

Sawin House Historical Summary – Original Draft 8/24/17

Built in 1690, the Thomas Sawin House, while substantially modified over the years, can be characterized as: 1) the oldest house in Natick, Massachusetts; 2) one of the oldest in New England; and 3) among only three surviving examples built by a veteran of the King Philip War. While modest in form, in its spare lines and isolated, rural setting it is an iconic representation of early colonial life.

The Sawin House is a symbol that in many ways marks the beginning of what we have become. The Sawin House stands at the threshold of many profound economic, cultural, environmental, and political changes - some of which it set in motion.

The house was a mobilization point for the battles at Lexington and Concord as well as an abolitionist focal point prior to the Civil War. It symbolizes the profound cultural, environmental, and political changes that define Natick community.

In 1651 the Puritan minister John Eliot let his Native American followers here to found a model town owned and governed by natives from tribes throughout southern Massachusetts. Conceived as “A Christian Commonwealth,” it was the first utopian community in North America. Subsequently, in the late 1680s, the Natick (Praying) Indians welcomed Thomas Sawin, their comrade in the King Philip War into their midst.

As the first English settler in the town, Sawin would grind their corn and mill their wood. The millponds and races he constructed still survive adjacent to his home.

The Sawin House represents:

- The formation of a significant partnership between Native Americans and English Colonists and the birthplace of Natick’s industrial economy
- One among the first public utilities constructed on a European model in the New England colony
- An enduring sign of respect for Native Americans and a model for coexistence between native peoples and European Colonists

- A means to better understand the complexities of the King Philip war and the relationships between natives and English that led to a colonial victory
- The eventual dispossession of the native population, both physically and culturally, and its return to Natick in the modern era

The Sawin House meets the established criteria for inclusion in the National Registry of Historic Places under criteria A, B, and D. In this regard it represents a special learning experience for town residents, visitors, educational groups and those with an interest in local history. The rich culture, varied personalities and variety of experience associated with the house are unique in their own right.

Of special note is the location of the house within the confines of the Broadmoor Wildlife Reservation, a substantial refuge of over 600 acres located in South Natick and abutting towns. Protective covenants and the conventions of the reservation's owner, the Massachusetts Audubon Society, require that access to the house and eventual use be constrained to the extent that impacts upon wildlife are minimized.

In this way the unique, pre-modern character and setting of the house and the special requirements of wildlife preservation can be recognized, reconciled and harmonized. Such ambitious goals are affirmed in the parallels between the lives of Thomas Sawin and John James Audubon, with special reference to the extraordinary history, culture and ecology of Natick from the Paleo-Indian period to the present.

Efforts have been underway since September of 2016 to negotiate an arrangement with Mass Audubon that would enable preservation of the Sawin house and establishment of memorial to Sawin and a Nipmuc woman, Sarah Awassamug. Ms. Awassamug created an article and managed approval through the general court that enabled trade of 50 acres to Sawin in exchange for him building a grist mill and saw mill in Natick. This agreement was reached in 1686, just a

few years after the horrific King Phillips War and the Deer Island genocide. The loss of life for both indigenous people and colonials was horrific. It is easy to imagine the animosity that existed between the Natick indigenous people and colonials for decades after the termination of hostilities. Within this context Awassamug and Sawin had the vision, integrity, and courage to forge an agreement that lasted for 300 years and was never breached. This agreement is one of the few agreements between whites and indigenous people in North America that was never breeched.

Preserving the Sawin house enables a perpetual memorial to people exhibiting uncommon courage and integrity. Sawin and Awassamug demonstrated the values that we hold dear.

As of August 2024, all efforts to reach an agreement with Audubon have failed. At this point, the house has been allowed to deteriorate to a point whereby reservation would be excessively costly.

However, Sawin had a mill in Sherborn and had to spend a lot of time managing this business while building the Natick mills. A huge advantage the Natick mills has was that they were on the Charles River which enabled substantial cost reductions for transporting hewen lumber.) Well before building his house, Sawin built a 12 x 21 cottage which was in fact the first colonial house built in Natick. He lived in this structure when in Natick and eventually moved the cottage and appended it to the house.

If an agreement can be reached with Mass Audubon that enables preservation of the cottage, Natick would have a perpetual memorial to Sawin and Awassamug.