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Beech Hill

by Ian Aldrich

A GRAND MANSION

In the late 1800s, as Dublin became a magnet for a diverse group of wealthy summer residents, a series of lavish, large estates began to sprawl out across the landscape. These new retreats were afforded unrivaled views of Dublin Lake and Mount Monadnock, and reflected a rich architectural flavor rarely seen elsewhere in New Hampshire.

One of the visionaries behind these grand homes was the renowned architect and landscape designer, Charles Adams Platt. Between 1898 and 1908 Platt designed four Dublin estates, including Mostly Hall (1900) on Old Harrisville Road, and the Daniel K. Catlin home (1908), at the end of Stonlea Lane.

Two other homes offered a more personal connection for Platt as both came at the request of his sister, Mrs. Elizabeth Jencks of Baltimore. The first of those, Spur House (1901) was designed for Jencks' sister-in-law and physician husband, Dr. E. Lindon Mellus, also of Baltimore.

The second was for Jencks and her husband, Francis M. Jencks. Deriving its name from the promontory on which it sat, Beech Hill was designed and built in 1902-03. It was a five-part, two-story Georgian Revival, and offered commanding views of the surrounding community.

In 1920, the home and its 79 acres were sold to Grosvenor Hyde Backus, a Washington, D.C., attorney, and his wife, the artist, Josefa C. Sewall Backus. They'd arrived in Dublin the year before, first taking up residence at Glimpsewood. After buying the Platt mansion, the couple resided at the estate until Grosvenor's death in 1948.

That same year, Josefa sold the property. It marked not only the end of the Backus's ownership of the mansion but also the house's life as one of Dublin's esteemed summer estates. Instead, a new era began for Beech Hill, one far grander than anything Platt could have imagined: home to a pioneering approach to treating alcohol addiction.

BEECH HILL FARM

The history of alcohol treatment is still relatively young. For years, alcoholics were believed to simply lack the willpower to change their lives; that their addiction was more a moral issue than a disease. In the early years of the 20th century, some treatment programs included physical abuse, humiliation, incarceration, and other scared-straight tactics intended to help alcoholics achieve a sober life.

But the 1930s marked a turning point in the approaches to alcoholism treatment. Most notable was the founding, in 1934, of Alcoholics Anonymous by William Griffith Wilson and Dr. Robert Smith. At the core of their recovery program was a spiritually centered 12 Step treatment that soon became synonymous with the organization. Elsewhere, the medical and academic worlds were also taking a renewed look at alcoholism treatment, among



One in a series of over 30 different postcards produced by Beech Hill Farm, 1949.



Beech Hill Farm “guests” relax by the swimming pool (built in the 1920s by the Backus family), 1949.

them the Yale School of Alcohol Studies. Launched in the late 1930s, it became the first interdisciplinary research center devoted to alcohol abuse.

One of its early graduates was a man by the name of John “Johnny Appleseed” Supple, a Connecticut native and AA member who’d been involved with alcoholism treatment since 1942. After several years of working at various alcoholism treatment centers, Supple landed on the idea of starting his own retreat for sobriety-minded alcoholics. In early 1948, Supple and his wife Janey, who had just \$200 to their name, moved to southern New Hampshire to realize his dream.

Their arrival had come at the invitation of Dr. Lillian M. Mahoney, owner of the Aldworth Manor, a private sanitarium in Harrisville, who’d pledged \$28,000 toward Supple’s new venture. With Mahoney’s guidance, Supple concluded his search for a home for his new center at the Backus estate atop Beech Hill.

On April 28, 1948, the Mahoney-Supple team purchased the home and its 79 acres from Josefa Backus. Two days later, the property was legally renamed Beech Hill Farm.

Over the next few months, Supple worked hard to convert the lavish mansion into a treatment center. He constructed a chapel directly to the right of the entrance and turned the large room on the northeast corner into a common dining room.

By early 1949, Supple had created a new kind of treatment facility, one that offered a comforting atmosphere where “guests” paid \$6 a day to recover. The facility was marked as much by what it didn’t have as by what it offered.

Absent was any kind of staff, much less a formal rehabilitation program. Instead, residents found therapy in the housework, outdoor chores, and recreation offered at the grand estate.

“We have kept it that way,” Supple told a visiting newspaper reporter in 1949, “because non-alcoholics do not understand us. Here the guests understand each other, and feel at ease. They help each other work out their problems.”

Reporters and other visitors marveled at what Supple had created. “There is more than democracy at work at Beech Hill Farm, but democracy might well be studied there too,” wrote *The Dublin Opinion* in May 1949. “Those who come there do all the work and chores around the place.

A millionaire may wait on the table, and be just as careful about how he does it as someone who has little in the world but his pockets. One feels a family atmosphere right away upon entering the house—something difficult to achieve in the short time Mr. Supple has had.”

Supple’s own compassion for those trying to get sober defined the administration of the facility during those early years. A former supervisor at the Remington Arms plant in Bridgeport, Connecticut, Supple had battled his own addictions before finally seeking treatment in 1942. Just two years later, he quit his job at Remington and began working full-time operating facilities dedicated to the treatment of alcoholism.

As much as anyone he understood the work and daily commitment it took to stay sober. His own life included a relapse into drinking following three years of sobriety. For him, Beech Hill served as a starting point, a place where addicts could put themselves on firmer ground as they began the hard work to attack their problem.

“What we do,” explained Supple, who oversaw the Farm until 1952, when he moved on to administer other centers, “is sow the seed.”

Despite its rather open approach, Supple had a few strict rules. There was no alcohol permitted on the grounds, and nobody was admitted while under the influence. If someone was simply looking for a weekend spot to dry out for a few days, Supple turned them away.

In its first year and a half, the Farm welcomed 500 guests. Visitors were referred to Beech Hill by hospitals in New York, the New Hampshire Alcoholism Commission, and friends.



Oil portrait of John Supple painted by Richard Whitney, commissioned for the 30th anniversary of Beech Hill Farm in 1978.

Beech Hill also drew the praise of AA co-founder, William Griffith Wilson, who'd worked with Supple and known him since the early 1940s. More than just an inspiration for Beech Hill, AA had a real presence at the retreat, with Supple holding meetings about the program every Saturday night.

A TIME OF GROWTH

With Wilson's help and appeal—he asked AA supporters in 1951 to contribute \$15,000 “to make a real go of” the Farm—Beech Hill, one of only two addiction retreats in the entire nation, began to expand.

In 1951 Beech Hill broke from its early form and established a 7-bed infirmary for safe detoxification of inebriated new patients. In 1965 the infirmary expanded to 20 beds with the construction of a new one-story building beside the mansion. A few years later, new professionally supervised seminars were introduced for recovering addicts.

By the early 1970s demand for what Beech Hill provided had increased so much that further expansion was again needed. This time the facility embarked on the construction of a modern, fully staffed one-and-a-half story hospital that eventually allowed for the accommodation of 42 patients.

Demand was driven in no small part by a change in the mid 1970s: Beech Hill began accepting third-party payments, in effect opening the door for it to collect insurance payments to cover treatment.

By the early 1980s, Beech Hill Hospital, as it was now known, served some 2,100 patients a year, offering highly

specialized in-patient, intermediate care, and after-care programs, plus consultation and education seminars for professional groups. In 1986, Beech Hill added on again, constructing a new 100-bed hospital building called Summit Hall.

Its staffing infrastructure included doctors, nurses, psychologists, and addiction counselors. Nearly 100 employees in all worked at the hospital, a number of them residing at the home of another former sanatorium, Birch Acres (now Del Rossi's Trattoria on Route 137), which Beech Hill had purchased in 1973 following its closure.

While a stark departure from Supple's original vision, Beech Hill's evolution had simply mirrored, and in some cases led, the widening scope and greater understanding of addiction issues. From that original, humble retreat first opened forty years before had sprung up one of the country's premier addiction treatment centers.

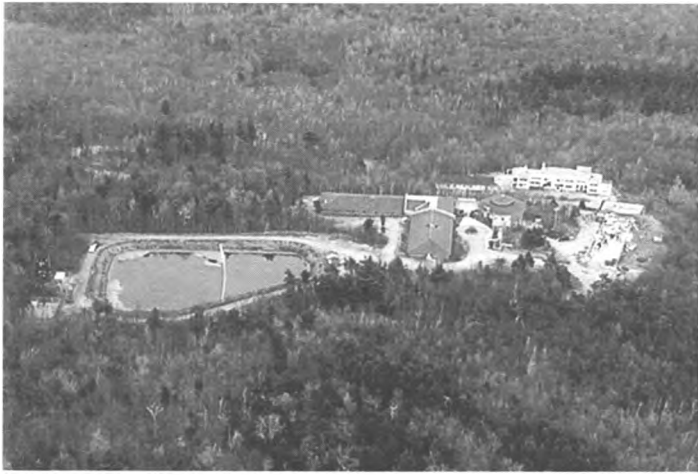
“At night,” wrote Tom Hyman in his Dublin history, *Village on a Hill*, “Beech Hill blazed with lights from many windows, and when the leaves were off the trees it gave the impression from a distance, as one approached town from the east, of a city on a hill.”

END OF AN ERA

Over the last two decades of its life, Beech Hill experienced numerous ownership changes and during the late 1990s was plagued with problems, including a series of serious incidents, including a rape and a riot among the patients. By the turn of the century the hospital seemed to be on better footing, but in 2001 the state discovered that several health and building violations had not been addressed. Midway through the year it ordered the hospital's current owner, Michael Beavers, to permanently shut down the hospital.



A postcard sent home during recovery, 1959.



View of hospital and septic lagoon prior to 2001.

BACK TO THE LAND

In the wake of its closure Beavers attempted to reopen the campus as a co-ed boarding school for grades 7 through 12, a proposal that was met with opposition by the town due to environmental and zoning problems.

Plans for a new use of the property began to form in 2005 when a group of Dublin citizens developed a strategy to purchase Beech Hill Hospital and its land from Beavers. As open land, Beech Hill is a vital piece of the conserved landscape. Its ridgeline is the watershed between the Connecticut River and the Merrimack, while its granite ledges and forests offer crucial habitat for numerous birds and animals.

Recognizing its importance, the Beech Hill-Dublin Lake Watershed Association was created with a mission to “make Beech Hill itself a resource for local citizens, and contribute to peoples’ better understanding of the watershed.”

With the help of more than two-dozen local donors from several towns, as well as financial support from the Monadnock Conservancy, the organization purchased the former rehabilitation center and its land from Beavers in August 2006 for \$1.365 million.

Over the next few years restoration of the property ensued. The original mansion and 12 surrounding acres were sold to Lavinia Clay, while all other buildings were demolished. The large septic lagoon was filled in and the land was protected for public use through a conservation easement granted to the Monadnock Conservancy.

Today, the 63-acre property is open to the public and features an assortment of hiking trails, including the Old Carriage Trail, which was first constructed in the 1920s. The property’s newest trails include the East Face Trail, Zig Zag Trail, and Ridge Trail, all constructed by Peterborough resident and forester, Swift Corwin, in 2010.

Through the hard work of the Association and its supporters, Beech Hill is now permanently protected, a prized natural resource that fosters wildlife habitat and provides a recreation area with the same stunning views that first drew Platt, the Jencks’s, the Backus’s, Supple and so many others.

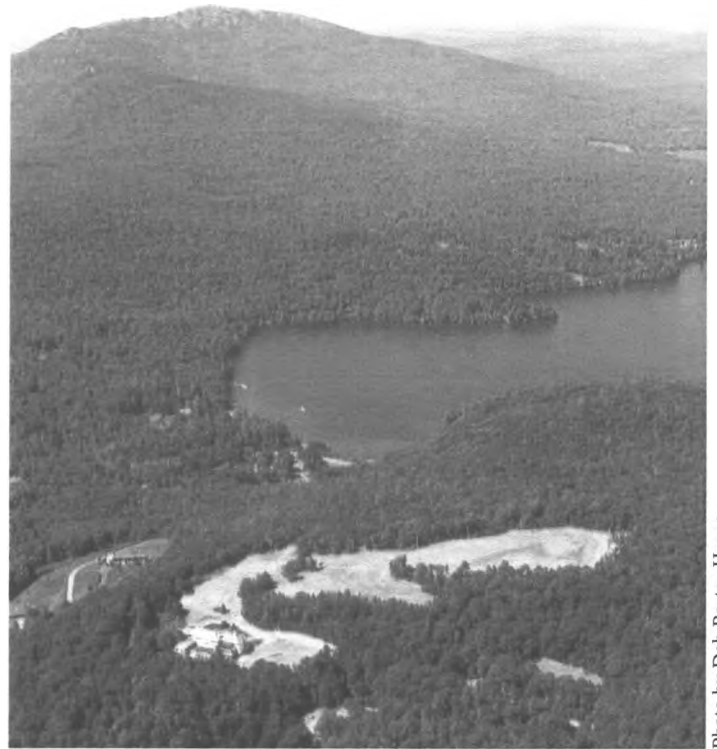


Photo by Deb Porter-Hayes

View after restoration of land by Beech-Hill-Dublin Lake Watershed Association, 2008.

Our thanks to Sharron Monaghan for her photos of the DHS annual meeting, featured in our last newsletter.

IN MEMORIUM

The Society reports with great sorrow the recent loss of the following members: **Gerald Belloli, Robert McQuillen, and Peter Hewitt.**

FROM THE ARCHIVES

We are grateful to Sally Shonk and Rosemary Mack for volunteering their time every Tuesday. We have had many generous donations to the Archives recently which we will acknowledge in our next issue.

DUES REMINDER

Thank you to all those who have paid their 2014 dues. For those of you who haven’t had a chance, we enclose an envelope for your convenience.