

Westford Recollections

By June Kennedy

The Baldwin Apple

This story starts like fiction, but it is true as far as one knows. Back in 1649 - 51, Oliver-Cromwell of England captured about 5,000 Scottish Clansmen, and they were a problem for him. He couldn't kill them and profess to be a Christian, he couldn't let them go or the Clans would rise again, and he couldn't afford to feed them. So he decided to sell them as indentured servants to the settlers in the New World.

Thus a Scotsman by the name of William Butter found himself on a farm in Woburn sometime before 1655 and was a free man by 1664. He cleared land, built himself a home in what was then a wild country in the area close to Woburn,

Massachusetts, later to be known as the town of Wilmington. He married, had a child and many grandchildren. One of his grandsons built a home about 1687, an old saltbox house that still stands, on land where the Apple Monument is located, designating the site of the original Baldwin Apple Tree.

In fact, the members of the Butter's family increased so in number that the name changed from Butter to Butters. The road on which the Butters' homes were built was called Butters Farm and the Apple Monument.

On one of these Butters farms a wild seedling apple tree started to grow, probably about 1740, as it was a large, mature tree in 1785. The story goes that it was a favorite tree of the woodpeckers in the area, and they left their mark on the trunk and large branches, so the fruit from the tree was known as the Woodpecker, or Pecker Apple. It was also known as the Butters apple from the name of the owner.

About this time there came a dream to some of the leaders of the area of a waterway from Merrimack River to Boston Harbor so that cargo boats could carry freight and passengers to and from Lowell and Boston. Deacon Samuel Thompson, a self-taught surveyor of North Woburn was engaged to make a preliminary survey in 1793 to outline the route that a canal might follow. This lead him to Wilmington, close by the Butters Farm. On this farm he discovered what was called the Pecker Apple and spread the word on his travels of its wonderful qualities. He interested others in grafting the stock on to other wild trees. For a short time after this the apple was called the Thompson apple because of his interest.

Deacon Thompson's neighbor and friend in North Woburn was Col. Loamm Baldwin. Col. Baldwin was also in the party making the preliminary survey of the canal, and he also became very much interested in the Pecker Apple. Later on when he was chief engineer and contractor for the building of the canal and its location in Wilmington was within a half mile of the Butters Farm, he started promoting the apple among his many friends.



PICTURED IS AN ORIGINAL TIN PLATE for stenciling Baldwin apple boxes many years ago. The other article is a grafting tool used on apple trees.

It was natural that soon the apple was called the Baldwin Apple in honor of the distinguished Col. Baldwin. He was a major when he participated in the battles at Concord and Lexington on the 19th of April 1775, became a Colonel in the Continental Army under George Washington and was very active during the occupation of New York and in the Battle of Trenton. He was one of the proprietors and principal contractors of the Middlesex Canal, the first Sheriff of Middlesex County under the Constitution, and a member of the committee to sign the Paper Money of Massachusetts Colony.

Col. Baldwin was a boyhood companion of Benjamin Thompson, who later became Count Rumford, and during their lifetime were close friends. Thus it was natural for the Rumford Historical Association with headquarters in Count Rumford's boyhood home in North Woburn, to want to erect a monument on the site of the original Baldwin Apple tree. They erected the monument in 1895. It is of granite with a carved apple on top, is about seven feet tall, and carries the following inscription:

"This Pillar, erected in 1895 by the Rumford Historical Association, incorporated April 28, 1877, marks the estate, where in 1793, Samuel Thompson, Esq., while locating the line of the Middlesex Canal, discovered the first Pecker Apple Tree, later named the Baldwin."

In the square in North Woburn near his home is a life-sized monument to Col. Baldwin and on one side of the stone base is the inscription:

"Disseminator of the Apple in honor of him called 'The Baldwin', which proceeded from a tree originally growing wild about two miles north of this monument."

After the promotional work in the early days by Deacon Thompson and Col. Baldwin, followed by the development of first, family orchards, and then commercial orchards, the Baldwin Apple became the leading variety throughout New England, New York State and farther west, holding this leadership well into the twentieth century.

The Baldwin Apple was held in such high esteem and its origin interested so many people, that even the legislature appointed a committee in 1853 to ascertain for once and for all the site of the original tree. Asa Sheldon of Woburn was a State Representative at the time and served on the committee. It was decided then that the original site is the one now described on the Baldwin Apple Monument located on Butters Row and Chestnut in Wilmington. Supposedly, the original tree, as recorded by Asa Sheldon in his book, blew down in the hurricane of September, 1814.

Not only was the Baldwin the leader in American markets, but it also was the leader in the export trade. Probably the best reference for apple varieties is the two volumes published in 1905 by the New York Agricultural Experiment Station entitled, "Apples of New York". It states that "the Baldwin is preeminently the leading variety in the commercial orchards in New York, New England, certain regions in Southern Canada, in the

southern peninsula of Michigan and in the clay soils of Northern Ohio. From Colorado to Washington it is more or less grown in many localities."

Any variety that has been a leader in home orchards for well over a hundred years and from the beginning of commercial orchards for nearly a hundred years cannot be pushed aside and forgotten. The present decline in the popularity of this variety with commercial growers really started when artificial storage became common place and fall apples, like the McIntosh, were turned into year-round apples. In common storage as well as in ice storage, the Baldwin, like other winter varieties, matured and came out in a high quality ripened condition. The green under-color of the Baldwin at harvest time gradually turned to a beautiful yellow with the contrast of the red cheeks, so that they came out of storage a handsome apple in prime condition for consumption. Its quality rated high, not only as a cooking apple but as a dessert apple.

Its season in common storage was November to March or April. Because of its firmness, in all the time that the wooden barrel was the accepted container, the Baldwin lead the field. Even as late as 1915 to 1920, the writer can remember the Baldwin apple being packed in barrels and shipped from the orchards of western Massachusetts by freight to Providence, Philadelphia and Chicago. When the trees were allowed to gain their full size, record yields per tree were reported up to 75 barrels. This is hard to believe as compared with our present yields on trees of restricted size. Boat loads of Baldwins were exported to England, sometimes packed in the orchard for direct shipment. Spraying was seldom practiced when the Baldwin variety was at its peak so that trees could attain great size and pickers knew how to handle 20 and 24 foot ladders. When nearly every housewife knew how to make an apple pie when baked apples and whipped cream was also a favorite dessert, and the demand was for cooking apples as well as dessert apples, the Baldwin was always a great favorite.

Now with the trend toward the dessert apple and the favorite package, the three-pound cellophane bag, general consumption of an all round apple like the Baldwin that formerly was brought by the consumer by the bushel, or the barrel, for the enjoyment of the whole family, one finds the Baldwin gradually disappearing from our orchards.

Who knows, if our economy changes, and the family finds it to their advantage to buy apples in more generous amounts than a three pound bag, and the joy and economy of home cooking returns, one may find the Baldwin again in its original place, as the great favorite of producer and consumer alike.

-Story written by Allister F. MacDougall for the official ground planting of the Preservation Orchard at Old Sturbridge Village, April 28, 1973, where he had the honor of planting a Baldwin tree.

