

# Dublin Historical Society

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## *The House That Benjamin Mason Built*

by Edie Clark

*Recently, local writer Edie Clark came into the Archives to do some research on her house—the Benjamin Mason house—to celebrate its 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary. She has graciously agreed to share her discoveries with us here.*

In 1997, I bought a house on Mason Road in Harrisville, a house that I was told dated to 1762. I have lived in that house ever since, puzzling through its history, finding clues here and there while completely renovating the structure. A strong lesson accompanies living in an old house: I am only a small part of a much greater whole. Since this is the 250th anniversary of this house, I have looked into its history and found that most of the history of this house concerns the Mason family, specifically Benjamin Mason, who was a master carpenter, framer of the old meetinghouse, Dublin's first selectman, a fifer in the Revolution, builder of roads, member of the Dublin church choir, and acrobat.

Though I sometimes try, it is hard to imagine what it was like to live on Beech Hill, high above the village of Dublin, in the early 1760s. (This section of Dublin broke away and became Harrisville in 1870.) Much of the land was wooded. There were few roads. And no other houses. It was a wilderness. In the broader view, the United States had not yet been formed nor had the Revolutionary War been fought. Intrepid early settlers, many of them from the town of Sherborn, Mass., 18 miles west of Boston, made their way to what was then known as Monadnock, No. 3 but which was, in 1771, named Dublin.

Though Dublin was settled in 1752, many local historians declare 1762 the earliest date possible for development in these parts. Incidents surrounding the French and Indian War created a kind of war zone throughout the colonies. Relative to those earlier years, 1762 represented a building boom. Starting that year and moving forward, as many as 30 families named Mason made the journey from Sherborn

to buy land in Dublin and surrounding towns. One of the most prominent of these early settlers was Benjamin Mason, who was born in Sherborn on July 14, 1717, one of the twelve children of Joseph Mason, a tanner and justice of the peace in Watertown, Mass. In September of 1741, Benjamin married Martha Fairbanks. They had nine children, most born in Sherborn, and not all of them survived, known by the fact that three of these children were named Benjamin.

According to the National Register of Historic Places Inventory, Nomination Form, the Benjamin Mason homestead dates to 1762, so we will use that date, though 1762, 1763, 1765, and 1767 appear on other documents in the Dublin Town Archives. It is certain that in one of those years, Mason and his family moved from Sherborn to Lot 14, Range 9—currently my home. He brought with him his rugged nature and his skills as a master carpenter and framer. At the top of the hill of what is now called Mason Road, Benjamin Mason built a “plank house” approximately 175 yards west of where the house now stands. His name appears on the town records as having worked on the roads in 1764 and 1765. He apparently helped build Venable Road, as one example of his labor, and another source states that he worked on the roads to defray his taxes. (On some old maps, Venable Road appears as Mason Road/Old Harrisville Road, so he may have, in fact, built the road to his house.) According to Leonard & Seward's *The History of Dublin, New Hampshire*, Benjamin Mason framed most of the houses erected in the neighborhood in his day, and at raisings and the like, he was distinguished for his “agility, fearlessness and self possession.” One example of his agility and apparent *joie de vivre* is recorded in the Mason Family Register. “It is reported that he was master workman when the frame of the old meetinghouse was put up; and he framed most of the buildings erected in the neighborhood where he lived. He was a man of uncommon agility



Photo courtesy Historic Harrisville

Benjamin Mason Homestead in 1946

and once, having raised the frame for a barn of ordinary size (*we believe that would be 30' x 40'*), he walked the whole length of the ridge-pole upon his hands, having no other support, his feet in the meantime upended in the air."

This leaves me longing to see a picture of this man, though, of course, none exist.

Aside from helping to build roads, Benjamin Mason was of considerable service to the town. At the first town meeting held at Dublin, in 1771, he was chosen selectman. In April 1773, at a meeting of the Proprietors of Monadnock, No. 3, he was chosen to serve on a committee to receive and "examine the accounts brought against the Proprietary," and again on March 4, 1774, he was appointed chairman of a committee of inspection to see that the Resolves of the Continental Congress be observed. He was listed as a voter in 1770, and his name appears on the tax list of 1771.

He served briefly in the Revolutionary War as a private. He was fifer when his company marched from Rindge in July 1777 to join the Northern Continental Army at Bennington.

On his return from war, he joined the Dublin Church and, "being musically inclined was one of the leaders of the choir singers."

His wife, Martha, was said to be a woman of "feeble health." It's hard to tell if this was the cause of her frailty, but the story is told, also in the Family Register, that while they were still living in Sherborn (also known as Sherburne), she almost died "through the carelessness of a ser-

vant girl. When her eldest son, Thaddeus, was an infant and in her arms, the girl seized a gun, which she supposed to be unloaded and, pointing it at the child, she said, 'I'll shoot you!' She pulled and the charge of shot entered the side of (Martha) but fortunately, her *stays* offered so much resistance, she was not fatally injured." (The *stays* would have been in her undergarment.)

In any case, Martha lived to be 91 years old so she may have been sickly but she survived many a long and fearsome winter on Beech Hill and, in fact, outlived by four years her faithful husband Benjamin, who died in 1801.

With that sturdy beginning, the Benjamin Mason homestead held a continuous family lineage from 1762 until 1946—184 years of unbroken family ownership. To review, the house and farmlands were passed from Benjamin, Sr., who owned the property from 1762 to 1790, to his youngest son, Bela, who took possession then and held it until 1810. The farm then passed to his nephew, Samuel Mason, Jr. Though Levi Emery is listed as the next owner, the farm left the family in name only as Levi Emery married Elvira Mason, so it was still in the Mason family. They farmed it from 1833 to 1875. They had no children. Mary Ann Mason, youngest daughter of Samuel, married Solon Willard in 1850, continuing the Mason hold but beginning the simultaneous Willard connection. Solon and Mary Ann lived at the farm until his death in 1908.

The Willard family continued on the homestead until

it was sold out of the family in 1946 to Robert and Mary Walker, who moved up from Long Island and who continued to farm there until the farm was sold in 1997 to Anne W. Howe, their neighbor to the west, who bought the farmland on the south side of the road, while I bought the house and the land on the north side of the road. We bought the farm together in order to save it from threat of development. Neither of us farm, but the vast fields are hayed and kept open by Jay Jacobs, who has owned the Moses Adams farm (land only) down the road since 1978. (Moses Adams and Benjamin Mason arrived in Dublin about the same time.)

According to the National Register: “no other homestead in Harrisville exemplifies the historical significance of the district better than the Mason Homestead.” The “plank house” was moved to its present location sometime before 1812, giving it the advantage of being closer to the road and also the protection of the hill and the bank into which it was set. This not only provided protection from the wind, which is forceful up here, but it afforded the house two at-grade entrances, which was supposedly a good way to avoid taxes on a two-story structure. (Alas, no longer!)

Once moved, the small, one-and-one-half story Cape was extended and extended again by a series of sheds until they reached the great barn. And so it became Big House, Little House, Backhouse, Barn. Likely in the 1950s, the current garage and storage shed were fashioned out of one or two of these sheds. Stones that once provided footings for these outbuildings still remain to trace their link to the barn, but most of them collapsed or were taken down.

The foundation for the house was constructed of large fieldstones with a top layer of brick, presumably so the sill of the old house could sit squarely on the new foundation. By 1840, the kitchen ell was added (it is said that the old cistern remains beneath the old kitchen floorboards—I would have to tear up the pine boards to find out). Another extension provided a laundry and a privy. In the late 1870s, a porch was added to the kitchen ell. In the 1880s, a two-story addition was added on to the west side of the little Cape, so they could take in summer boarders, one more source of income.

By the time I bought the farm in 1997, the oak-framed English barn was listing and in need of repair. The 1986 National Register reports: “Once the traditional 30’ x 40’ it is now 15’ wider due to a 19th century extension along the northern side, converting it to a more typical Yankee barn. The great hay doors are on the long rather than the gabled-roof sides of the barn with hay mows above the stalls for stock on either side. Its southern door has a single row of glass panes above its lintel.”

The assessors for the National Register concluded this barn to be “one of very few extant 18th century barns in New England,” but those words would not fix the roof, in

particular the roof in the northeast corner, or the buckled, rotted posts. The 19th century addition they referred to was all but caved. Estimates just to repair and give it stability were, sadly, beyond my means. I was able to sell it to Ernie LaBombard, a barn expert from Canaan. He brought a crane and a flatbed down and, working alone with the crane operator, he walked the high frame with the agility of Benjamin Mason himself, removing one peg at a time and thus dismantling it like Lincoln Logs, all within eight hours. We know it took Benjamin Mason a lot longer to erect the big structure. [If you would like to see photos of the barn, you can go to Ernie’s website where it is listed among the frames as “Dublin,” at [www.greatnorthernbarns.com](http://www.greatnorthernbarns.com).]

The record from the National Register continues: “The successive generations of Masons and Willards lived substantive lives here from 1762 until after World War II. They cleared the fields, harvested timber, and had a long, continuous relationship with Harrisville village mills.” They raised beef for local boarding houses (which included their own), provided wool for the blankets turned out in the mills, and had a brick yard that “scanty records show provided bricks at least for a Harrisville blacksmith if not for the mill buildings.” In the mid 19th century, the farm kept one horse, two oxen, a herd of thirty sheep, four or five milking cows, and two or three pigs. They grew fields of wheat, corn, barley and potatoes, and brought in 30 tons of hay each year. In the better years, other produce included 350 pounds of butter, 150 pounds of cheese, and several hundred pounds of maple syrup. In the smaller, red barn, still standing, wooden lasts for leather shoes were found when the property changed hands in 1997. The cobbler’s bench remains. Everything else was removed before the closing, but until then, it was considered a “rare surviving local example of the outwork system of shoe manufacturing which was very important in mid-19th century New Hampshire.” In short, Ben Mason’s homestead evolved into an enterprising and active farm. Where other farms in the district declined after the Civil War, this farm survived.

Levi Emery had close social and business connections with the Harris family and with Harris Mills. The Agricultural Censuses for 1850, 1860, and 1870 show Levi Emery was producing large quantities of wool (90 pounds in 1850 and 1860, 140 pounds in 1870). Undoubtedly he was selling wool to the Harris Mills. When he lived on the farm, Solon Willard sold cordwood to the Cheshire Mills. In the 1870s and 1880s, the farm took in \$3,000 each year.

Ralph Willard, grandson of Solon Willard, was born in the house in 1910. He and his wife, Gladys, lived there together, raising seven children, until they sold the farm to the Walkers in 1946, retaining a small acre at the edge of the original plot of land. On that acre, they built a small Cape



of the period and, after Ralph died, Gladys lived there very happily, still doing Navy kicks and mowing her lawn by hand at the age of 93. Before she died in 2009, she gave me a small mixing bowl, cream-colored with a stripe of blue, which she said came out of the old farmhouse—a gift I treasure.

Until about 1995, this 198-acre complex was farmed by the Walker family. In its final phase as a farm, corn was raised for son-in-law Hank Kenney's dairy farm in nearby Marlborough. They grazed his heifers on the pastures, hayed the fields of orchard grass and timothy, and harvested hardwoods from the wood lots. They also gathered maple sap for Hank and Nancy's maple sugar ventures. Mary Walker, Nancy's mother, was well known in Dublin for her work as a caterer as well as at both *Yankee* magazine and at the Dublin Lake Club. Mary fostered an amazing array of flower gardens along the rocks walls and at the edges of the woods. Her father was the gardener for J.P. Morgan's Long Island estate and on occasion, she brought cuttings and divided clumps to plant here. She worked in other gardens as well, especially at Abe Wolfe's High Wells, where she and her husband Bob acted as caretakers for many years. Some of her gardens remain. Mary Walker's death in 1995 ended the Walkers' tenure on the land and the active farming, but happily some of her gardens remain.

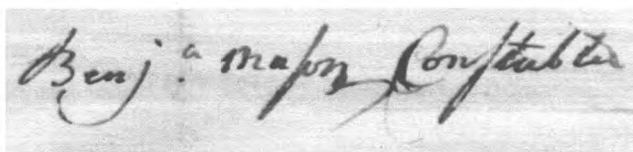
Huge maples and large apple trees surround the farmstead still, though all were substantially damaged in the 1998 ice storm, just weeks after I took possession. Today, as in centuries past, the house sits slightly back from the road, behind a stone retaining wall made of huge quarried granite stones, all in the midst of extensive cleared fields and stone walls, substantially unchanged, though I have made vast changes to the house interior.

When I bought it, the most noticeable problems with the house were three. The interior was dark and chopped up into small rooms. The entire house was oriented to the north, toward the barn, which was convenient for the farmers, but I wanted to orient the house to the south, where the mountain and sunlight awaited. And it had seven bedrooms. I needed only two or three at the most.

With all this in mind, we removed many walls and doors, which brought air and light to the expanded rooms. To the south-facing roof, we added a dormer and one skylight, plus many windows to the west wall. Without being aware I was repeating history, I added an almost identical addition to the west for a living room and a screen porch. A new kitchen was created out of the large south-facing living

room and two bedrooms adjoining the kitchen provided room for a spacious dining room. Two new chimneys replaced the old and condemned. The downstairs bedroom that faced the mountain became an open, stone-floored porch. In short, the house was completely rearranged with energy efficiency, light, and the magnificent view of the mountain in mind. Where once there were seven bedrooms, now there are three. And, like those who came before me, I do occasionally take in boarders.

If one can accept that the intermarrying of the Willards with the Masons maintained the Mason family tie, then it can be said that there have been only three owners of this farm, the Mason/Willard family and the Walkers, followed by Anne and myself. After purchase, we divided the land by the run of the



Signature of Benjamin Mason, "Constable,"  
from Dublin warrant article, 1772

road, which represented a natural subdivision. Anne Howe subsequently put the land in her possession (115 acres in total) into conservation with the New Hampshire Society for the Preservation of Forests wherein, by easement, the land can never be built on or developed in any way. One would presume that Benjamin Mason would approve.

Though they dominated the town rolls for at least two centuries, to my knowledge, there are no Masons left living in Dublin. Ten years ago, in an effort to eliminate confusion over the fact that there were two Old Harrisville Roads in Harrisville, the Harrisville section of the road was renamed Mason Road, as a tribute to Benjamin Mason. There were also two notes of surprise in my research: Henry Allison, Dublin citizen extraordinaire, was a fifth-generation direct descendant of Benjamin Mason and the red Cape in the center of town that has, since 1935, been occupied by *Yankee* magazine, belonged to Dexter Mason, also a direct descendant of Benjamin. Perhaps in this day of six degrees of separation, if I did a thorough enough genealogical search, I might find I too am his direct descendant. Having lived here these last 15 years, exposing his hand-hewn beams and studying the curious traces of wallpaper on the basement walls as well as the massive foundation for the long-gone center chimney, I feel a special kinship. Maybe that's all it takes.

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*For help gathering this information, I am indebted to John Harris of the Dublin Archives and to Anne Howe of the archives of Historic Harrisville, as well as to various web searches from the National Archives and those of the National Park Service. And to Phil Sweet, who helped me search ancestor.com for a record of Benjamin Mason. (Edie can be reached at [www.edieclark.com](http://www.edieclark.com).)*