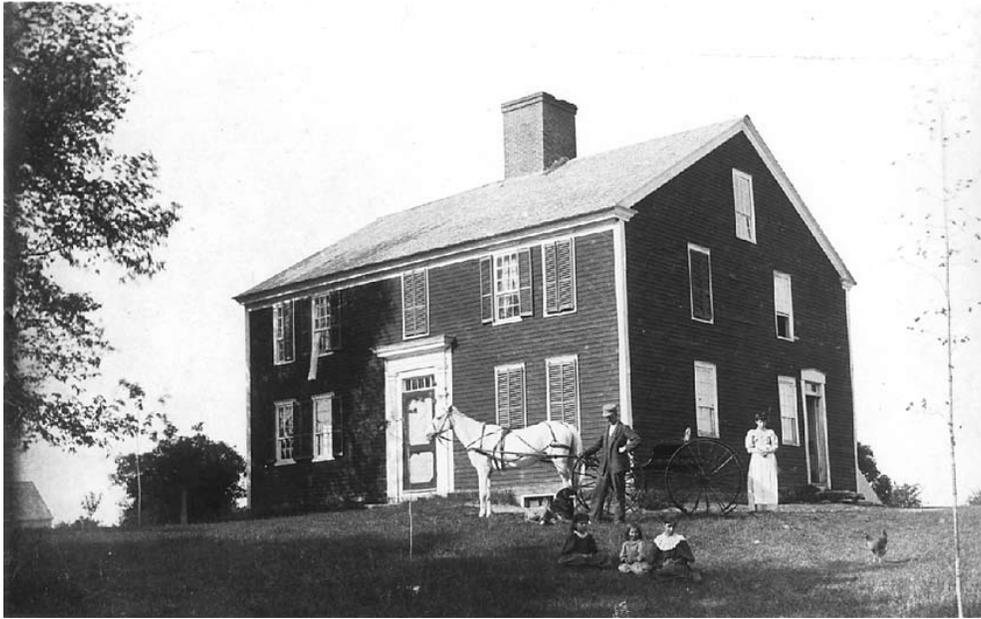


The Red House: Facts, Stories, and Conjecture

by Katie Murphy



The Dolloff family standing before their home, the former Buxton Tavern, c. 1895. Frank Dolloff stands behind his daughters, presumably the eldest three, Ethel, Rachel, and Minnie. Cora Baston Dolloff stands to the right. Photo courtesy Yarmouth Historical Society

I started out to write a short article about the Red House and some of the rumors that have surrounded its existence. But, as with so much research, my investigation quickly went from one subject to another, well beyond the simple history of the house itself. But the house's actual "biography" is where the story really begins.

THE BUXTONS

The property that this house sits on was originally built on in 1781 as a building lot by Isaiah and Sarah Cushman, who pieced it together from various owners to make a 65-acre lot. After 14 years, Isaiah and Sarah sold it

Whenever I return to North Yarmouth from points south, it's a pleasure to drive home the back way, up Route 9 through Cumberland and into Walnut Hill village. Once I reach our town's double 115/9 intersections, the familiar territory makes me relax. But not completely; these converging routes have been a dangerous section of road for many years and the driver is best advised to stay alert. Our town's center intersections have been this way since the 1700s, but big changes are coming, as the stack of culverts and pile of wood chips lying in wait on the Smith's property just beyond the granite posts on Route 9 testify. (The MDOT's project, which includes pedestrian-friendly sidewalks, is scheduled to be completed by June 30.)

Our crossroads may be altered, but the buildings that line the roads will stay in place; and that's a comfort, because I don't think I could stand TOO much change in the center of Walnut Hill! Many of our old houses have watched the march of progress for decades, if not centuries. These are the comforting structures that provide us with a sense of home.

Chief among them is the big red house that sits literally in front of one of the intersections due for revamping. In past years, it was home to a preschool (named, of course, The Red House), although recently it changed hands and is now a private residence again.

with "the buildings thereon" to 27-year-old Jeremiah Buxton in 1795. Jeremiah had made a smart purchase. By 1795 the county road from Yarmouth village to New Gloucester had been well established; six years later it would intersect with the Hallowell Road directly in front of the Red House. Anyone traveling further inland and along the stagecoach line that ran through the village was sure to pass by the Buxton place, and Jeremiah must have seen opportunity here. (*Remember the old adage: "Three elements of a successful business are location, location, location."*)

Jeremiah married 24-year-old Jane Drinkwater in 1796, and this entrepreneurial couple set to work. They established a tavern and an inn at the house, farmed the property, raised cattle, and traded. The oldest Buxton son, William, took after his industrious parents. At age 17 he joined the family business and eventually held shares with Jeremiah in Union Wharf in Yarmouth, a stagecoach line that ran through Walnut Hill village, and eventually railroad stocks. The family bought more property in North Yarmouth, amounting to 130 acres in 1813.

Jeremiah and Jane raised six children (six others died at young ages). Three occupied significant houses in Walnut Hill: William bought the home just north of the Red House in 1836 (it had once been an old tavern). Jeremiah Jr. ran the Red House tavern after his parents for many years. And Edward G. Buxton ran the white Buxton Tavern Stand across the road from the Red House.

Coopers were important to trade in early days because they constructed and repaired wooden barrels. Before metal drums or plastic containers, barrels were essential for storing and transporting flour, grain, molasses, maple syrup, cider, beer, salted meat and fish, and more.



The Buxton family businesses catered to the traveler. At this busy intersection, the family offered a store, blacksmith shop and a cooperage, which son Edward operated.

People on their way through Walnut Hill traveling north and west were following

the road to Hallowell (Route 9) or were on their way to Gray and further to New Gloucester, a courthouse site. Going south and east, they were making their way to Yarmouth or Portland with goods to sell. One or two stagecoach routes passed through here.

Stagecoach passengers stayed in the Red House; the cattle drovers and peddlers stayed at the Tavern Stand. A sign at the crossroads advertised “Entertainment for Man and Beast” (one assumes that a good time was had by all, but what specifically the cattle enjoyed is a little mysterious).

Jeremiah Buxton Sr. died in 1835; Jane in 1847. The house passed to son William. Finally, as the house neared close to a century of Buxton ownership, the family bade farewell to the Red House in 1881, when the elder Buxtons’ daughter-in-law Jane (widow of William) and granddaughter-in-law Rachel (widow of William M. Buxton) sold the house and 30 acres to neighbor Samuel H. Sweetser.

THE DOLLOFFS AND BEYOND

Sweetser owned the house for only three years, but he did not occupy it, and it stayed empty. The place was not in very good shape at this time. We know this because it was one of five properties that the town considered buying and turning into a poor farm, and a town committee reported on its condition. It had “one old barn & shed and from 20 to 25 acres of land. This is a cheap farm soil very good but rather badly run out...no pasture no wood and no fence except what the rail road makes running through it. Water priveledge rather bad...(sic).”

Samuel sold the house and property to Frank Dolloff in 1884. (By the way, we don’t know exactly when the house was painted red, but it was surely prior to 1884, because the deed transfer clearly referred to it as the Red House).

Frank was 25 years old at the time and had been living both at home with his parents, and also (according to the 1870 Census) with his brother Oscar and family at their farm, the

present-day Skyline Farm. The Dolloffs had moved here from Rumford, but Frank truly became part of the community when he married Cora Bell Baston, an energetic woman born and raised in North Yarmouth. Cora eventually became the town’s resident nurse and midwife, maybe due in part to personal experience: She and Frank had six children, all girls.

It must have been a busy house. We know this from the extraordinary set of record books that Frank kept throughout his adult life, and which are still in the possession of the Dixon family. From these we know that Frank worked very hard and wore many hats: He not only hayed, planted endless rows of strawberries, hills of potatoes and corn, and apple trees; but at times was a US mail carrier; worked for the American Express Co.; hired out as a day laborer; worked for Merrill Brothers and for Forest Paper Co., and served as Station Agent for the Maine Central Railroad. The railroad had come through Walnut Hill Village in 1870, connecting Portland with Danville Junction and points west. The line ran close by to the Red House, and the depot was just down the way. Frank faithfully kept the railroad records and his journal at a desk near the side door of the house.

Frank’s personal notes about his family are very spare; his records of jobs and financial matters are more meticulous. He does note occasionally that he is sick. He writes about this more often as the years progress, In fact, he died in 1904 at the age of 45, leaving Cora with 20 year-old Minnie, 18-year-old Ethel, 15-year-old Rachel, 13-year-old Lena, 8-year-old Anne, and 3-year-old May (Mary). Cora remarried in 1906 to Edward Perris of Pownal, who joined her at the Red House.

Following Cora and Edward’s deaths in 1928, three of the Dolloff daughters—Ethel, Anne, and May—continued to live on in the house. None of the women ever married. May, the last remaining sister, passed away in 1988 and left the house to her grandnephew Mark Dixon and his wife Anne. In 1999 the Dixons built a new home back behind the Red House, and Katri Sampson became the house’s new owner. She turned part of the downstairs into the Red House Montessori School; many local children were students there.

The Red House was bought in 2005 by Tim and Cheryl Clayton. The Clayton children Morgan (9), Sophie (7), and Ian (3), are especially intrigued by and proud of the house’s history.

RED HOUSE STORIES

Architecturally, the Red House is a Georgian structure (see article on p. 4). It is a farmhouse, and a big one at that, with more than 10 rooms. At right angles to the “big house” is a spacious ell, at one time a separate building. *(cont’d next page)*

Town Administrator Norman Smith presents 95 year-old Ethel Dolloff with the Boston Post Cane in 1981. Sisters Anne, Ethel, and May lived in the Red House from the day they were born until their deaths. Ethel, well-known locally as a midwife, died in 1982. (Photo originally published in *The Shopping Notes*)



Both Dick Baston and the Dixons have stories to tell about the Red House. Dick (whose grandfather's sister was Cora Dolloff) has the distinction of having been born in the Red House in May of 1927, "in the front room, on the left side." His mother "laid in" there for two days. Though Cora and her daughter Ethel were both midwives, "Old Dr. Woodman attended (my mother)," he says. "He came up there by horse and wagon and stayed on until I made my appearance." This was "old" Dr. Woodman; his son, the "new" Dr. Woodman made house calls years later in an automobile.

Mark and Ann Dixon's memories are more recent and point to an intriguing aspect of the house: its "secret cupboards."

In an upstairs room is a small closet, only about 8-9" deep, with a false back wall panel. Opening up the panel reveals a space that extends down to the first floor. And in a downstairs room is another panel that reveals another even more spacious "room" that also extends down to the cellar. "We used to padlock that cupboard when our children were toddlers because we worried that they might get curious and fall down into the chamber," recalls Ann. "Our son Drew used to believe that Santa came from behind the padlocked door."

Mark once climbed down into the little room to run a cable and noted that the room was big enough for 6 to 8 people.

Were these spaces once used for a specific purpose? The possibility is easy to imagine. Dick Baston remembers being told that the places were used to "hide from the Indians. You'd hole up there and leave the house wide open. That way the Indians would think you'd headed for the woods instead." "Aunt May's father and mother always told their children that the 'secret room' in the chimney area was used to hide former slaves who were attempting to make their way to Canada," says Ann.

Many SAD 51 schoolchildren remember these intriguing spaces, too. For several years, the Dixons generously opened their home to elementary classes during their study of local history, and a highlight of the tour was always opening the "secret panels" and peeking into to the bricklined spaces.

A QUESTION OF STRUCTURE

What were these spaces? Modern, efficient houses built today don't have such features, but, says North Yarmouth historian Ursula Baier, older houses certainly did. And "they might have been hiding places. No doubt about it. People might tuck silver into them if they felt threatened, or someone might hide. Children would of course use them for play." However, she says, these spaces were not deliberately planned, but were an efficient use of odd areas left over after the boxing in of a huge center chimney, the heart and soul of an old house. The chimney was essential to carry smoke from the kitchen fireplace, bake oven, and other smaller fireplaces. So important was the chimney that it was sometimes partially erected before the house frame was even started. And, the frame of the house was designed specifically to contain the chimney, rooted by a massive piece of masonry in the cellar that supported the first floor kitchen fireplace. It was logical to add on other fireplaces to share the same flue. As the chimney stretched upward, its "shoulders" tapered, creating odd and often spacious areas. Rather than waste the space, builders might create access to these areas by building in a small door. Other boxed-in spaces might be the odd leftover from building a bake oven or a the space underneath a house's triple run staircase. Both of these often became cubbyholes with doors fitted for access. A carpenter with a good eye for detail would match the door to the surrounding panel.

These "bonus" spaces had all kinds of use, from drying herbs to storing utensils. But is it possible that the Red House's cupboards truly did hide fugitive slaves traveling to freedom along the Underground Railroad? As we turn to this question, a short historical background is necessary.

Ian Clayton, equipped with flashlights, shows off the "secret door" in the old kitchen of the Red House. Below, a look down into the passage.



A SECRET NETWORK

The Underground Railroad originated in the Philadelphia area around 1800 and grew to a complex network of both black and white people who ferried escaped slaves to freedom. By the 1850s it involved thousands of activists and was a “model of democracy in action (with) a minimum of central direction and maximum of grassroots involvement” (F. Bordewich). It was built around secrecy and therefore few written records exist of names, dates, methods of transport and locations of “stations.”

In Maine, which had been admitted to the Union in 1820 as a free state (as part of the Missouri Compromise), and whose Article 1 of the new state constitution declared “all men are born equally free and independent,” slavery was not a distant



It's not often you get the chance to see a complete center chimney exposed. But on October 24, 1941, when fire completely destroyed Cliff Young's house near the intersection of Route 231 and North Road (Hick's Corner), the opportunity presented itself. Phil Chase of the Cumberland Fire Department was there to help fight the fire and stopped long enough to snap a photo of the aftermath. On the spot of this house today stands the home of Mark Heath, next to the old Hicks School.

Through the smoke you can glimpse, at the bottom, the first floor kitchen fireplace. Further up, on the second story, are two other fireplaces; there is probably at least one more out of view. Secondary flues from the smaller fireplaces joined the central one, which serviced the kitchen hearth directly. All led to the massive central chimney, which would have capped the roof of the house. *Photo copy in collection of NYHS*

issue. Because of the coastwise trading that was the lifeblood of maritime cities along the eastern seaboard, the slave trade was part of the mix of buying and selling. Portland was tied to many ports throughout the world in this way.

During the 18th century, a Maine ship would typically be a small vessel, often owned by a family (such as the Buxtons). It might sail down the the British West Indies and, for example, trade timber for molasses, horses, tropical fruit ... and perhaps a slave. In the 19th century, Maine's maritime trading had grown and diversified, and there is a documented Maine connection to slave trading. Some ships, built in Maine and captained by Mainers, sailed under the Spanish flag between Cuba and the African Congo. These were slaving vessels. They brought their human cargo to Cuba, to which other ships would travel to buy the captured Africans and transport them to markets elsewhere.

Writer/researcher H.H. Price makes the point that in places where there is marked abuse (in this case the abusive practice of dealing in slaves), a strong reaction will inevitably rise up against the injustice. This was true throughout the United States, and especially in Maine. Negative reaction to the slave trade started in the 1820s and gained momentum in the next several decades. Societies organized to protest the slave trade centered in Portland but by no means were confined to that city.

Locally, there were strong anti-slavery sentiments in North Yarmouth. In 1826 Asa Cummings, formerly the pastor of the First Church in North Yarmouth (today's Yarmouth) became editor of the *Mirror*, published in Portland. He used the *Mirror* to speak out strongly against slavery. His successor in Yarmouth, Rev. David Shepley, and Rev. Caleb Hobart of the Walnut Hill church from 1825-1859 were anti-slavery proponents, too, but they were all members of the ill-advised American Colonization Society, which proposed the “solution” of repatriating those of African descent to their native Africa. Colonizationists were fiercely criticized by many, including Boston's William Lloyd Garrison, who strongly urged that the only solution to the problem of slavery was abolition. These two views were fiercely debated in Maine; Garrison was seen as very radical (it didn't help that he also advocated temperance and women's rights). But many were convinced of the truth of his stance. At a tumultuous 1833 convention of the Colonization Society in Portland, a Maine auxiliary of the Anti Slavery Society was formed, “leaving the question of colonization untouched.” Some 200 members—including Rev. Shepley—signed on, “a great proportion of them females.”

The Anti-Slavery Society of North Yarmouth was founded in 1834. 310 members—including 61 women—signed on, and three delegates from North Yarmouth attended an Anti Slavery Society convention in 1835 in Portland: a strong showing.

By 1845, as the slave issue heated up even more nationally, many members of North Yarmouth's Society re-formed as a branch of the Liberty Party. "We Pledge ourselves to give our voice against Slavery, and in favor of immediate emancipation wherever in the Providence of God we may be called to act," read their constitution. Fifty-nine men signed. Many Liberty members must have been farmers, judging from the way they set their meeting times; convening on "the afternoon or evening of the Tuesday before the next full of the moon."

One of the Liberty's 1845 meetings was held at the Walnut Hill Meetinghouse, with "Jacob Loring and J. L. Gookin Vice Presidents for this part of town." The group was one of political action and discussion, and they must have been enflamed by a meeting in 1847 when they "heard the story of Saml Johnson now of Portland, last Oct from Kentucky, giving some account of his treatment in Slavery and of being maimed after being recaptured 4 yrs ago."

In 1848, the Liberty members re-formed themselves into the Free Soil Party. Eighteen men signed on to this organization. Once again the group met to discuss politics...and perhaps to take more concrete action. A cryptic entry reads:

Voted that Benjamin Jefford be a committee to open and man the house on Friday

Voted that Jacob G. Loring B. Byrum Ch Humphrey & Z. Humphrey be a committee to make provision for strangers for their entertainment. (Nov. 18, 1848)

This note seems significant: It's unlike anything else written in these records, and odd enough that it might be a veiled reference to moving escapees along on their flight to Canada.

Why is this abolitionist history important? Because, postulates Price, a person most likely to harbor a fugitive would be someone active in an abolitionist organization. In the mid-1800s the house was occupied by the the Buxtons, but no Buxtons appear on any of the abolitionist rosters, even though a few Buxton neighbors did: David G., Jeremiah, and George Loring; Levi Hayes, and Enos True (among other North Yarmouth men from this part of Ancient North Yarmouth).

Though white abolitionists were important along the Underground Railroad, of even greater importance were black communities already established along the UGRR's routes. Price says that even if a white person's house is reputed to be a Railroad stop, usually it's the home of a black person nearby that actually turns out to be the real waystation. It's also certain that black communities throughout Maine were in close contact with each other, and their network moved fugitives along efficiently, along with help from white people.

Was there a community of blacks living in Ancient North Yarmouth? The answer is a qualified yes. A few isolated early North Yarmouth records document at least a scattered population. For example:

- A section in our town's early vital records recorded a few "Negroes' (Marriage) Intentions, 1798-1846."

- A document dating from 1810 regarding the case of "Richard Hill a Negro Man...residing with his family in the alms House in ... North Yarmouth" who had lived here since 1805 and had served in the Revolutionary War is part of our town's early papers.

- A passage in *Old Times in North Yarmouth* talks about the Carter family, who lived near the present-day intersection of Portland and West Elm Streets in Yarmouth. (In fact, valuable papers documenting this family were rescued from a house there, and now form the Carter Family Collection at Yarmouth Historical Society.)

By 1850, there were 17 blacks living in Yarmouth (US Census), but none in North Yarmouth (this was one year after Yarmouth separated from our town). In subsequent Census records, more black people in our general area are recorded, but they are clustered in Yarmouth. Our town's vital record books don't record a person's race after 1850. And, because dwellings of black people were modest, these properties are by and large now gone, along with any documentation. In general, blacks living in North Yarmouth might have existed and provided refuge to runaways, but none whom we can find any evidence of living in town or, especially, in or near the Buxton house.

Could the Underground Railroad have passed through North Yarmouth? Perhaps. There are no specific, documented routes that slaves fleeing to Canada followed (remember, these were supposed to be secret routes), but we know that fugitives did travel through Maine. Some got to Portland and other ports as stowaways and either continued up the coast by ship or were shuttled along overland routes (one apparently went west on either side of Sebago Lake). Runaways might have passed through the Buxton Tavern, from where roads eventually led north to Canada, or at least to a black settlement further inland. Traveling overland might have attracted less notice than traveling by the railroad—a more visible form of transport at the time, but one that offered a much more direct way to Canada. (Sympathetic rail workers were sometimes instrumental in helping runaways along this route, which is why the name Z(adoc) Humphrey is significant: He was a "railroad depot master" in Yarmouth and could have been an important link in "making provision for strangers.") As far as the *(cont'd, p. 16)*



Susie Sawyer and Elsie Bohannon, c. 1914. Elsie and her husband were from Richmond, VA and lived in North Yarmouth while he worked on the Maine Central Railroad tracks. They lived in a small home on the Sawyer's Route 9 property near the Old Town House. *Photo from Ginger Sawyer Collins*

UGRR (cont'd from p. 12)

Red House is concerned, however, the (Maine Central) Railroad *did* go through Walnut Hill...but not until 1870, after emancipation and the Civil War. A rail connection to Canada, though, did exist in North Yarmouth starting in 1849—at Dunn's Depot in East North Yarmouth, via the (future) Grand Trunk Railroad.

In the end, we can't be certain that the Red House was an Underground Railroad waystation, because no evidence exists to prove it. But we also can't disprove it. Imagination, along with the hope that the Red House might have played a role in this profound piece of American history, will continue to keep the story alive. Until the day that one of the Clayton children finds an undiscovered diary...a hidden cache of clothes...a secret old photograph...or an ACTUAL tunnel, the Underground Railroad connection will remain a mystery.

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Finally... **A Tunnel Tall Tale?**

► **RUMOR:** A tunnel once ran between the Red House (Buxton Tavern) and the white house across the way (Buxton Tavern Stand). It was used by runaway slaves. The tunnel collapsed once—you could see the depression in the lawn. Because of heavy truck traffic, it was a hazard, and the Maine DOT filled it in. ► **COMMENTS:**

"Personally, when we owned the Red House I looked through the cellar and never found any evidence of a boarded up entrance to a tunnel or anything." —Mark Dixon

"Oh, that hole in my lawn. It was an old dry well used for septic, made of wood. Actually, a guy I hired to work on my property lost his tractor in it. So we filled it in." —Dennis Fogg

"A tunnel under the intersection? Seems like it would have turned up when they ran the water line down 115 about 20 years ago. But if it really does exist...well...now THAT sure would make the MDOT crazy during construction this spring...." —Scott Seaver

"That old Buxton Tavern Stand has a big second floor room where they used to hold dances. If a Saturday night dance ended late people would stay over, the men in one house and the women across the street. So they dug a tunnel between the two to keep the party going. Ha!" —Dick Baston