



The Mink Brook Nature Preserve

(draft 11/1/11)

A Brief History of the Land

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Introduction

The Mink Brook Nature Preserve is a 112 acre parcel of conservation land owned by the Hanover Conservancy since February 1999, contiguous to smaller parcels owned by the Town of Hanover and the Upper Valley Land Trust, all of which share parts of a common history with roots reaching back to the earliest days of Hanover and Dartmouth College.

The Town of Hanover was chartered on July 4, 1761 by New Hampshire's Royal Governor Benning Wentworth. As was Wentworth's custom at the time, with every town that the Royal Governor chartered, he set aside a 500 acre parcel for himself, always within a corner of the newly created township. Typically these 500 acre parcels were known as the "Governor's Right" and were square or almost so in configuration. Between 1761, when Wentworth began this practice, and late 1766 when he was removed from office by King George III and replaced by his nephew John Wentworth II, Benning Wentworth had amassed land holdings in present day New Hampshire and Vermont that totaled in excess of 100 square miles. In Hanover, the Governor's Right was located in the very southwest corner of Hanover, adjacent to the Connecticut River and the Hanover – Lebanon town line.

In March 1770, the Proprietors of Hanover were making a bid to attract Dr. Rev. Eleazar Wheelock of Lebanon, Connecticut to locate his newly formed school named Dartmouth College there, instead of in Orford or Haverhill, New Hampshire as he was being strongly urged to do. Royal Governor John Wentworth agreed to include his uncle Benning's 500 acres in Hanover with adjacent parcels being offered by both Hanover and Lebanon. Therefore, the total "package" of contiguous lands offered to Wheelock that spring was as follows:

- The entire 500 acre parcel owned by Benning Wentworth – the so-called "Governor's Right," to be given to Dartmouth College.
- A 300 acre parcel immediately east of the Governor's Right to be conveyed to Rev. Dr. Eleazar Wheelock.
- A 1000 acre parcel bordering the easterly side of the 300 acre Wheelock parcel to go to Dartmouth College – today the Greensboro Road/ Mink Brook area.
- And a 1441 acre parcel located immediately south of the Hanover – Lebanon town offered by Lebanon in support of Dr. Wheelock's new school.

All of these parcels were contiguous and comprised much of the lower Mink Brook watershed. As will be discussed, all of the present day 112 acre Mink Brook Nature Preserve property is land originally held by Dartmouth College or Dr. Wheelock – mostly land from the original 300 acre Wheelock holding.

Early History

Rev. Dr. Eleazar Wheelock permanently arrived on the Hanover Plain about August 29th, 1770, after about a two week, 175 mile journey from lower Lebanon, Connecticut. Traveling with him to the yet to be created new home of Dartmouth College were persons close to him including male family members, students, and laborers with teams of oxen pulling freight. Their tasks were to begin the arduous task of clearing a place in the dense wilderness of Hanover in order to erect shelters for the first winter, and to begin to establish the new school. Wheelock had seen the Hanover land earlier in the summer when, beginning on June 8th he spent three days carefully inspecting the site being offered by Hanover's proprietors before traveling north to inspect sites in Orford, Haverhill, Compton, and Plymouth, New Hampshire. The inspection tour concluded in Portsmouth where he arrived on June 29th to confer with Royal Governor John Wentworth II, Portsmouth then being the capitol of the Royal colony of New Hampshire. The choice of Hanover as the location of the new school was officially announced from Portsmouth on July 5th, much to the great displeasure of Haverhill!

One aspect of the Hanover land offerings that contributed to Wheelock's decision to locate there was the fertile, well watered lands along Mink Brook including small but well situated flood plain lands at the brook's mouth and along the nearby Connecticut River. Of course, those flood plains have since been submerged with the completion of Wilder Dam in late November 1950.

By the time winter set in, only about seven acres of land had been very roughly cleared, mostly the area of the present day Dartmouth Green, and a few crude log shelters were haphazardly erected. However, with the coming of spring in 1771, things began to happen at a quicker pace. During the summer of 1771 a saw mill was operational on Mink Brook, near the present day offices of the Upper Valley Land Trust, and by the following year a grist mill was in operation there as well. Land clearing was also happening at a fast pace, and it is believed that land within the current Mink Brook Nature Preserve was soon cleared and agriculture established. The westerly facing upland hillside near the saw and grist mills, that is now part of the Preserve, was soon referred to as the "president's Garden."

Of interest to and part of this discussion is the subject of the present day easterly property line that separates the Preserve from the so-called Town of Hanover's Gile Tract. Starting at about the intersection of this easterly property line and the Hanover-Lebanon town line is a lovely, intact stone wall. This wall marks the ancient property line between the 300 acre Wheelock parcel and the 1000 acre Dartmouth College parcel of land. That easterly property line, as it threads its way north over the top of the hill and descends the northerly side, makes a series of erratic westerly jogs. The reason for this stems from the fact that knowingly or not, in 1771 after Wheelock had established his first saw mill on Mink Brook, it was found to be located, not on Dartmouth College property as the College Trustees had intended, but rather on Wheelock's private property! Therefore, to appease the Trustees, the original property line was adjusted westerly, giving additional land to the College.

Eleazar Wheelock passed away in Hanover in April, 1779, at the age of 68 years. By that time, he had not only successfully established Dartmouth College on the Hanover Plain, but had acquired additional land

so as to leave each of his children then living in Hanover, two daughters and four sons, a farm of their own. From his last will, his land holdings, independent of Dartmouth College, were given as follows:

- Mrs. Abigail Wheelock Ripley: 100 acres (present day Webster Avenue, Occum Ridge, Occum Pond area)
- Mrs. Mary Wheelock Woodward: 100 acres (lands between present day Rope Ferry and Lyme roads)
- Eleazar Wheelock, Jr.: 200 acres (lands between present day Lyme Road, North Park and East Wheelock streets)
- John Wheelock: 200 acres (lands between present day East Wheelock and South Park Street; and between East Wheelock, Crosby, and Lebanon streets)
- James Wheelock: 200 acres (lands south of Lebanon Street, in the area of the Dresden School District, Woodrow, Barrymore roads, Hovey Lane and Buell Street)
- Ralph Wheelock: 200 acres (lands along Mink Brook now part of the Mink Brook Nature Preserve and the Brook Road, Mitchel Lane, Dayton Drive, Thompson Terrace and Barrett Road neighborhood)

Wheelock had hoped that his son Ralph would be his successor at the College; however, that was not to be as Ralph was epileptic. Therefore, Eleazar Wheelock was succeeded by his son John. It is believed by this writer that Ralph Wheelock died in the 1820's, when the Mink Brook lands passed out of Wheelock Family hands for the first time.

Later History After the Wheelocks

The Bentons

This writer is not sure exactly when Ralph Wheelock passed away, nor sure if the lands along Mink Brook went to the Benton Family shortly after the time of Ralph's death. We do know that the Benton Family were among the first settlers in Hanover, initially locating in the rural areas removed some distance from the future "Village at the College." Frederick Chase states in his book *A History of Dartmouth College and The Town of Hanover, New Hampshire (To 1815)* that the first death in Hanover was that of a child of Deacon Stephen Benton's, fourteen months of age, who died of consumption in 1767. Furthermore, according to Chase, Stephen Benton was active in early town affairs (both church and serving as selectman), and the American Revolution.

By 1833 Ruben Benton is listed as a town selectman, and in 1840 his farm house located at 104 South Main Street burned and was replaced by the 1 1/2 story brick Greek Revival style house still standing at that location. And, this writer has knowledge that in 1851 – 52, Charles Benton, son of Ruben Benton, erected the large barn measuring 131' X 45' by four stories high that was for many years a notable feature of that farm until torn down in 1949.

The Gazetteer of Grafton County, N. H. 1709 – 1886 tells us the following about Ruben Benton:

- He moved to the village about 1826 and settled on the farm at South Main Street.
- Had nine children, including Charles Benton.

The Gazetteer tells us the following about his son, Charles Benton:

- Born in Norwich, Vermont in 1819.
- Married Elizabeth L. Barker of Windsor, Vermont.
- Had born to him the following children: Martha E., Adaline F., Lizzie J., Achsa A., Charles F., Laura M., Annie O., Frank A., and Marjorie.
- Served as selectman (eight years), justice of the peace, town treasure (six years), supervisor of the check list beginning in 1878, police justice beginning in 1876, and town representative to the legislature in 1879 – 80.
- Breeder of Merino sheep, 140 head
- Proprietor of a “sawing machine” (my italics)
- Farmer with 150 acres in Hanover and 174 acres in Lebanon.
- A son, Charles F. Benton, was also a farmer with his father

After the Bentons

On May 26, 1898, Elizabeth L. Benton (Charles Benton’s widow), Annette A. Benton, Anna O. Benton (daughter), Marjarie F. Benton (daughter), Charles F. Benton (son), Martha B. Buckingham (daughter), Laura B. Heilge (daughter), Frank A. Benton (son), Elizabeth B. Hallman, and Adaline B. Walker (daughter) sold the farm belonging to the late Charles Benton to Dartmouth College for \$4,500. The sale included two tracts of land located on both sides of South Main Street, and totaled 170 acres more or less. Excluded from the sale were the brick farm house and the land immediately surrounding it. Also, the farm house reserved water rights to springs located near the present day northerly area of Barrett Road.

On April 14, 1903 Dartmouth College conveyed the former Benton farm to Charles W. Stone. It is this writer’s understanding that the transfer of the former Benton farm was actually a trade made by the College for the Stones’ farm on the easterly side of Oak Hill, adjacent to the Wolfeboro Road, bordering on the new Hanover Water Works Company’s reservoir that had been created in 1893. The College was a shareholder along with the Village Precinct of Hanover in the recently formed water company, and about ten years after the initial construction of the reservoir, there was an effort to acquire additional land within the watershed. The 1886 Gazetteer tells us that Charles W. Stone was a dairy farmer with a 250 acre farm. When this writer was a young boy, Charles W. Stone’s son, Charles R. “Jim” Stone (also a farmer), told of the day in 1903 that his father traded farms with the College and how they drove all of the livestock down Reservoir and Lyme Roads, thru the center of the village, to the new farm located along Mink Brook. This writer has viewed a map in the Town of Hanover’s records showing all of the farms that made up the reservoir watershed area, including Charles W. Stone’s farm.

This writer believes that Charles W. Stone might have had as many as six or so children. One daughter, Celia Stone, married Ernest Martin Hopkins on February 2, 1911. Celia was first an elementary school teacher and then became the personal secretary of Dartmouth presidents Tucker (1893 – 1909) and Nichols (1909 – 1916). As a young man, after graduating from Dartmouth in 1901, Ernest Martin Hopkins was named the assistant to President Tucker, and fifteen years later became the eleventh president of the

College in 1916, a position that he very successfully held until his retirement in 1945. After Celia Stone Hopkins died on May 18, 1950, Ernest married Celia's widowed sister, Grace Stone Tibbets.

Ida Stone, wife of Charles W. Stone, died on June 8, 1929. It appears that Charles R. "Jim" Stone inherited the farm in 1939. This writer does not know when Charles W. Stone died. Other property occurrences mentioned in the deeds available to this writer include the following:

- A right granted to "Trapp and Tennant" to cut pine and hemlock timber from the property for a period of two years, no date given.
- A conveyance to the Town of Hanover to mine 300 truckloads of gravel from the property on December 21, 1909.
- A parcel 50 feet square beside South Main Street to Grafton County Electric Light and Power Company for an electrical power substation on July 31, 1928, and a similar parcel at the same location to GCEL&PC on December 31, 1929. It is believed by this writer that at about the same time, an easement for an electrical power transmission line, crossing Mink Brook, was also granted to GCEL&PC.
- A parcel of land 66 feet wide to the state of New Hampshire, sold for \$2,000, for purposes of relocating South Main Street, on May 20, 1940.
- Circa 1940 - 1947 Jim Stone sold off several small parcels along the perimeter of the farm adjacent to Buell Street, South Main Street, and Mourlyn Road.
- A sizable parcel of land was sold to Charles G. and Alma N. Milham, who resided at the end of Storrs Road, on September 13, 1946.
- Flowage rights along Mink Brook to elevation 385 feet were sold to the Bellows Falls Hydro-Electric Corporation on February 28, 1948.

South Main Street, also referred to as West Lebanon Road, was relocated during the summer of 1940. This work involved placing new fill across the meadows adjacent to Mink Brook, constructing a new highway bridge spanning Mink Brook, demolishing the former stone highway bridge constructed in 1914, and moving the Stones' wood frame farm house.

Charles R. "Jim" Stone and his wife Kathleen had two children, Chester and George. Both sons served in the United States military during the Second World War, and then returned to the Hanover area. Chester "Chet" Stone constructed a new wood framed cape style house facing South Main Street, located just north of the brick Benton farm house, in 1946. Much of the wood for the house was cut off from his father's farm, out in the vicinity along the Hanover – Lebanon town line. When this writer was a young boy, a large saw dust pile was still visible where a portable saw mill had been temporarily set up. Chet Stone and his wife Florence had two children: son Bob, born about 1946, who died of leukemia when in his early twenties, and a daughter Carol who was born about 1949. Chet had no interest in farming and instead worked as an architectural draftsman for several local Hanover area architects. Chet's brother George was never as settled down, and instead seemed to always be just one step ahead of the law!

On January 10, 1949 Charles R. Stone sold the farm consisting of about 169 acres, excluding the land surrounding his home (perhaps several acres), to Frank J. Barrett, Alfred T. Granger, and Joseph S. Ransmeier, for the sum of \$15,000.

During 1949, the farm buildings were razed or otherwise given away, a large free standing hill located adjacent to the south of the main barn was bulldozed, and the residential subdivision that included Brook Road, Granger Circle, Mitchell Lane, Dayton Drive, Barrett Road, and Thompson Terrace was laid out.

On November 30, 1950 construction had been completed on the new hydro-electric dam known as Wilder Dam, and was dedicated that day. During the following months the new reservoir filled up and flooded lower Mink Brook and the surrounding meadow and former crop lands.

There are very few remaining indicators of this land's once proud agricultural past. Ruben Benton's brick farm house, constructed in 1840, still stands in very nice unaltered condition at 104 South Main Street. The big stone retaining wall that was once the easterly wall of the massive barn is still visible along the easterly side of Granger Circle. If one knows where to look, a short section of the old farm road is still visible parallel to Brook Road. Within the 112- acre Nature Preserve, a very early mill site has been eroded away by the fluctuating waters of Mink Brook but the earthen dam that was once part of the mill site is still visible in the meadows south of the brook, near Trout Brook. Up near the top of the hill, just below the northwesterly facing ledges, unused slabs of granite quarried from those ledges, probably intended for use in the big barn's foundations, are still lying in the woods. This writer has not climbed the hill within the last dozen years or more, so it is not known if any parts of the old farm road that once connected the terraced millet fields are still open.