



TURNING OVER A HISTORIC HOME

Sun Staff photo by Mike Pipeon

... former owner Barbara Hildreth Parkhurst, left, with Karen Campbell and daughter Kerry

Historic home changes hands after 9 Westford generations

(Editor's Note: Gordon B. Seavey is a retired journalist and local historian who often writes on the history of the Nashoba Valley.)

By GORDON B. SEAVEY

WESTFORD - The pre-Revolutionary War Hildreth homestead, one of the town's oldest buildings, has changed ownership. It had been in the family for nine generations.

Believed to have been built in 1687, prior to the date that Westford broke away from its mother town of Chelmsford, it is not quite the town's oldest structure. Nevertheless, it certainly occupies a special spot in the town's history in that it has been owned continuously by descendants of Richard Hildreth who was born in England and settled here in 1643.

Breaking the thread of ownership for the first time is Barbara Hildreth Parkhurst of Chelmsford, whose father, Arthur, was born in the old home. The purchasers are Major and Mrs. Graham Campbell. Maj. Campbell has been in the Air Force for 16 years and is currently stationed at Hanscom Air Force Base in Dedford.

The house has undergone little change over the nearly three centuries it has stood on - where else? - Hildreth Street and is now numbered 88 in the "modern" style.

The property included 150 acres of meadow and upland fields, good for dairy farming and producing apples. With the exception of two acres surrounding the homestead, the land was sold recently for a cluster-zoned housing development.

The unpretentious dwelling faces away from Hildreth Street and sits well back. It has been suggested that the original road passed directly in front of the house, but this is not indicated on a 1730 map.

There are four rooms in line on the ground floor and another four above, all around a central chimney. Evidence shows that a wagon shed tacked onto the easterly end was remodelled into a kitchen and utility room, with a floor added above. Otherwise there have been few changes over the centuries.

For heat, there are working fireplaces in six of the rooms. Several years ago, a small fireplace in what was probably the original kitchen was uncovered, exposing a large complete one with an iron crane for hanging kettles over the open fire. There is also a double beehive oven.

Walls of this room are of native white pine, possibly sawed at Jonas Prescott's mill at the outlet of nearby Forge Pond. These boards are nailed to a ship-lap pattern and some are 23 inches wide. This original kitchen with an attractive mantle and cupboards surrounding the wide fireplace was no doubt the center of family life. The bricks could well have been made on the property.

A partial cellar, mostly used to store vegetables in the winter and keep milk cool in the summer, was common in early days. The Hildreth house, however, has a full cellar under the main part, a partial one under the addition.

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corner of an outbuilding. Recently, the weather-worn clapboards were replaced by shingles and the walls and attic insulated.

A narrow stairway with two landings winds up to the second floor. A very narrow wick's staircase, with bottom tread missing to entrap "evil spirits," comes from the attic down alongside the chimney. Heavy corner timbers show prominently in each room.

Coming to Westford when it was a wilderness, the Hildreths probably chose this section of the area because of its rolling meadowland, brook and small pond, important for farming.

Their fields covered part of Sparks and Burns Hills, the latter strewn with boulders left by the great glacier 16,000 years ago.

In the early days, settlers strung their nets atop Burns Hills to snare passenger pigeons which were so abundant that flocks darkened the skies as they flew over. This was for food and also to sell in the seacoast cities. Historian Allister F. MacDougall has a rack which was used to roast these small birds over an open fire.

On Sparks, there is a two-acre lot walled by stones, believed to have been part of an old homestead. When the water department, three years ago, was seeking a location for an additional reservoir engineers spotted this plot as being ideal. With an elevation of 400 feet, when built, this underground reservoir will balance the pressure between the standpipes on Frances and Kiscook Hills, plus serving the southern part of town.

The Hildreth property includes a one-half mile frontage on Hildreth Street, a highway linking Westford and Littleton and a natural way to Routes 495 and 2.

As for the old house, there have been few exterior changes. As was the style so popular in the 19th Century, the original small-paned windows had been replaced by "two over two" sashes. These were recently changed to "six over six" with modern storm windows for the first time.

This Hildreth house was never turned into a salt box type as was James Hildreth's home (1658) nearby when the lean-to style was added at an early date. What is considered the oldest Westford home still standing is the Solomon Keyes house, constructed by him earlier in the east part of town on Frances Hill. Across the road was a garrison house. The Pawtucket, Wamesit and Nashoba Indians hunted this territory.

George Parkhurst has forebears

among the Hildreths and is considered an authority on family history as well as on his native town of Chelmsford. With his wife Barbara, he has kept alive the Hildreth Family Association which was revived by her father, holding annual reunions in various sections of the country. There is a mailing list containing more than 1,000 names.

Maintaining the continuing Hildreth ownership for nine generations has been accomplished by the simple expedient of passing title down from father to one of the male heirs in each generation, he explained.

Complications arose, however, when Isaiah (1764-1813) and Lydia Leighton Hildreth produced no sons and only one daughter. The chain of nominal succession was solved when daughter Susannah married her first cousin, Abijah Hildreth, and settled on the farm.

Mrs. Parkhurst's father, Arthur, and his twin brother, Clarence, as well as older brother, Albert, were born and raised at the old place. Arthur was active in many town affairs and carried on the family property, operating it as a sideline. He was for 25 years a science instructor at Newton High School and went on to become a college instructor.

Clarence operated an automotive repair service in town and Bert was a farmer nearby. Three of the latter's children, Stuart, Elizabeth Tallard and Helen Coupal, live locally.

The Campbells, the new owners, have been doing some minor carpentry work and more interior decorating the past few weeks and already have begun the process of moving with their three small children from the rented home they have been occupying for the past year at 10 Depot St.

Karen, the mother, long interested in things colonial, has been doing guide work at the Concord Antiquarian Society while living in Westford. She reports that ever since she was a small child on the west coast, colonial things have been an interest. She has been painting the rooms in colonial colors, adding stencilling to the decor.

The purchaser of the farmlands is Charles Brown of Carlisle, operating as Panamora Properties. Two adjacent parcels providing 62 additional acres on the south and west were also purchased for his Hildreth Estates development of a 166-unit cluster type condominium complex. The units will sell from \$90,000 to \$130,000 according to size. There will be eight clusters of buildings, done in a New England village style.

Mrs. Parkhurst expressed great sadness in disposing of her property. A brother, Robert, died as a youth and there is no one to carry on the Hildreth name. Recently retired as chief parasitologist at Massachusetts General Hospital, she plans to continue her interest in Westford. She is a member of the Historical Society, a trustee of Westford Academy and active in the alumni association.

Her roots are deep in her native town. Seventy-eight Hildreths attended the Academy prior to 1912 and ten Hildreths served in the Revolutionary War.