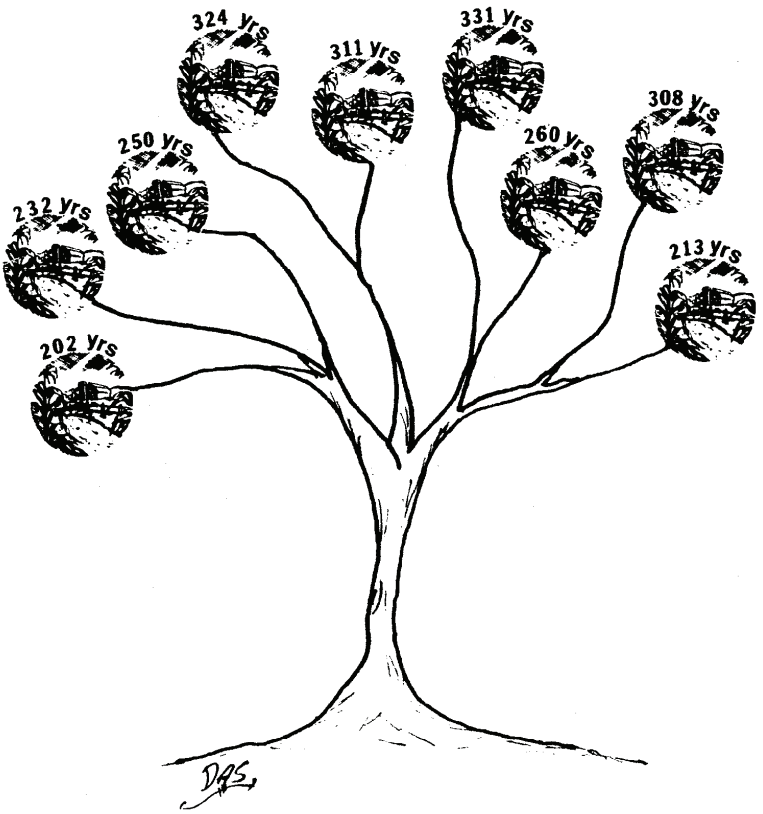
RI's

Farming Family Tree



Over 200 Years of
Continuous Growth

The Harbert Farm

Matunuck Beach symbolizes one of the many treasured natural resources Rhode Island has to offer. However, another of our State's treasured natural resources prospers nearby. This is the Harbet Farm. At 330 years old, this 175 acre South Kingston farm ranks as Rhode Island's oldest functional dairy facility. Mr. and Mrs. Harold Browning and their children currently operate and manage the Harbet Farm. Harold is the tenth generation of Brownings to maintain the farm since its acquisition in 1657 from the Indians as a result of the Pettaquamscutt Purchase. He began milking the cows and harvesting the fields on the Harbet Farm in the 1940's, and since 1953, Harold has become its present-day proprietor.

The post and beam that Harold and his wife occupy on the Harbet Farm was built in 1730 as an attachment to another house built in 1690. His uncle lived in the older house in the early 1900's, but the post and beam home was vacant from 1916 to 1953. The rest of the family had still worked the farm but had lived in another house just "over the hill". Today, both houses have been renovated by Harold and his family.

About 95 Holstein and a few Jersey cows trod their way twice a day through the Harbet Farm's milking parlor set-up. Harold and his son, William, handle all the farming chores which, besides milking, include cultivating 91 acres of corn and hay silage to feed the "milkers" and another 95 head of young stock. Seaweed was once used to fertilize the crop, since during that time period most local farmers owned a portion of the beach specifically set aside for seaweed harvesting. None of the classic tower silos stand on the farm today, because they do not hold enough silage for Browning's high-producing dairy stock. Instead, corn silage is stored in the bunker-type silo, while hay is continually piled up in the open fields.

A large portion of East Greenwich Dairy's milk comes from the Browning herd. Consequently, this makes the Harbet Farm, both economically and traditionally, a vital part of Rhode Island's dairy industry.

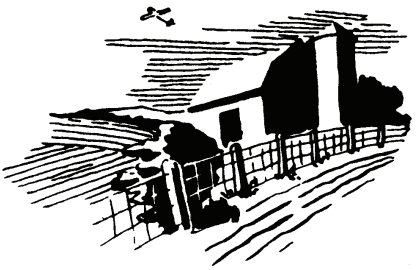
The Marchant Farm

Along the banks of the Usquepaug River in West Kingston, 101 acres of farm and woodland beautify a small but important portion of South County. This historic property is the Marchant Farm, which was recently entered on the National Register of Historic Places, and is the present day home of Mr. and Mrs. Edward Prest. Since 1980, Ed and his wife have been permanent residents of the farm's original post and beam house built between 1720 and 1750 by the Babcock family. Back in 1775, Joe Babcock sold the estate to Henry Marchant, Ed's first generation heir.

At one time, wool and eggs were shipped to and sold in Providence, but throughout its existence, the Marchant Farm has essentially remained a subsistence farm. Horses also grazed the lush fields, and dairy cattle used to pasture this land from the 1930's to 1950's. Also, in the 1950's, Ed's brother William and William Jr. tried their hand at Christmas tree farming. Years later, however, William's health deteriorated, and his son went to college, losing interest in the venture. This portion of the farm now serves as wildlife habitat.

Ed, now the sixth generation to run the farm, plans on preserving its present state. Today, 13 acres of alfalfa, timothy, and clover are leased for feed to a local dairy farmer. Another neighbor harvests maple sap for syrup from trees that line his driveway. Currently, the existing woodland maintains a forest management plan. There is also a family graveyard on the property which includes markers for the Babcock, Marchant, and Prest descendants.

Ed shares ownership of the farm with William's two children and someday will pass his portion on to his own two children. Today, however, the Marchant Farm serves as a summer place for Ed's children, nieces, nephews and grandchildren.



The Seabury Farm

Seabury Farm sits on forty-eight very neat and well cared for acres in Little Compton. The current residents are Mr. and Mrs. Albert Seabury Crandon. Mr. Crandon recently celebrated his 95th birthday, which is an accomplishment in itself. During our interview, Mr. Crandon was a most gracious and entertaining host. He is an avid record keeper and collector of old family wills. The oldest one he has found was dated 1840 and he estimates that his family has been on the farm for about 250 years. Mr. Crandon's ancestors came over on the Mayflower, fought in the Revolution, and were a part of the Civil War, which he believes to be the worst thing ever to happen to this country. As you can see, Mr. Crandon has a very rich and interesting family history.

The farm came to him from his cousin, Albert Theodore Seabury, who established the farm as it is today. Cousin Al's parents lived on the farm in a house that has long since gone to ruin. To build the present house, Al Seabury went ot Maine and selected good, hard, straight pine. It was squared off at one of the local "pecker mills", as sawmills of the time were called, and loaded onto a barge for the voyage to Little Compton. Being the good Yankee Trader that he was, Al bought enough wood to build three houses. He then sold off two-thirds of the wood and made enough money on the deal to pay for the construction of his own house. This is a fact that Mr. Crandon is particularly proud of. Cousin Al drew the plans for the house himself. Mr. Crandon found the original muslin tracing cloth rolled up and stuck on a rafter, years ago. Also a great source of pride is the fact that his house had the first bathroom in any building in Little Compton. No more trips to the "Honey Dippin' House"!

Mr. Crandon first came to the farm in 1897, at the age of four. The families visited each other often, and he usually spent summers on the farm. He started actually working on the farm when he was ten years old. Milk, silage and other feed commodities for the animals were the main crops produced. Most farms of the time either had a woodlot on the immediate property, or one situated nearby. The pastures on the Seabury Farm were created as the areas of woodlot were cut to be used a s fuel.

The Seabury Farm (continued)

The barn behind the house is a real beauty. It has no support posts in the first floor working space. Being trained as a civil engineer, Mr. Crandon is extremely impressed with its design and construction. One particularly interesting feature of the barn is that one side of the interior is 14 to 16 inches lower than the other. The reason being that cows were kept on one side and horses on the other. Cows don't need as much "headroom" as horses, thus the unique design. Next to the barn was the Milk House. This structure had a deep pit made of concrete which was filled with cold water to keep the cans of milk fresh, until they were picked up to go to market. It seems that the farm had many ingenious innovations.

Cousin Al had an interest in carriage making as a young man. He constructed a beautiful, two story building to house his workshop and an apartment for the farm workman. One winter night, the man who lived in the second floor apartment had the fire going full tilt to keep warm. He had a little too much wine and fell asleep. Later that evening, he and the workshop went up in flames. Quick action by the fire brigade kept the entire farm from being engulfed.

In 1922 Cousin Al passed away and Mr. Crandon was named a executor of the estate. He would visit the farm on weekends to look after Sue, Cousin Al's wife and to see that everything was okay. The weekly commute must have been something, as Mr. Crandon worked for the Bridge Division of US Steel in Pittsburgh. The farm was kept in production by various local dairy farmers that raised hay and silage for their herds. Today, the fields of Seabury Farm are still producing tons and tons of cattle feed for area farmers.

Mr. Crandon has a keen interest in preserving the farm for future generations, and with this intention in mind, has willed it to his son. The "youngster" is 65 years old and, if he is anything like his father, he is surely a fine gentleman in every sense of the word. The Seabury Farm and family is truly one of Rhode Island's Treasures, and hopefully will be around in another 250 years to be recognized as a five-century farm.

The Simmons Farm

Alexander Simmons and his wife, Mary, live on and own 120 acres of farmland that decorates both sides of West Main Road in Middletown. Although Simmons is not unique in this respect, his being a direct descendant of one of Rhode Island's first families in Agriculture, the Coggeshalls, makes him significant. Back around 1664, when Bristol County was originally a part of Massachusetts and Middletown as part of Newport, the famous Coggeshall family began its agricultural legacy.

The Simmons "Century" Farm, as it is known today, boasts four living generations. This includes Alex himself, his children, grandchildren and mother, who resides next door, a field away from Alex, in a house built in 1818. Up until last fall, Simmons milked about 50 head of Holsteins. The old stanchion barn and milkroom still occupy his mother's backyard, but Alex, now retired from full-time dairy farming, keeps only two "milkers" for his family's use. The cow barn sustains some heifers that Alex enjoys raising for fun and profit. Beyond the barnyard, hay and vegetable fields decorate the hilly landscape which stretches down to the Narragansett Bay shoreline. Rows of multi-floral rose, planted by the soil conservation service, separate the various croplands which Alex will later harvest and then sell vegetables at this popular roadside stand. He usually has a college work-study student help him with these chores.

The Coggeshall family cemetery is currently undergoing relocation of the headstones from a hard-to-get-to plot in the back fields to a space closer to the road so passersby can easily visit it. One of Alex's sons, who works for the United Farmers' Cooperative and lives on a farm of his own, is interested in his father's determination to keep the farm undeveloped. He will most likely take over the responsibility of running the Simmons Farm and continue to preserve the Coggeshall agricultural legacy that endures as a distinctive and symbolic piece of Rhode Island's history.

Blue Flag Farm

The story of the 120 acres of Blue Flag Farm goes back to 1676, when it was settled by Col. Benjamin Church. He was the first to do so in Little Compton and lived in a house close to the shore. The house has been gone since the mid 1800's but a stone marker points out its former location. In 1724, his son built the main house that stands on the property today. The Nelson family bought the land from William Wilbur in 1756, and Blue Flag Farm was born. Like most farms of its day, it was a general subsistence farm with the family producing whatever they needed, and marketing what produce they could in Newport and Providence. They built a second house on the farm around 1830, which still stands today. Two other smaller houses existed for a time, but they were made from chicken coops and corn cribs.

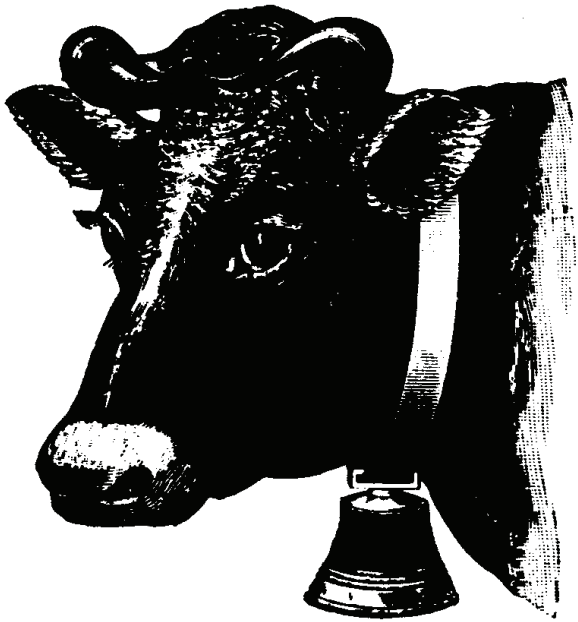
The farm was primarily a dairy farm from the late 1800's, and the barn there now was built in 1885 to replace two older structures damaged by storms. A windmill used to stand on the farm. It took advantage of the offshore winds to supply the energy to grind the farm's grain into flour. Sometime in the 1880's it was sold to a neighbor, who used oxen to drag it up the road, where a house was built around it. It still is one of the most unusual houses in Little Compton.

A great-uncle of the current resident of the farm used to bring the milk to Sakonnet Point by buggy and load it onto a steamboat to sail up to Providence to be sold. Dairying continued right up until 1965. For about fifteen years, the land was rented out to tenant farmers. The problem with that situation is purely one of human nature– a farmer will never take care of land that doesn't belong to him the way that he would take care of his own. In 1980, Jack Nelson and his son took over the farm and are the ninth and tenth generation of Nelsons to live on the land. They raise heifers, pigs, sheep, hay and corn silage. Jack also deals in "a white product that I get from cows in my barn, that has a worldwide market for which I can set my own price!" Sounds like a good deal to me– I don't think he's talking about milk, though; can you guess what the product is?

Blue Flag Farm (continued)

Mr. Nelson sees the importance of keeping land undeveloped, because as he says, "land used for agriculture returns benefits and crops year after year, whereas a houselot produces only one crop and returns benefits only when it is sold again. Farmland should be left in the hands of the farmer as a way of preserving it, because when a family lives on a farm, they can really appreciate its value."

The Nelson family surely has something to be proud of in Blue Flag Farm. Not only because of its longevity, but because in this day and age when farms are swiftly becoming an "endangered species", there are still people who see the value of the family farm. Oh, yeah– that white stuff Jack harvests from the cows in his barn? Why, piano keys, of course!



The Reynolds Homestead

Travelling the nooks and crannies of southern Rhode Island, one would find about eight farms that have not changed family ownership for at least 200 years. However, heading towards the northwest corner of the state, along the rural roads of West Gloucester, one would discover yet another plot of farmland that recently celebrated its bicentennial. This is the Reynolds Homestead, 150 acres of farmland that today boasts three generations of descendants of James Reynolds. The Homestead, deeded to James in 1786, originally contained 200 acres.

Throughout its history, the Reynolds Homestead has enjoyed a bustle of activity. Over one hundred years ago, a portable sawmill operation on the farm processed wood to be sent to Providence for housing construction. In the early 1900's, the Homestead hosted an old-fashioned husking bee. About 100 neighbors eagerly participated in this annual event which was traditionally followed by a supper and then musical and literary entertainment.

Today, Bill Quigley, whose wife was the direct heir to James Reynolds, lives in the Homestead's old farmhouse. Since retiring from the construction business, Bill spends the nice days cutting hay that is grown both on and off his property. He feeds some of it to his small herd of Hereford cows and sheep and sells the rest. The responsibility of the farm chores are also shared by his children and their families. His son and daughter each own a home adjacent to the old farmhouse located on Reynolds Road.

Like most farms of the 1700's, the Reynolds established a family cemetery plot which still exists on the property today.

With a varied landscape consisting of fields, woodland and swamp, it's no wonder that the Quigley's plan on preserving the Reynolds Homestead for their future generations to enjoy.

The Farm of Marion and Dorothy Fry

The Fry Farm, or Fry's Hamlet as it is referred to on the National Register of Historic Places, is much the same as it was in 1677 when the Town of East Greenwich was founded. The parcel of land that was to become the town was divided among forty-eight families who performed some service in King Philip's War. Only sixteen families actually came to East Greenwich to start the town. Thomas Fry, a Newport resident, sent his son, also Thomas, to become one of the town's first citizens. The senior Thomas visited East Greenwich from time to time, but spent most of his life in Newport. Dorothy and Marion are the ninth generation of Fry's to live on the farm, and they have quite an interesting family history.

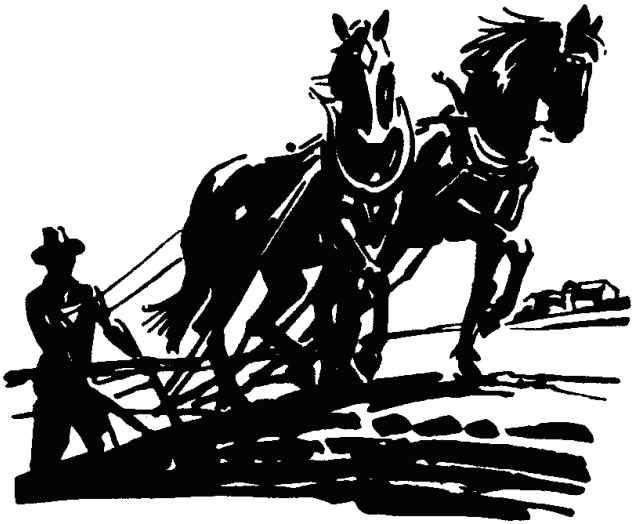
Keeping with the practice in the late 1600's, the Fry family had several farms in the country in addition to their residence in town. They were merchants with vessels that plied the trade routes of the time. Through the generations, the name of Thomas seems to be quite popular, as there were four. They were also a very politically active family down through the years. Thomas #1 represented the town in the legislature for a short time. In 1727, Thomas #2 served as Deputy Governor and Thomas #3 was once Treasurer of the town. Thomas #4 must have been quite the agriculturalist, because in 1830 he was presented a beautiful silver cup from The Society for the Encouragement of Domestic Industry. I guess, even back then, people realized the importance of farming and its preservation as an industry, as well as a way of life.

The farm itself was mostly a dairy farm, but oxen, horses, hogs, chickens, ducks, geese, flax and other crops were raised to keep the farm going.

The Frys have some old account books dating from 1719 to 1830 from which you can get some idea of how things were back then. The flax was spun right there on the farm for clothing. A bartering system was used by most people, with accounts being settled every so often. There are entries in the books showing that things like butter, cheese, wood and meat were sold to buy things like tea, coffee and spices. The existing house was built to replace the original that burned in 1793. the books have records on the building of the new structure, along with the cost of the materials that would make any of today's contractors faint.

Fry Farm (continued)

The farm was a working farm until about twenty years ago, with the milk produced there going to a local dairy. Presently, a cousin is keeping some cows and raising crops on the land. Besides being a dairy, potatoes were once grown and an apple orchard produced enough fruit to pay the college tuition for Dorothy and Marion. The pastures and wetlands of the Fry Farm support a variety of wildlife. Dorothy and Marion have no plans for selling any of their land, and wish it to remain as farmland and open space. After 311 years, it would be a shame to change things now.



The Whimshaw Farm

Although Westport, Massachusetts is the present day home of Mr. and Mrs. Horace Wildes, his legacy at the Whimshaw Farm in Little Compton continues to eke away at Rhode Island's shrinking, but nevertheless, important dairy industry. Milk from today's herd of 75 cows is distributed through the Cooperative Extension Service, but the days of Israel Shaw, who founded the farm back in the early 1700's, do not exemplify the activity taking place at the existing dairy facility today.

Peter Tallman purchased the property from an Indian in 1728. After the marriage of Tallman's daughter to Israel Shaw, the estate then became known as Whimshaw Farm. Like most farms of that day, it started out as a subsistence farm and had retained the Shaw name until Horace's mother married a Wildes. Within this 250 year time span, however, many changes developed leading up to the current dairy farm. Most notably, Frederick Shaw, Horace's grandfather, established an ice cream business in Fall River during the late 1800's. since milk would tend to spoil faster than it could be sold, due to the rocky roads of the early days, Frederick resorted to shipping his cream from Little Compton by boat.

In the early 1920's, Horace and his family moved from Dartmouth to the farm which had been inherited by his mother. Since land travel had improved dramatically by this time, Horace and his brother Merrick formed a dairy business transporting milk to the Fall River Dairy. From 1939 up until the 1980's, they ran their stanchion-type dairy operation.

What was once an 84 acre farm has dwindled down to a 35 acre operation, which has made it necessary for the corn, alfalfa, and grass to feed her herd to be grown on rented land. Horace's cousins cashed in on their portion of the farm, and recently, he himself sold his share of the farm to Merrick who now runs the farm with his son Emerson and grandchildren. They live in the house built in 1860 by James Shaw, Frederick's father. Horace and his wife still make the 18 mile commute form Westport to Little Compton to visit their family at the Whimshaw Farm, which today still maintains its important niche in Rhode Island's agriculture.

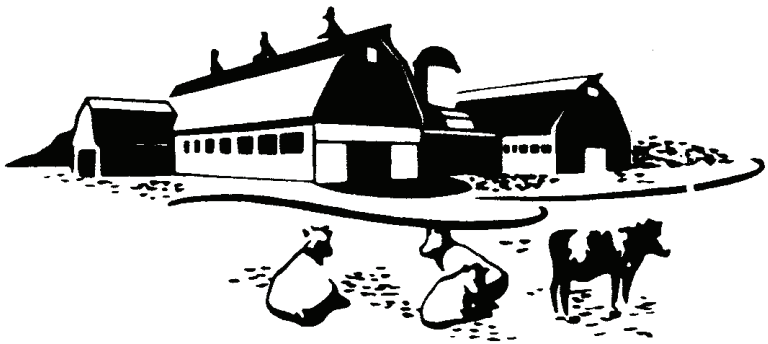
The Farm of Gifford Tibbitts

One cannot truly document traditional dairy farming in Rhode Island without the inclusion of East Greenwich's Gifford Tibbitts. Since the late 1600's, Gifford and his ancestors have been producing and selling milk locally from their herd of Holsteins and Jerseys.

As was common on dairy farms of the early days, an ice house kept the milk cool until it could be transported by railroad up tot Providence. Until last summer, when Tibbitts retired, he has milked an average of 35-40 cows twice a day all his life. The stanchion-type milking set-up still exists, but because of the economic pressures that face many dairy farmers today, the herd was sold. Only young stock presently occupy the old barn.

Besides raising dairy cattle, the Tibbitts family grew potatoes, both on and off the immediate farm's boundaries. These days, the corn and hay silage fields grown to sustain the herds of yesteryear still thrive to feed the few remaining heifers. Gifford's son, who works in Boston, tends to the farm chores on weekends, and his grandson takes care of the young stock as well as some pet rabbits after school.

Gifford resides in the original farmhouse, and even though it is no longer a fulltime operation, he plans on preserving its 132 acres for his family's enjoyment.



About this Brochure

This guide to some of the oldest farms in Rhode Island was originally created in 1987. Obviously lots of things change in more than twenty years, but we thought it was interesting enough to make it available again.

Ken Ayars, Chief
RI Division of Agriculture and Marketing
Summer 2008

Grown in
the Biggest Little State
in the Union

Published by the Rhode Island Division of Agriculture
Department of Environmental Management