The Todd Lot

One of the most intriguing parcels at MacLeish is the Todd Lot. It is referred to alternatively as the "Todd Lot" or the "old Todd farm" in deeds as recent as 1975. This "Todd" and his farm remained a bit of a mystery for much of the semester. The deeds that I uncovered back to 1859 all referred to the lot as Todd, but an owner with the name of Todd never appeared. Even more intriguing, no one had ever found any evidence of an old homestead site on the property, as this name hinted that there should be. Finally, while searching through an old index in the Registry of Deeds, I found him. Asa Todd was a Baptist preacher who moved to Whately in 1790 to become the minister of the new Baptist meetinghouse on Poplar Hill Road. He was granted the farm in 1791, by the members of the church committee, led by John Brown, whose descendants would one day own this property.

This semester I conducted a study of property deeds to uncover the ownership history of the Ada and Archibald MacLeish Field Station in West Whately. Deeds provide information about who owned the land at various points in time, and may sometimes provide hints as to what the land was used for. I have been able to supplement my knowledge from the deeds with the extensive genealogies and historical descriptions found in A History of the Town of Whately, Mass, published by James Crafts in 1899.

The forests that now blanket the Field Station hide a rich and complicated history of land use and ownership. A few centuries ago, this land had been cleared of woods so that it could be farmed, mined and used to pasture livestock. Several homesteads dotted the discontinued stretch of Poplar Hill Rd that is now a woodland path running straight through the Field Station. There are many fascinating stories to be told about the history of MacLeish, and many more waiting to be uncovered.

Through the Years…

Ownership Timeline


The other prominent owners of the Todd lot were the Brown family. Lieut. John Brown bought the land just south of the Todd farm in 1769 and built a house on Poplar Hill Road in the early 1770s. His son Chester lived on the land after him. This deed documents the sale of the land from Champion Brown, who inherited the land from Chester, to his younger brother Myron in 1859. Champion left Whately behind to go into business in Montreal, Canada.
The Whately area is initially settled by the Nettowick people, who were considered Nipmuc, a group of Algonquian Native Americans native to central Massachusetts and southern New England. They cleared the land close to the river with fire every fall. The location and fertile land made it attractive to European settlers from Connecticut looking for new land to move to. The town of Whately was incorporated in 1735, although English settlers had been there since the mid 1600's. Whately separately from Deerfield in 1735 to become a separate town. The town was named after a local official.

Smith College bought the first parcel of land that was to become the MacLeish Field Station in the 1970s. In May of 2008 the site was dedicated in honor of Ada and Archibald MacLeish by former Smith College student David Harun. The dedication was based on a field concept while in a field at the MacLeish Field Station. A professional was hired to act as the Forest Resource Manager for the development. The accompanying map shows the areas of those cuts by their dbh, for the 1984 proposal date. The larger the dbh, the older the tree. Figure 2 shows the total timber cut by species. Data is also available for the amount and species cut relative to the grade of lumber obtained.

Timber Cutting

Timber has been harvested on the MacLeish Field Station property four times since the land was purchased by Smith College. A professional was hired to act as the Forest Resource Manager for the sales. The accompanying map shows the areas of those cuts by their dbh, for the 1984 proposal date. The larger the dbh, the older the tree. Figure 2 shows the total timber cut by species. Data is also available for the amount and species cut relative to the grade of lumber obtained.

Whately and the MacLeish Field Station

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Interview with Fred Bardwell

Fred's family can be traced back to the earliest English settlers of Whately. His family once owned part of the MacLeish land, and still owns adjacent land today. During our interview, he talked about the different ways of life during both his parent's time and his own childhood. Both he and his father were born in the farmhouse on the property. Outside the kitchen window of the house is the Brookstock Farm and a barn that was built on the original site of a wood mill owned and run by his father's family. The mill had 8 rooms and was powered by the river. He thought about flooding, the river is so close to the house, and Fred acknowledged that they did have some flooding prior to the large new sewer built for Northampton, but no longer. He told about the many things the family did to obtain all they needed, including he harvesting and hunting. He also had memories of using that ice to make ice cream and of his brothers going ice skating just below the house every Thanksgiving afternoon.

The Bardwells pastured cattle on some of their land during the summer which they then sold in the fall. They leased out some fields to one of Fred's uncles and used income to pay for his taxes. Crops were raised in some fields. The area people grew vegetables for their own consumption as well as tobacco and cucumbers to sell for cash. Some of the land was harvested for its timber over the years. When they did cut timber they simply let the land regenerate new growth naturally. They did not replant rows of all the same kinds of trees like some forestry companies do today.

Galena

Galena is a vein of galena, a lead ore, which promises to be of some commercial value, exists in the west part of town. Strictly speaking, there appears to be three distinct veins of this metal, but only two of them have been explored to any extent. One is found on the westerly margin of Poplar Hill and extends into Conway; the other is on the easterly side of Hog Mountain, and may be traced for three-fourths of a mile. A cross vein has been discovered on land of Elam Bardwell. The usual width of the vein is from six to eight feet, traversing the granite formation and it has disseminated masses in quartz. In the southerly part, it contains oxide and manganese along with the galena.

Whately pottery from the Whately Historical Society

Early Whately Pottery and Its Connections to Lead

Redware pottery and bricks were made by early settlers from clay found along the banks of the Mill River and the Great Swamp Brook. Firefly ground clay was added to the lead mine deposits found on the MacLeish site along with any other coloring elements, such as manganese, to make glazes for the pottery. Because of the English Emphasis which stopped the importing of pottery, Whately area residents used more of the locally made pottery than any other to store their foodstuffs. A Connecticut doctor diagnosed illness among the Redware users in “tallow colic”. He attributed it to locally made pottery containing “LED”. Subsequently, lead-free clay was obtained from Berlin, CT and New Jersey. Elam Bardwell and other farmers were major producers of area pottery.

Tom Wessells and Stone Walls

Taking the MacLeish land with Tom Wessells, author of Reading the Forested Landscape, we could see some evidence of the land’s different uses by looking more carefully at the stone walls on the property. The main path, an extension of Poplar Hill Road, was once used to drive sheep. This was evidenced by the wide separation between the rock walls along the sides of the path. The extra width allowed large flock to pass through more easily, and were commonly made during the “sheep fever” period in the early 1800’s. Whately also explored that stone walls were generally built to pass through two purposes: walls composed of large rocks were used to pasture animals, and were made by gathering rocks obtained usually within the perimeter of the enclosure, whereas walls built from large and small rocks were used to grow crops. In this case, stones were piled out and added to the walls as the land was plowed each year, resulting in the addition of smaller stones.
Overview

The Smith College Ada and Archibald MacLeish Field Station, acquired in 1964 but not dedicated to environmental research until 2008, is a site of study in many different areas, creating a wealth of information that must be documented and organized. Geographic Information Systems (GIS) software provides an array of tools that can be used to map and classify data, both geographic and otherwise. I have spent the last two semesters learning how to use GIS and compiling information about MacLeish into easily accessible maps that will be a resource for future researchers of the site.

The MacLeish Field Station

Smith’s property in West Whately covers a large area, currently undeveloped but home to a lot of history. Parts have been cleared for farmland, or as pasture for dairy cows. The land has also been forested and mined for lead, the estimated locations for sites of which are indicated above.

Proposed Trails

In fall 2008, Reid Bertone-Johnson’s Landscape and Narrative Class designed a network of trails that traverse MacLeish. Their goal was to make the property more accessible, so that visitors would be able to explore it more widely.

Forest Stand Type

Beginning in 1984, sections of the property were auctioned to foresters. To facilitate this, the tree cover of different areas was observed and mapped in a rough sketch. BB signifies black birch, HH hickory and hardwood, WK white pine and hemlock, and OM mixed oaks.

Dates of Sale to Forester

Between 1988 and 1991 the entire wooded area of the property was sold to be forested. The tree cover data collected twenty years ago can now be compared to current observations to examine the impact of foresting on local tree life.