

Transcript From An Oral Interview With John Quincy Adams
Concerning Past Land Uses of Mt. Misery, Lincoln, Mass.

Interview Conducted by Jo Springer, 6/2/81

JES: How did your family come to acquire the Mt. Misery land?

JQA: There was an old man named Garfield, who had a colonial house on the land. My grandfather picked up land from Garfield, Holden Baker, and Brigham Baker. In 1894 he bought the Baker farm along with other tracts of land. The Snellings owned this piece of land here, (referring to a map of the area), and he tried to buy a certain section of it, but the Snellings wouldn't sell. He was furious.

Old Mr. Garfield was living there alone and my grandfather supported him in his last years, and he made it possible for him to live there until his death. When he died my grandfather had the house pulled down, because it was pretty well tumbled down anyways. Then he turned the Garfield farm into a tree plantation. My grandfather was very strong on trees and I think the land was very old and he let it grow up. He planted Scotch pines from his nursery, white pines, which haven't done well there and the European larch down near the ponds. The ponds of course didn't exist then. Jim DeNormandie put in the ponds. At one point you'll find the old mill dam, they called it Beaver Dam Brook.

JES: Do you know what was the purpose for the ditches that are to the right hand side of the mill site as you are looking up the Beaver Dam Brook?

JQA: No, I don't know. I know what you are talking about.

JQA: That was all grown up when we were kids and we use to come down here to gather wild grapes in the fall and all along the ditch. But somehow I've always associated that, and this goes back to what my father had said, that this was all part of Garfield's irrigation system. They were very strong on that. They also, down here in this back brook, which you haven't seen yet, they had a ditch irrigation system which extended right back behind the barn here, (referring to the barn just outside his present house), along the brook. Down there were several dams between that and the present meadow, the field which still exists and the irrigation ditch ran right down the center of the field. You can still see traces of it now. They were very strong on irrigation. What they used it for down here I don't know. But I do know that they apparently cultivated all down along the brook, whether it was cranberries or what I do not know. It's quite obvious that they did a lot of work and they worked hard on keeping that properly wet up. The same things exist here and there is this little pond here which was on Snelling land.

JES: You are speaking of the kettle hole?

JQA: Yes, the kettle hole, which always has water. They dug a ditch, which took a lot of digging so that it spilled out into the river eventually. Now I assume that was also for cranberries, because there were a lot of cranberries that were grown here at one time. That is all I can tell you about that. I somehow associate that, (meaning the cranberry ditch), with this, (meaning the ditches near the mill site). But the mill dam that I speak of up about in here you can see boulders and the slide way for that.

Jes: Is the sluice way in that portibunvery straight?

JQA: Yes, it was straight and it comes very close to the line up here near the Mt. Misery acquisition line, just a little bit below it. There use to be a road that ran across it and when we had it I can remember there weremany stills up there for bootleg liquor at one time. You can still see the foundations of them.

JES: Where were those?

JQA: Those would be.....there was a little pond in here, which partly belonged to ^{me} ~~Misistooksky~~ and partly to others who had bought in here. So they were near this little pond.

JES: Did your family ever live on the Mt. Misery land or did you mainly use it for agricultural and tree farm practices?

JQA: Yes, my grandfather bought the Baker farm, he didn't buy it from the Baker's, he bought it from the Ogden's who had bought it from the Baker's in 1899. Then he gradually acquired as much land as he could; the Garfield farm and these little pieces down here, which were divided up into little pieces. Then he picked up more land here.

JES: When did your father sell the land to the DeNormandies?

JQA: My grandfather died in 1915. My grandmother, Mary Ogden Adams had it as an estate until WWII. At the termination of the war, my wife, Lucy, and I acquired all the land of the MOA estate here and the DeNormandies acquired the Garfield farm. During the war they had acquired the Snelling, or what had become the Bowen property. Then they acquired, from the estate, the old Garfield farm and all of this down here.

JES: Who acquired the land where the nursery now stands near St. Annes church?

JQA: The DeNormandies acquired that separately. That had been

JQA: the Bunker farm. That included the little farmhouse, the red parish house, which had belonged to a family named Bunker when we moved here. There were two boys, Foster, and Elliot. Elliot was in my grade in the public schools. His father was a coaster schooner captain. He was injured in a fall from the mast head or something like that and my grandfather, who was very charitable helped him out in his old age. But, they owned the farm, and Foster and Mrs. Bunker worked it until quite late. Foster kept some cows down there in the old barn.

JES: Do you know what crops he grew there?

JQA: Yes, he grew hay and anything that he could grow in the small farm. Mostly it was hay and forage for the few cows that he had. They had a couple of black cherry trees that bore heavily and we use to go down and help pick them for a market crop. Then Foster wanted out and the DeNormandies bought them out. When Jim built the upper pond it backed the water up and it was very important to this farmland to keep this water table down. So my grandfather broke open the little dam he had because the pond had flooded the land. The pond had made it impossible to work the land even though the land there is ditched. So you will notice that the two ponds towards St. Anne's church exist because of this dam down here. The land near the nursery is very wet land in spots. So the two upper ponds were put in after the two lower ponds. Jim has a pond mania. He likes to put ponds everywhere and so they were perfect for him, but it really hurt this land. The little piece of land near the church which the Farrars owned was also hard to drain and this was also a part of the Mt. Misery acquisition.

JES: What crops were grown on the Bunker farm?

JQA: This part here has always been a high field. It is a very sandy field and should not be in continuous crop. It should be in hay and allowed to rest, because unless it is carefully handled you will lose the soil and this is a very sensitive area. I've been hollering to the commission to be more stringent with the people that are renting the land. It has not been too well taken care of.

JES: Do you know who owned this land before the Snellings?

JQA: Yes, this was Rodman Snelling, he was the original Snellings. There were several branches of Snellings. Howard, Elizabeth Snellings' husband, was one of the boys. There were three boys; Charlie, Howard and one other that died of cancer years ago. Charlie moved away and Howard is still here. It was all one family at one time.

JES: So the Snellings bought from your grandfather?

JQA: No, they were here in the 1880's, because they were the ones that built the episcopal church.

JES: Could you please tell me about the impact of the hurricane of 1938 in terms of its' effects on the vegetation and the trees.

JQA: Yes, I can tell you all about the hurricane of 1938. I was in Concord at the time, but I was here the next morning. What do you want to know?

JES: I was wondering if there were any asparagus or strawberry green houses that were damaged.

JQA: The Bowens had the land at the time and Bowen's son, I think it was Bowen's son, was going to make his fortune in raising asparagus. There was a lot of asparagus growing at that time. Asparagus is a peculiar crop. It likes light sandy soil.

JQA: but it also requires a great deal of feeding. They call it a gross feeder, because it is cut quite heavily and it has an enormous root system and it needs to be fed if it is going to retain itself. Now, when the Snellings had it they had it to hay and red clover, because I remember the field was very sweet smelling. I remember at dusk one summer evening when I was a fairly small boy, there was a doe and a speckled fawn out in the field of clover. So the field was properly kept at that time. But then when the Bowens had it, and he was going to make his fortune in asparagus, he turned the field into asparagus. They did not fertilize it and wore the soil out quickly and the asparagus crop failed after a few years. So then it became kind of a desert. They just left it fallow and nothing went on it. I may say this field out here was put into asparagus. The whole field was cut to asparagus and sent to Boston markets in the spring.

I went to New York and Columbia University, left Harvard to go to Columbia School of Architecture in 1930, and didn't come back here really until 1939, after I was married. When I returned the field was beginning to ripple up in sand dunes, because it was just being left fallow. They put a vegetable garden in one end of it, but they left the other part to go to pot. Then the Roosevelt administration and the New Deal were putting a lot of interest into farming, because we had the disastrous drought in the mid-west. They went into contour farming and they were supplying great amounts of lime and fertilizer and helping out in green cropping the fields. So I took it over from the state at that time to see what we could do and green cropped it. It really had a super effect. It started to come back so by the

JQA: 1942's or 1943's we were getting hay off it and they've been getting hay off it ever since. It's in pretty good shape right now. It just goes to show what can be done and should be done to the high field over on the Mt. Misery area. Otherwise it will end up as a sand dune. The same thing as the Baker Bridge fields you see across the tracks. It looks fine now, because Steve Farrar has it and it ~~is~~ in alfalfa, which should have been done years ago. The Storrows had it as a crop farm and then that was continued when we got it. We put it to corn and it's been in corn ever since. We'd like to keep it that way. Corn is a gross feeder and doesn't put anything back into the land. It's mostly sand over there. I'm just giving these examples, because it shows how light soils get worn out.

JES: You were going to tell me about the hurricane of 1938.

JQA: Right. Crop land itself was not hurt, because it can't come down, but everything else did ~~come~~ down. The high land down at Mt. Misery and the roads going into Mt. Misery were deep in blown down trees, mostly pines. They were big pines at that time and just about all of them were blown down.

The pines down in the hollows, where the winds could not get to them survived. They are the base of a good stand today.

JES: Were the larch and pines along the pond much denser at one time before the hurricane?

JQA: The larch pretty much stood. In the valley of the brook itself the hurricane went over the top of it. That hurricane blew harder than any other hurricane we have ever had around here. It was clocked at something like 180 miles per hour. My older sister was the only one in the house at the time. My mother was on the Cape, my brother and father were in Boston, and

JQA: another brother was working at the watch factory in Waltham at the time. My sister said it blew harder and harder. Then, she said the trees were not going down in one fast drop, but that they were just laid down, one after another. The road in front of our house was filled with trees.

JES: Do you know if the Fairhaven Bay was used to cultivate blue joint grass?

JQA: It was what we called marsh hay, which is indigenous here and goes back to colonial times. Linclon was used a great deal for the cultivation of marsh hay. The settlers cut it all along the river. There was marsh hay in Well Meadow Creek, which is at the bottom of Adams woods. When I was a small boy, they had only recently stopped cutting that because, it was just a lot of bushes coming up. They use to cut it by hand scythes and they cut it all along the river everywhere.

JES: What was it used for?

JQA: They used it for bedding and for feeding. When cut right the hay is very sweet.

JES: It has been suggested that there were limestone quarries up where the upper ponds is now. Do you remember hearing any stories about a limestone quarry?

JQA: No. All I know about it was what Betty Little, (a local historian), told me. All I know is that the area looked like a battle field.

JES: What were the major crops grown that you remember?

JQA: All the lowlands were partially in cranberries, and in all of the marshes along Fairhaven Bay. We use to pick them down along the bay when I was a youngster. We had a flat boat

JQA: up in the barn with cranberry scoops that had been left from the time the Bakers harvested cranberries. Cranberries were a big crop around here.

JES: To whom were they sold?

JQA: They took them into the market in Boston. Everything went to the market in Boston. But the main crops were hay, asparagus, and a prodigious amount of corn. In the days of horses they use to send car loads of manure up from Boston. Teams would unload them down at the sidings at the Lincoln station and then haul it out to the fields around here. So that is what we used for fertilizer.

JES: There were not enough cows around here to provide you with a sufficient supply of fertilizer?

JQA: Well, we used what we had, but you see when you are building up fields you need an awful lot, especially with corn. Most of the farms, did not have many cows. They weren't cow farms in the sense that you think of them today. A person would have anywhere from two to three cows. Every family would have its own cow and then a big farm like Codman might have twelve cows.

JES: Do you know where on Mt. Misery the cows were grazed besides from the very top of the mountain?

JQA: Garfield unquestionably had his own cows. The Bunkers had a small cow farm. The Snellings had a barn with stations. But, cows were not a main source of income. I think export was mainly in hay, corn and cranberries.

JES: Was apple cider making a common practice? I haven't noticed a large population of apple trees on the land.

JQA: Yes, everyone had their apple trees. We had an orchard, but the insects were not so bad then. We sprayed just after the time of flowering. After the bees got through fertilizing them they were sprayed. That is all the spray they ever got. We did not have a big orchard, but we had many varieties. I guess there were apple trees everywhere.

JES: Did you make cider?

JQA: Yes, we made cider, We had a press. Roots farm in Concord, Intervale farm, which is where Sandy Pond ^{road} use to cross before Route Two was there, both had orchards. They made a lot of cider there. Storrows had a big orchard. There were orchards scattered everywhere.

JES: So most of the cider would have been sold to the Boston markets?

JQA: Yes the big market was always in Boston. When the Bakers had this farm they use to pull crops by oxen to Waltham.

JES: I was wondering if you could explain some of the configurations on the land that I did not understand. If you are standing above the lower DeNormandie pond on the new little wood bridge that looks down over the pond and you are looking down towards the lower pond, if you look about five yards down on the left hand side there is a stone encased hole about two feet wide by about three feet across, in a rather circular or oval shape. Do you know what this was used for?

JQA: It could have been a well. There were wells everywhere. I know there was a well down there. Oh yes, because when we went down to pick grapes we always watched out for it. There was a filled in well.

JQA: You know the legend of Mt. Misery don't you?

JES: Yes, well I've heard different stories as to how it got its' name.

JQA: Well, Elliot Bunker told me, and of course it came from his family, and it was a legend around town that there was a cow that fell off the mountain and broke its' necks. The cow died in misery at the bottom, but whether the cow really died in misery or it was the misery of the farmer I do not know. That was the established tradition.

JES: Do you know when that was suppose to have taken place?

JQA: No,, because that was a way back, It was just there and that was why it was Mt. Misery, because the cow fell off the cliff. I think that it's a perfectly plausible explanation. I think the misery was the farmer's.

JES: What was the old building foundation that is up on top of the mountain itself?

JQA: Yes, that is new. Jim DeNormandie built the little get away cabin up there. It was not there until he acquired the land after the war. It was there shortly before the town acquired it and the reason it wasn't there then was because some kids got up there and burned it. I do not think they meant to burn it but they were probably smoking cigarettes, or doing something dreadful.

JES: Can you explain the ditches that run across the top of ridges in certain areas on the land, one in particular behind the Garfield home foundation? Do you know if these were boundary markers?

JQA: I have found those ditches in the oddest places along the river and there is one near where a little spit of land

JQA: comes out of a meadow and there is a high lump and along the nose of it is a ditch. I don't know why it is there. I'm fascinated by it. There was an agricultural purpose for it I'm sure. All this land was intensely cultivated by the time of the revolution and for a time thereafter, until the land started to open up in the west.

JES: So you think that even the steeper parts of Mt. Misery at one time were farmed?

JQA: Yes. You see that stone wall going over the top of the mountain, well that stone wall is built out of stones hauled from the fields.

JES: I've read that the stone wall was put in because the two Billings brothers couldn't decide on the division of the land because they believed that there were valuable minerals in the land so the stone wall divided their parcels of land.

JQA: Yes, well they could have, but you see they put the wall in because they had the whole thing cleared. All these walls that you see here in New England were made when the land was cleared. In fact, there were only little clumps of trees by the time of the revolution. At that time this land was just as clean as the English countryside. But I assume on Mount Misery itself, that was pasture land, because that is what it would have been good for.

JES: Do you know what the small little wood foundation towards the river was?

JQA: Yes. That was Mr. Bowen's, who bought the land from the Snellings. He had a little get away house in the woods. It simply rotted away.

JES: Was there ice cutting in Fairhaven Bay?

JQA: Yes, there were two patches of ice in the bay that were cut. There was the ice that was cut for this farm on this side. Then on the other side, on the Concord side, where those big fields come down and there is a little boat house which goes down to the river, that farm cut ice there for its own ice house. We always had the bigger ice cutting. We had quite a big ice house here. That is the only ice that I know of that was cut on Fairhaven Bay. But then other people cut at different points. The river did not make much ice. It made it on the sides, but the channel always kept it open and it was treacherous. It was beautiful river skating. At one time you use to be able to skate ten miles up the river and ten miles down the river.

JES: I was wondering if you could tell me something about the Chestnut Blight. I've looked through the town reports of the 1910's and the 1920's. but was unable to determine when the blight was the worst here.

JQA: My father told me that the first tree that was blighted here was just out in back of this big barn. His father took him out to see it and that must have been about 1910 or 1911. That was before we moved here. My grandfather lived here, but we were living in Kansas City. My grandfather was very disturbed about it because this was the first instance here. It was a very big chestnut. It still yielded nuts, though, that I remember when we moved here.

By 1918 and 1919, it was widespread through here. In 1920, Sandy Pond Road was covered with dead chestnuts standing up on both sides of it. At that time Charlie Smith, who owned the property had them cut down and set aside for telephone poles.

JQA: There are records of those and pictures of those at the town hall. We moved from Kansas City in 1915 so this is really when my memory starts.

One thing the DeNormandies did when they bought Mt. Misery was to send a bulldozer through and build big roads. They cleaned it out so that automobiles could get around it. Then it began to be used by the public. It was used by the public long before the town acquired it. This is because it was easy to get into.

JES: What roads are you speaking of?

JQA: The one coming off 117, and then the other one that comes in the back. And so what they really did was to polish it up. They also built the road going up to the top of Mt. Misery.

JES: I think that I have asked most of the questions I had. I am sure I will think of more later. I appreciate you spending your time with me and answering my questions.

JQA: You are welcome. Good luck.