around 1740 [actually 1726] in the village of Assinippi, just across the Norwell town line. The Southeast Expressway did not exist until years after World War

II. The main road from Boston swept through the commercial part of the village [Washington Street, now Route 53].

The small General Store and one or two other shops have been replaced by a huge restaurant, shopping complex, and a full range of suburban enterprises. Sophisticated traffic lights appeared at the intersection. Barnicoat's tombstone business on the road to Hanover still remains, however, and looks much as it did fifty years ago [1940]. Somewhat sadly, the Barnicoats have carved grave stones for several generations of Turners, Browns, Curtis', and Jacobs.

From Boston, about thirty-five miles away, a left turn off the highway [Route 53] passed a very old graveyard on the right [Union Cemetery, Hanover] and a sudden and lovely view of Jacobs Pond on the left. This secondary route [123 West] to Scituate on the coast is heavily traveled. The graveyard and the pond still provide a surprising buffer separating the hustling village from a sudden pastoral view of Jacobs Farm, sited on the corner of the main road [Main St., Route 123] and Jacobs Lane, the first turn to the left. The old house and outbuildings are an impressive anachronism.

As the generations rolled on, the land was broken into several farms, all occupied by descendants. The original house, outbuildings, and 150 acres of land were acquired by The New England Society for the Preservation of Antiquities [now Historic New England] from Dr. Henry Barton Jacobs after his death in 1936 [actually 1939].

Jacobs was educated at Harvard Medical School and became the personal family physician to Robert Garrett, President of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad. Jacobs married Garrett's widow and continued to enjoy homes in Baltimore [MD] and Newport [RI].

It is obvious from the probate of the will that Dr. Jacobs inherited little of the former Mrs. Garrett's fortune, due, undoubtedly to the acuity of Mr. Garrett [unlikely as Garrett died insane, more likely due to no Jacobs heirs]. The endowment of the farm was meager, even for the standards of the times.

Henry Jacobs lived in Boston and Baltimore. He paid rare and ceremonial visits to the house in Assinippi. It is more accurate to say "houses" because the Turners occupied the east side, about one third [the size of] the main house, when viewed directly from the front.

My grandfather [George A. Turner] was a carpenter and country contractor with only moderate skill and little drive. He married Mercy Brown of Scituate. As his family grew, his first cousin, Henry Jacobs, installed him on the farm as caretaker. My father [Harold, Sr.] was born in another Jacobs house in Norwell and was six-months-old when the Turners moved to the farm in the early Spring of 1897.

After Dr. Jacobs died, the Turners were asked to leave, after continuous occupation for forty years.

There were two hired hands, Patrick Gammon and Henry Hines. Pat lived in the next house toward Scituate, which still stands. It is unclear whether my grandfather [George] helped with the work at peak seasons. It is certain my father [Harold, Sr.] served two masters: apprentice to his father and farmhand. My father was always proud of his hard work. He was good with his hands, but, in spite of occasional moments of nostalgia, vowed never to return to a farm.

There was a good-sized barn with two horse stalls, a hay loft and four-wheeled buggy that was still used in the 'thirties.' The cows were housed in a smaller building next to the big barn. There was barely standing-room in this damp atmosphere, heavy with the odors of tightly-packed cows and wet hay. Those two buildings [barns] were floored with heavy timbers. It was easy to slip and fall on your backside in the cow barn, built on lower ground and constantly wet.

Nearby there was a piggery and a pen the adjoined a chicken coop. Another pen enclosed a bull that came and went for reasons that baffled Janice and me [probably rented for breeding]. All of this was within 50 yards of the house.

Across Jacobs Lane facing the Scituate Road [Main St., Route 123], a long building housed much of the large, horse-drawn farm equipment: plows, a reaper, hay fork, and rick (the name for a wagon on which the hay was loaded). Included in this inventory was a two-seated “pung,” as a horse-drawn sled was called, a large wooden apple press for cider, and a foot-pumped, circular grinding stone for sharpening and honing blades. The task of turning that stone was mine when I stood around and pestered the hired hands. I would, of course, last about two minutes before near-collapse.

My grandfather [George] may have been a man of indifferent success, but he was no fool. One of the features of the large barn was added after he studied the antiquated method of backing the hay rick up the slope to the barn floor and pitching the hay through the overhead loft door above the wagon.

A large square was cut out of the second floor and pulleys and stout ropes were fastened to the corners of this platform. Carefully balanced and weighted stones were added. At the harvest, several men would stand on the floor and lower it to the level of the hay wagon. The hay was forked from the wagon to the lowered floor and a number of men, augmented by the calculated weight of the hay, would stand on the stones. The floor would rise to its original position and the hay pitched sideways into the big loft.

With equal ingenuity, he designed gravity feed pipes that were used to pour measured amounts of grain into the horse troughs, saving storage space on the ground floor and easing the job.

These operations seem primitive in the waning years of the twentieth century, but internal combustion engines and electricity were rare on small farms in the late 1800’s. These improvements, along with others my grandfather concocted, added efficiency to farm work that had remained unchanged for generations.

With the exception of the barns, Jacobs Farm was without electric power until the 1930’s.

Aunt Tat recalled that Uncle Irving, the husband of Edith, my father’s eldest sister, brought a[n electric] line from the big barn to the house so my grandmother would have a single, bare electric lamp for light in the kitchen. Dr. Jacobs noted this bit of gentle piracy by the Turners on one of his inspections. The hired hands were told to take it down. Norwell Historical Society papers in my possession extol virtues of Henry Jacobs that are at odds with the recollections of his less-favored cousins.

There is sufficient evidence that the Turner part of the house was created for a resident overseer. [Whether or not this was the intended purpose, and no evidence is offered, the east portion had been added around 1840 to accommodate the Jacobs’ expanding families.]

The front elevation is deceptively simple. Neither of the original [front] doors were used, except on special occasions. The complex “additions of the moment” can only be seen from the rear. This view is a classic example of those in the scholarly publication of Thomas C. Hubka: *Big House, Little House, Back House, Barn; Connected Farm Buildings of New England*.

Part of the charm of Jacobs Farm is the seeming endless stone walls that fence the fields and buildings. Traditionally without mortar, they were constructed of carefully piled boulders, plowed from the fields. Farmers took pains with the fitting, and the result is surprisingly symmetrical. A curving stone wall separates the garden and house from the barns. The reverse perspective is unique. A jumble of haphazard additions were made in periods of necessity or prosperity.

From this vantage point, facing the barns, the piggery and chicken coop are to the right. The intervening grassy space and a dirt path lead to an arbor that hid the outhouse. There was no plumbing in any part of the living quarters in my childhood. Ivy, climbing roses, hibiscus and morning glory disguised this essential facility. Grape vines filled the space behind the first Turner buildings.

At bedtime, I gave no argument about visiting the “two-holer” [actually a “three-holer”]. A middle-of-the-night emergency was scary and hazardous. My angry mother, carrying an oil lamp, was forced to accompany me.

The two houses [of Jacobs Farm] form a “U.” On the left [at the end of the added buildings to the east house] was the carriage barn that protected the Jacobs’ closed four-wheel carriage. That decaying conveyance was still there when we were children. Janice and I could not resist peeking. We were forbidden to slide open the ancient carriage door and were caught a number of times. Even at high noon, it was dark, musty and eerie, and the leather on the vehicle and harnesses had deteriorated badly, adding to the smells.

Both carriage and barn are gone, now. Some enterprising caretaker attempted to make a screened patio of the area and failed. [I don’t know the standard for success he was using, but it is still there today!]

Attached [right of the former carriage barn] was my grandfather’s workshop, the converted tack room of the carriage barn. This retreat was declared out-of-bounds because he smoked his pipes there. My grandmother never allowed tobacco in the house, and he acceded to her wishes, thereby gaining a retreat that protected him from three generations.

Aunt “Tat” remembers the day “Ma” died. “Pa” appeared in the living room after the funeral and, without fanfare, lit his pipe and smoked contentedly in his favorite chair to the end of his life. My father [Harold, Sr.] inherited his rack of pipes. A hole was worn through each stem. In old age, George Turner had only one tooth in the centre of his mouth with which he could grip the pipe.

A large dark room separated the workshop from the back entrance of the house. It was, essentially, a tool shed, and a great amount of gardening equipment hung from the walls, along with harnesses in various states of repair. A long rough table was covered with preserves. Tat continued her mother’s practice and put-up a variety of jams and jellies as well as homemade root beer and sarsaparilla in specially capped bottles. Large milk cans stood in a dark corner to keep the fresh milk cool, a large wooden butter churn beside them.

The door to the house opens into the kitchen. On the right [probably left] were counters and an ice-box. Another door [off the next door dining room] leads to a small summer kitchen [now called the pantry] with shelves for fresh baked bread and pies. According to my father, his mother cooled pies on an outside shelf that formed the bottom of the window sash. As with all country boys, he and his pals would manage to “lift” a pie, occasionally. They were always caught because “Ma” was careful to count her production. He [Harold, Sr.] said the warm pies were so delicious, it was worth the inevitable woodshed treatment from “Pa.”

The sink and copper pump are on the left [of the kitchen], the sole indoor source of water. There was an outside pump over another well. A white porcelain pitcher filled with water stood beside the handle for priming purposes. It was a serious offence to pump water and forget to re-fill the jug. The coal stove was just inside the entrance.

Baths were taken in a large copper tub, placed in the middle of the kitchen floor.

The wooden floors slope upward into a narrow hallway. [The author may be incorrect because the floor slopes down toward the kitchen, through the corridor/dining area, which he calls a narrow hallway, from the living room in front.] Aunt Tat said that they were honed clean at least once a week, and she and her sister Edith would slide from the living room into the kitchen until “Ma’s” patience was exhausted.

There is a peculiar window in the hall [corridor of the dining area] that looks into a room that opens off the living room. My father [Harold, Sr.] had a serious bout of Scarlet Fever when he was about ten or eleven [1906-1907] and almost died. When he began to recover, his father [George] cut a hole in the wall and fitted a regular outside sash which must have been available.

His young son could be brought downstairs and watch the activity in the house from his sickbed placed in the room [Sometimes called the quarantine room, now it has indoor plumbing and is used by the Society as a storage room.]

The living room [in front of house] was not large, but had a fireplace on the east side [cast iron stove now attached] that led to the vestibule of the front door that was never used, in my memory. There were two windows facing the Scituate Road [Route 123], and an old upright piano sat against a door that was permanently locked [No key or lock on door today] and led to the Jacobs’ part of the house. Adjacent to the piano was a steep flight of enclosed stairs to the second floor. Another door to these stairs kept the living room warm. Scratches can still be seen on the frame where matches were lit for the oil lamps that were carried upstairs at bedtime.

At night, the house would take on a life of its own. The creaking and groanings left an indelible impression on me when we would all be sitting around in the living room after dark. Of course, I was first to bed. Mother would light an oil light and precede me up the stairs. After I was tucked-in [in what is now the Vinal Library, as the author once recalled], she would light the lamp on the hall table and disappear below, closing the door behind her at the bottom of the steep staircase.

It is surprising that I have no memory of being frightened although the house noises and the murmuring of the adults continued. On one occasion, however, I was badly rattled. My grandfather had nodded off and, without warning, began to talk to Henry Jacobs, who, he had dreamed, walked through the door blocked by the piano. His eyes were open, and Aunt Tat talked quietly to him until he awoke. She was careful to avoid unsettling the old man. He talked so little that his conversation startled us all. I watched that door for the rest of the years we visited, hoping that Dr. Jacobs would not make another appearance.

Dr. Jacobs’ mother, Frances [Ford] Jacobs, occupied the other part of the house for a number of [summer] months each year. She died [1921] before I was born [1927], but the few words that the Turners had for her were affectionate. The feeling [toward his mother] must have been shared by her son [Dr. Henry Jacobs] because the house remained as it was on the day of her death. The dining table [was] set, the beds made, and a cleaning woman came in twice a week. [A widow, Mrs. McNaughton of Scotland, was Mrs. Jacobs’ companion and was allowed to remain there until her own death.]

The Jacobs’ part of the house was off-limits [to the Turners]. On one or two rare occasions, I was allowed to accompany visitors. It was elegant compared to the “other side.” Recent restoration [c. 1990] has helped show the house as it may have been.

When I reconstruct those years, I remember how much my mother [Esther Diana Joel Turner] enjoyed her time in Assinippi. She was accustomed to a life of urban amenities. Her family lived in large homes in Everett, Boston, and Watertown. My father’s sisters loved my mother from the first time that my father brought her to meet his family. They were both still in college, mother at Wellesley and my father at Tufts. She, in turn, adored this placid family whose temperament was in sharp contrast to her people.

The old place has not much changed. Lack of endowment has contributed to its deterioration. Jacobs Lane was a dead end until recent times. Now, heavy commercial traffic [vehicles] use it as a shortcut, heedlessly undermining the foundations.

The farm was de-accessed by S.P.N.E.A. in 1988. It was purchased by...The Town of Norwell. Extensive renovations have begun. For so many who have been intimately involved with this special place, it is encouraging news.

Jacobs Farm is deeply imbedded in my psyche. The innocence of childhood, faulty memory, and fantasy combine to re-create those happy times.

It was a quiet Sunday when I last visited. The hay had been harvested and that pesky stubble was evident. For a fleeting moment, I considered removing my shoes and socks and experiencing the pain and pleasure of testing my soles. The picture of a grown man running through a hayfield with bare feet, pants rolled up, seemed more than ridiculous, and that careless moment passed.

Too bad.

