

## Poquanticut

No neighborhood in Easton is as rife with stories of witches, lawbreakers and strange happenings as Poquanticut, yet the pattern of its development can be read in its geology just as in every other neighborhood. Its terrain is more varied than any other neighborhood with some of Easton's highest lands draining into a series of low-lying swamps. No part of town has been so clearly affected by glacial action. Spectacular glacial erratics, huge boulders seemingly dropped by giants, abound in the high land around Borderland State Park. There also the streambeds that once ran under the great glacier are laid bare almost like cobblestone streets. Even the cedar swamps owe their origin to the poor drainage created by the ice sheet.

The varied terrain provides a wonderful habitat for animals. Deer, of course, are still common, but there was once larger game as well. In 1747, Benjamin Harvey of Allen Road almost lost his infant daughter to a black bear practically on the doorstep of his home. Years later the last bear in town was killed at Fox Mountain Rock between Poquanticut Avenue and Bay Road. The foxes took over the bears' haunts and provided sport for Easton's hunters and trappers until well into this century. As we shall see, some of the homes in the neighborhood actually began as hunting lodges. The varied wildlife in today's Borderland include otters, and names such as Beaver Dam Road also attest to former animal abundance. Nearby Rattlesnake Hill in Sharon indicates that danger once lurked in Poquanticut's high rock ledges as well.

Three brooks flowed through the old Poquanticut Cedar Swamp in the state park before that swamp was turned into Leach's Pond in 1825. Two of these streams arose in Sharon while the third began in the swamp itself. The western and largest of these is Poquanticut Brook, often and less accurately called the Poquanticut River. Poquanticut is apparently an Indian name, but its source is obscure. Chaffin makes no mention of its origin, but local tradition holds that the Poquanticut Indians of Rhode Island travelled here to hunt.

In the swamp Poquanticut Brook joined a more easterly flowing stream. This little brook once powered several small mills in Sharon along the Bay Road. The two brooks, now one, continue through the park and cross Rockland Street just east of Mill Street. Where the Poquanticut Brook crosses Massapaog Avenue, it joins a third stream which once began in the cedar swamp. This little stream, its flow cut today by the creation of Leach's Pond, crosses Rockland Street to the east of the main branch of the Poquanticut. Now complete, the waters of the Poquanticut travel southward to form New Pond in Furnace Village.

In 1825 Shepard Leach excavated the Poquanticut Cedar Swamp to create the pond that today bears his name. The cedar, invaluable for shingles and fence posts, was harvested by Leach before excavation began. Strangely, sometime after 1830 the pond became known as Wilbur's Pond by which name it was called into this century. As described in the chapter on Furnace Village, Leach's expensive project was probably necessary due to a design flaw in New Pond.

The other stream system in the neighborhood was used to form Old Pond in the Furnace. Originally called the Little Brook, it has been known since the Nineteenth Century as Beaver Brook. Around Rockland Street the little stream was once called Cooper's Brook for Timothy Cooper who once owned land there. Chaffin stated that the

Brook began in a “pond-hole”, probably a glacial kettle hole, a little north of Rockland Street near Bay Road. Like the other streams in the area it flowed to the south crossing Allen Road (formerly Britton Street), Rockland Street, and Beaver Dam Road before forming Old Pond.

Several small mills found a home along these streams, but only one dates from the first period of settlement. The sluggish brooks of the neighborhood needed too much man-made improvement to be attractive, so the earliest settlers turned to farming and hunting. Both remained the dominant interests of the district well into the Twentieth Century. Even today, almost a quarter of a century after the start of the home building boom in the neighborhood, Poquanticut is still Easton’s least developed area.

The first of Poquanticut’s solitude loving settlers was probably Daniel Owen, Jr.. He had moved to Easton with his father who settled along Bay Road between 1705 and 1710. Daniel, Jr. later moved to a farm on the northeast corner of Beaver Dam Road and Poquanticut Avenue. By 1730 he had opened a tavern there.

Shortly after Owen others settled in the district as well. For instance, in 1718 the brothers John and Benjamin Selee moved to the neighborhood. John built a sawmill on the western branch of the Poquanticut Brook at what is now the south side of Rockland Street near Mill Street. The mill operated throughout the Eighteenth Century, and during much of that time it was probably the only industry in the neighborhood.

Since the rest of the town considered the neighborhood to be an howling wilderness with an eerie reputation, roads were slow to develop there. Rockland Street existed as a footpath before the town’s incorporation, but it only became an official town road in 1738 when it was laid out as far as the future Massapoag Avenue. Its extension to Mansfield was formally surveyed in 1816. Poquanticut Avenue became a town road only in 1763 even though one of the neighborhood’s earliest settlers had moved to its route a half century before. Allen Road was the other footpath for early settlers and it remained so until it officially became a street in 1766. Also in that year Beaver Dam Road was laid out to replace a path (Perry Lane) connecting Bay Road with Poquanticut Avenue further south. The remains of the original path can still be seen next to the home at 31 Poquanticut Avenue. Massapoag Avenue, Chestnut Street, and Mill Street all had to wait until the Nineteenth Century before they joined the network of official roads. A hint of the condition of these early roads can be seen in the death of “Deacon” Pierce. After a night of drinking at Hodges’ Tavern, the old man drowned in a mud puddle on Allen Road.

Although it grew slowly, the neighborhood made a lasting impression on the town’s folklore with the children of millwright John Selee. The stories of Nathan Selee and his sister Thankful Selee Buck are well told in Chaffin’s *History of Easton*. According to Chaffin people believed Nathan Selee had help with his sawmill:

... Strange stories were told, and even believed by superstitious people, about the Devil or his imps running the mill at night, Nathan Selee being reported as knowing too much about magic arts, and being on too good terms for awhile with their author.

Chaffin added the following details:

He was thought to be ambitious to delve in the dangerous mysteries of supernatural things. Mr. Selee was a clairvoyant, and many stories are current of what he saw and foretold.

Sadly Chaffin gave only one example. In that case Selee refused to tell the future for

a daughter of Stimson William's and then noted to a passerby she had a terrible week ahead. She died during the week. Chaffin then continued:

The story is still believed also, that, having sought long for a certain book on magic which he thought would perfect him in the [black] art, the door of his shop opened one day and a stranger handed him the book and vanished. Directly upon the departure of the strange visitant a wild storm began to rage.... Mr. Selee took the book and all the other books of the kind that he possessed, and threw them into the fire; and then going to the door and looking out he saw the sun shining.... This determined him to have no more to do with the dangerous subject.

Selee's sister Thankful also practiced the black arts. Chaffin wrote:

Thankful Buck was reputed a witch, though there is no tradition of her having done anything especially wicked. She is said to have performed her incantations at midnight with her daughters, one of whom inherited her name and reputation, by pouring water from one pan to another. Loads of hay were sometimes stopped in front of her house and could not move until she gave the signal when a black cat was seen to come out from under the hay and glide away. She once sent her husband to some distance to get a certain kind of wool she particularly desired. He failed to procure it, and on his return found it impossible to enter his own door.... A neighbor was said to have caught a black cat doing some mischief, and to have given her a severe beating on the head; the next day it was observed that Thankful Buck had lost an eye.

What is the explanation for these stories? Chaffin believed that with the threat of hanging long passed, "some shrewd persons... enjoyed the sense of power which the reputation of being a little uncanny gave them." A careful examination of the stories seems to undermine this explanation. Nathan Selee spreading a story about burning his magic books would seem to reduce his supernatural authority, for instance. Clearly, something more was afoot in Poquanticut.

While as Chaffin suggests, we must distinguish between the outbreak of witchcraft hysteria at Salem in the 1690's where many people were executed and the relatively harmless practices of the Selees in Easton, both were part of a long tradition of "true" witchcraft in New England. Easton was certainly not the last bastion of these beliefs either. For example, in Lynn Moll Pitcher, a contemporary of Nathan Selee, gained a widespread reputation as a fortune teller. The Selees and their neighbors believed in supernatural powers, and the stories told by Chaffin are clearly part of long standing folk tradition. These stories blend hints of actual ceremonial magic with legends told in many lands and events with natural explanations.

Stories of witches transforming themselves into animals are commonplace in most societies with a witchcraft tradition. Even the story of a witch being wounded while in animal form can be traced to old English stories. The story of Nathan and the Magic Book is an Easton version of the Faust legend.

Other parts of the Selee legend may be explained by natural events. A sudden storm might have caused the mill pond to overflow and turn the gears in the sawmill, for instance. Given the state of roads in Poquanticut, it is easy to imagine a slough in front of Thankful's home, traditionally on the corner of Rockland and Mill Streets (now a vacant lot next to 14 Mill Street), that snared heavily laden haywagons. And finally, would any husband with a wife like Thankful not feel an extreme reluctance to enter his home if he had bought the wrong wool at the market?

Still, when folk tales and common sense have finished with the Selees, the evidence

for practicing the black arts is overwhelming. Thankful Selee's midnight incantations may have been a satanic ritual, but it was just as likely a form of divination. While stories of water pouring as a means of telling the future are hard to find, a precursor of crystal gazing used pans of water surrounded by candles. Interestingly, once that ritual was underway, a virgin boy or girl was needed to stare into the pan and seek the vision. This, of course, would explain the presence of Buck's daughters.

Nathan Selee did seem to have a wide ranging intellect. The author had an opportunity to view Selee's papers when they were up for sale a few years ago. They included extensive surveying records with a wide variety of other things including medical remedies and a strange hand written anti-Catholic prophesy. It is easy to imagine a man like Selee seeking out books of magic. Finally, clairvoyance was widely accepted as fact well into the Nineteenth Century. In the 1850's John Wilson served the neighborhood as a clairvoyant doctor who claimed to diagnose disease while in a trance. While Wilson may have been a quack, there is no reason to suppose that Nathan Selee was not a sincere believer in his own powers.

Selee and his sister lived into the early Nineteenth Century, and persons alive in the Twentieth Century knew Thankful Buck's daughter, she who "inherited her name and reputation." One of these informants confirmed for Willis Buck that the second Thankful was a little "odd." Thus, through almost a century one family in Easton held a supernatural reputation. Present residents tell stories of the disgusting practice of animal sacrifice discovered as recently as a year ago, so apparently others have taken up old neighborhood traditions. Other contemporary stories tell of unearthly growls heard in the night. Probably a bobcat is on the prowl, but perhaps those growls came from an ancient one-eyed black cat still stalking the night to spy on neighbors!

Nathan Buck, a son of Thankful, continued this branch of the Buck family's strange history. The War of 1812 was not a popular one in New England, but Eastoners did serve on militia duty. One company under Captain Noah Reed was sent to New Bedford in the summer of 1814 to guard the coast against the landing of British raiders. The young men were simply on extended sentry duty, and as bored soldiers will, they began to play pranks on each other. A certain Charles Gilbert was notorious for such pranks. For example, he had tried to tease an old Easton soldier on guard duty by charging his horse at him. The startled soldier, Elijah Drake, had shot the horse. A few days later the prankster decided to work on Nathan Buck, who Chaffin noted "was not, it must be confessed, especially bright." To prevent any further shooting Captain Reed had told all his soldiers to challenge intruders three times before firing. Gilbert charged out of the darkness, but Nathan Buck was taking no chances. He challenged the intruder three times very quickly and fired, killing Gilbert. In a military court Buck would probably have been acquitted for simply doing his duty, but poor Buck was turned over to the civil authorities of New Bedford. Nathan Buck was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to ten days solitary confinement and three years of hard labor in Charlestown jail. He was soon released because prison life had destroyed his health, and he died in October, 1815.

Many Selees also remained in the neighborhood during the Nineteenth Century. The house at 161 Rockland Street, for instance, was built by John Selee, a brother of Nathan. When the Farrington family restored this house, they made an interesting discovery. Behind a wood closet near the front chimney was a hidden compartment big enough to stand in. Clearly, one of the occupants had maintained a stop on the Underground

Railroad.

Three other residents of the neighborhood in the Eighteenth Century also deserve mention. One is Edmund Andrews. He is perhaps more frightening in modern minds than the neighborhood's witches, for Mr. Andrews was Easton's first lawyer. Born in Taunton, he moved to Easton shortly after 1750 and settled on Poquanticut Avenue. In 1764 he was chosen by the Baptists to represent them in their case about paying taxes to the Congregational Church. Thus, he deserves credit for taking on an unpopular case which could hurt his scanty business. Massachusetts at this time was one of the most litigious societies in the world, but most people preferred to represent themselves in the many cases relating to boundary disputes or debts. Andrews supplemented his income by farming and keeping an inn at his home. He held a tavern license from 1761 to 1773.

In June, 1774 the people of Easton signed a strongly worded protest against the British Intolerable Acts and included an agreement not to import British goods. In July forty-six Easton men, nearly a half of the one hundred and five men with property valued at £20 or more, signed a letter praising the British military governor and criticizing the patriot cause. One of these pro-British signers was Edmund Andrews. Daniel Williams, Jr., the only man expelled from town for Tory sympathies, was another signer. On the other hand three men who would become leaders in the town's militia during the Revolution also signed. Was Andrews a Tory? Was his lonely tavern in Poquanticut a haven for Tories or perhaps even British spies? We may never know. Since at least eleven signers were Baptists who probably feared for their religious freedom under a patriot regime, perhaps Andrews only signed to help his old clients. Andrews or a son of the same name served briefly in the Revolution, but the whole family apparently left town in 1785 shortly after the war's end.

Benjamin Harvey of Allen Road, whose daughter was almost eaten by a bear, was also a participant in revolutionary affairs. He had been a prominent Baptist leader in their push for religious freedom in the 1760's, and like some of his fellow Baptists he had signed the letter of welcome to General Gage. However, in little more than a month, Harvey's opinions would change. Gage's enforcement of the repressive Massachusetts Government Act led to protests all over the state, but the strongest protest, an actual riot, took place in Taunton in early August. One of "the principal rioters" was Benjamin Harvey who was then in his sixties. Harvey's presence, and probably that of other Eastoners as well, gives our town the right to fly the famous "Liberty and Union" Flag which was the symbol of the protesters. It was one of the first flags flown in the patriot cause in America.

The final interesting early resident of Poquanticut took part in an even earlier war. This was David Thompson, Jr. who died in Easton in 1836 at age 98. In 1757 the nineteen year old Thompson, who grew up in Stoughton, lost an arm while serving at Fort William Henry in the French and Indian War. This siege was made famous by James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, recently brought to vivid life again by a new film version. Thompson lost his arm when a French mortar shell exploded in the fort, but the injury may actually have saved his life. As an invalid, he was probably placed in the rear of the surrendered troops as they left the fort, and thus missed the attack by the Indians allied to the French. Unlike the movie version, the French actually rescued the British troops by stopping the Indians after only a few minutes of fighting. After returning home to Stoughton, Thompson married and moved to Easton in 1783. His farm

was on Mill Street at the Easton and Mansfield line. At the time of his death he had living six children, thirty-eight grand-children and one hundred great-grandchildren. He received a state pension for his wartime services and was one of the last survivors of the war. One wonders if this old man tucked away in a secluded corner of Easton was aware of the 1826 publication of *The Last of the Mohicans* which would immortalize the most exciting moments of his long life.

In his chapter "Shadows", Reverend Mr. Chaffin notes "Easton did not have a very enviable reputation among her neighbors during the latter part of the last century" due to the "existence here, about 1800, of an organized gang of thieves." He adds, "They were mainly located in the west part of town..." Indeed they were, but within a few years of the publication of Chaffin's book, the thieves became almost completely associated with the Poquanticut neighborhood. By 1906, for example, Oakes Ames would write in his diary that there was once "a resort of thieves... in a region quite near the territory which Blanche and I someday hope to call ours [Borderland State Park]."

George White was the leader of the gang of thieves who tradition says were "one link in a chain of evil conspirators reaching to Canada." The names of about a dozen gang members and some of their confederates were known to Chaffin. This group produced a crime wave that lasted for several years in the towns of Easton, Norton, and Mansfield. They were general thieves stealing cloth, clothes, cutlery, crockery, combs, alcoholic beverages, razors, nail rods, wire, horses, and grain. No store or mill in the area seems to have been safe from them. The criminal activities of George White himself, particularly horse stealing, seem to have ranged far beyond that of the gang as a whole.

The thieves were well organized with passwords and secret signs. They also had three hideouts in Easton. One was a sort of cellar east of Bay Road near the Stoughton line where seven stolen horses were once found. A second safe house for the gang included a cellar large enough to drive a horse and wagon into in case of pursuit.

The last hideout is probably the main reason why the gang is associated with the Poquanticut neighborhood. This is the famous double cellar hole whose remains can still be seen today. The house that stood here seems to have been a main resort of the gang. A map of 1855 shows it was reached by a carpath from Highland Street and was actually in the Furnace Village school district. In early days a path may have reached the house from Chestnut Street as well. One of the house's two cellars was open for entrance while the other, separated from the first by a stone foundation wall, could be entered only through a trapdoor inside the house. Once when the house was being searched, nothing was discovered because the housekeeper was washing clothes in a tub set directly over the trapdoor. A century later this would become a B western cliché, but it managed to fool the officers of the law here! It should be noted that most houses in Easton did not have full cellars at this time, so the failure to discover the thieves' ruse is more easily understood.

The gang was finally stopped through the actions of a brave young storekeeper who had been victimized by the thieves. The young man, after secretly learning some of the gang's signs, drove to the double-celled house and told the occupants that he wanted to hide some stolen goods there. Since at least one storekeeper was already a gang associate, the members invited the young man to join. He even participated in some of their raids. Since he was rather sickly, he often visited the town doctor Samuel Guild. Guild, a bold man who once slept with loaded pistols by his bed to protect the town's liberty tree, was

then our Justice of the Peace. The young clerk must have been a fancy talker to allay the gang's suspicions especially since a gang member was a near neighbor of Dr. Guild. Once the young man had provided Guild with enough information to act, the Doctor had to find officers willing to help make the arrest. This was more difficult than it seems because the town constable was a gang member and the county deputy sheriff was a receiver of stolen goods. Finally, the gang was apprehended and brought to trial at the October, 1803 session of the Supreme Judicial Court in Taunton.

George White was sentenced to jail, but most members seem to have been fined and put on parole. Reverend Mr. Chaffin deplored the action of the gang even while he concealed the names of its members to protect the sensibilities of grandchildren. He does inform us that one prominent confederate committed suicide rather than face a trial and that a female gang member never reformed and was last seen in Taunton jail with her two daughters in 1842. But even the pious Reverend Mr. Chaffin seemed to enjoy the tales of George White, the ring leader who left no descendants to protect. His story of White, who in order to raise money to pay his lodging bill, stole the innkeeper's horse, sold it, then stole it again and returned it to the unsuspecting innkeeper, has passed into folklore.

A cursory examination of court records now housed at the Massachusetts State Archives in Boston shows that the gang apparently was made up of members of just a few families. Indicted with George White were five other Whites, Adonijah, Jonah, Josiah the 2<sup>nd</sup>, Sheziah, and Simeon, Jr.. Others named in the records were Peleg and Robert West, Thomas Willis, Senior and Junior, Benjamin Keith, Reuben Vose, and Nicolas Drew. Elizabeth Drew also appeared in court records, but whether she was the woman with the washtub is unknown.

Thomas Willis lived on Washington Street near Dr. Guild. His son, charged with concealing stolen goods, owned a store on Bay Road at its junction with Randall Street. Robert West, Adonijah White, and a Levi Drew, perhaps a relative of the indicted Drews, all lived near Daniel Wheaton along the southern part of Bay Road. Wheaton, a lawyer who had only been in town a few years, apparently served as an attorney for some gang members. The Adonijah White, indicted several times and convicted of receiving stolen property, was the grandfather of Guilford White who in Chaffin's time was a prominent resident of Eastondale and an attorney in the federal courts in Boston.

Poor Poquanticut seems unfairly tainted by this gang's activity which occurred on the fringes of the neighborhood. Its weak road system, dark reputation and sparse population made it an ideal location for the thieves, but the thieves themselves seem to have belonged to other neighborhoods. Even at the time the gang was active and the Selees still practiced the Black Arts, the neighborhood was growing and adding community institutions.

The earliest civilizing force to arrive in the neighborhood was an elementary school built in 1793. It was originally supposed to be on the west side of Poquanticut Avenue between the junctions of that road with Chestnut Street and Massapoag Avenue. It was moved a quarter of a mile westward apparently because there were more students on Chestnut Street than in other parts of the district. In 1827 the population of the district had again shifted, so the old school was dragged across the fields to a location on the east side of Massapoag Avenue about an eighth of a mile south of Mill Street. A ten foot addition was added, and this little school continued to serve the district until 1871 when a new one was built on the same site. That school remained in use until 1914 when the

building was condemned, and the Town decided to consolidate the Poquanticut students with those along the northern part of Bay Road in the school on Bay Road opposite Rockland Street. This led to a protest by the neighborhood's parents, so in 1916 the School Committee built a new school for both districts at the corner of Rockland Street and Allen Road.

In 1947, according to Willis Buck, the Superintendent of Schools and the Fire Chief visited the school during Fire Prevention Week for a fire drill. While the Chief stood by with a stop watch to time the drill, the Superintendent pulled on the rope to ring the bell in the cupola. The bell support broke, and the bell crashed onto the roof. In repairing the bell support and remounting the bell, Mr. Buck discovered that the bronze or brass bell bore the mark "Troy, N. Y. 1857" After some research he succeeded in tracing the bell back to 1869 when it was bought by public subscription for a school in Furnace Village. In 1870 with the opening of a new building on the corner of South and Highland Streets, the other school was moved and became the Bay Road School mentioned above. When that school was sold, the town reserved the bell and put it in the new Poquanticut School. Where the bell had been from 1857 to 1869 remains a mystery, but it is one of the oldest bells still in Easton. The bell is now in the collection of the Easton Historical Society.

In 1957 the Poquanticut school was closed, but it subsequently returned to life as the new home of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Private George F. Shindler Post # 2547. The VFW has been very open to having a variety of groups use their hall. Thus, once again Poquanticut can be said to have a community center. Currently, the newly formed Easton Animal Owners Association meets at this site.

Another example of change in the neighborhood during the Nineteenth Century is the house now owned by Mr. Willis Buck (139 Poquanticut Avenue). It is now one of the oldest still standing in Poquanticut. Rueben Harlow, Jr. built the house in 1825 for his intended bride, Celia Lothrop. Although he deeded the house to her, he died before they could be married. His brother Tisdale later married her (some people considered it a good way to keep the property in the family), but records do not show whether or not they ever lived in the house. At any rate, they soon sold it and the land to Macey Record, Jr. and went to live in the big house next door (131 Poquanticut Avenue) which Tisdale Harlow had built.

After the death of his first wife, Macey Record, Jr. courted a twice-widowed woman whose first husband had lived fourteen years and whose second had lasted only fourteen months. Macey's friends warned him he would probably last only fourteen weeks if he married her. He fooled them, however, as he lived over twenty years. After his death, his widow sold the house to a coffee importer named Dilloway who used the farm as a rest home for his dray horses. He, in turn, sold the house to Squire Harlow's widow who wanted it for her son Tisdale and his bride. Thus, the house returned to its original family.

The Macey Record house is a good example of Federal Style architecture and how it was adapted for practical use. The main part is two stories high, but it is only one room deep. This tall but narrow design is typical of the style but not very practical for a large farm family. Thus, a one story ell was added to the back containing the kitchen, pantry, back hall, buttery, and bathroom. A deep cellar, composed of faced granite hauled from Quincy, extends under the entire house. All the lumber used in the house was cut on the farm, and the ridge pole alone is over forty feet long. The timbers are hand-hewn oak and pine and were put together with wooden pegs or wrought iron nails. The house has five

fireplaces and a brick oven. The chimneys are all built on huge stone arches, so that none of them extends to the cellar floor.

Perhaps the only important business to find a home in this largely agricultural neighborhood began about 1830. Nathaniel, Daniel, Albert and Charles Hayward opened a carriage factory on Poquanticut Avenue just south of Beaver Dam Road. The stream there powered a smithy that produced the iron wagon parts. According to Rebecca Flandreau:

The Haywards made very fine wagons of all descriptions. I remember especially a butcher cart that Will Leonard of Norton used to drive. It had a large painting of various cuts of meat on the canvas side.

Nathaniel and Daniel Hayward sold their interest in the firm within five or six years to pursue experiments on various rubber products. In 1882 Albert M. Hayward, the son of the original Albert, bought out all partners. Four years later he moved the business to Five Corners as described in the chapter on Bay Road.

As we have seen, the Buck family has long been associated with Poquanticut. Thus, it is fitting to use the reminiscences of Anna Buck to give us the flavor of the neighborhood in the first quarter of the Twentieth Century. She wryly notes:

When I was growing up, that part of Easton in which I lived, Poquanticut, was the most rural area of the town. It was the western frontier. Residents of the other sections of Easton would call us who lived in Poquanticut, Bay Roaders, for it was then little comprehended that any life existed west of that historic throughway.

Her parents had lived in Mansfield for a few years before returning to live at 111 Rockland Street, a house that had been built by her grandfather between 1874 and 1876. By the time they returned to Easton in 1911, the house had been bought by Oakes Ames as part of his Borderland project, and the Bucks rented from Ames.

Although the days of using charcoal to make iron were long passed, that hand-made fuel still had specialty uses. Miss Buck writes:

To supplement the meager income from farming, my grandfather Horace made and sold charcoal. Just west of the house a lane departs Rockland Street which lane wends north to Turkey Hill. Along that lane, grandfather had dug a large pit into which he would carefully place the newly harvested indigenous wood to make charcoal. When completed, he would load the newly made charcoal into a wagon and make delivery at the Baker Chocolate Factory at Milton Lower Mills.

The ways of making a living in Poquanticut continued in the traditions of the Nineteenth Century:

The men also would go iceing in winter. They cut great chunks of ice from the frozen ponds which would be stored for warm weather use.

At one time father had a small, local milk route selling raw milk door to door with a horse and wagon. Mr. Horace Willis had a large herd of cows at his farm on Rockland Street which farm was located at 161 Rockland Street. Mr. William McLeod maintained a herd at his farm on Poquanticut Avenue where now lives Mr. Charles Wilbur in the house numbered 131 Poquanticut Avenue, and known as the Clover Valley Farm. Milk from these farms was sent to the Lowney Chocolate Factory in Mansfield. [Probably another market for the Buck's Charcoal, also.] Each farm had its own milk route. Excess was taken to Manley's Dairy and after 1917 to Producer's Dairy for pasteurization.

There were at least three poultry farms in Poquanticut. On Rockland Street was Mr. John Young, on Mill Street Mrs. Addie Buttinger managed and operated a

poultry place. Over on Chestnut Street, Mr. DesJarlais, too had a poultry farm. Each was an active business which sold large quantities of eggs and baby chicks.

While other parts of town were quickly acquiring modern amenities, Miss Buck explains that Poquanticut lagged behind:

When I was young in Poquanticut there were no paved streets, there was no central heating, there was no running water, and there was no electricity. In those days, when motor cars in Easton were rare, my father, brothers, and other men of our neighborhood would clear snow from the road using hand shovels. It seems to me that we had bigger snow storms in those days, but we must also remember that the wagons, the sleighs and the early horseless carriages did not need such a wide clearing of snow as do the many vehicles of today. Our nearest neighbor lived next door, east on Rockland Street about one-quarter mile away, in a house now numbered 87 Rockland Street. There was no other house in sight and when we needed to use the telephone we would go there where Cousin Sanford Buck lived.

We went to school [after attending the Poquanticut School] by horse drawn wagon and, in later years by motor coach sometimes driven by Mr. Elmer Goss. In winter when there was snow on the ground we were transported to school by wooden sled.

On the other hand, the pleasures of a child's life in Poquanticut were not very different from those of children in "civilized" North Easton at that time:

As children we had access to about ninety acres of fields, pastures and woodlands that are now part of Borderland State Park. Of course, in season we brought the wild strawberries and blueberries home. In the summer we would walk a half a mile to where Mill Street now leaves Rockland Street. There the Poquanticut River can be seen as it wends its way to the ponds to the south. The boys would dam the river and create a neighborhood swimming pool.

Commerce managed to find the scattered homes in Poquanticut just as in the other neighborhoods of the time:

The family groceries and supplies were early purchased from two stores in the Easton Furnace district. A clerk from Kimball's store came to the house on each Tuesday, while a clerk from Swift's store came on Fridays. Their job was to solicit our order the delivery of which was made on the following day. Kimball's store was located on Bay Road, south of the Five Corners and opposite to where Highland Street now intersects that road. The store was owned and operated by G. L. Kimball.

It is said that it was Luther Swift who would take the order on Friday, and Howard Swift who would deliver it on Saturday.

At a later time, my father would drive by horse and buggy, once a week, to North Easton, where he would shop for groceries at McMenemy's Meat Market and for other items at the Ames Store.

Because of the lack of transportation and the uniqueness of the neighborhood, the residents opted to create their own club for recreation and community service. The club met in the old school which the Town had abandoned in 1914. It provided both fun and a link to the wider world. Anna Buck describes the club:

In 1923, when I was fourteen years of age, I joined the Poquanticut Welfare Club. Fourteen was the minimum age for membership. The club had been organized on Wednesday April 26, 1916 with my father as director, my mother as secretary, and my brother Horace as vice president. There were twenty-five charter members. The club had as its objective the mutual benefit and aid of the people in the Poquanticut neighborhood. The club sponsored whist parties, basket parties, lawn parties, dances and strawberry festivals. At Christmas each child of members

received a gift. Sometimes there were musical programs by local people or a dance recital given by children of members. Speakers from Easton and elsewhere provided programs.

The club bought the former school on Massapoag Avenue, paying it off in just over three years. In that building, early during World War I Mrs. Frothingham, under the auspices of the Womens' National League of North Easton, came to give a demonstration of canning. At a meeting on July 19, 1916, the question of electric lighting for the neighborhood was touched upon.

The club remained active until June, 1926 when it disbanded. The main cause of dissolution was the burning, on September 25, 1925 of the club house [some say arson by a disgruntled resident was the cause].

My mother conducted a Sunday school in the club house. Later, Reverend Warren Bixby, an Episcopal minister from North Easton, would come to our area on Thursday afternoons, and gather the children at a neighbor's home where he would lead religious services.

The Poquanticut Welfare Club disbanded in the same year that electricity finally reached the neighborhood. Every homeowner had to pledge to pay five dollars a month for seven years before the power company would hook up the neighborhood. Increased access to automobiles also began to tie the neighborhood more closely to the rest of town. Paved roads followed and in the early 1950's street lights arrived. As in other rural neighborhoods, it was the arrival of town water in 1966 that set the stage for the building boom of recent decades. While there is still abundant open space in Poquanticut even outside the state park, for better or worse it is one of the quickest growing areas in town today.

The wide open spaces of Poquanticut were attractive to both hunters and eccentrics. Around the turn of the century Charles Wesley Smith, a fur trapper and charcoal maker, slept in a box in his house and was known far and wide as Quanticut Smith. Mr. Smith apparently did other things to justify his eccentric reputation, but sleeping in a box with covers pulled over it was probably a sensible alternative in a house that lacked central heating.

Others used the neighborhood as a temporary respite from civilization. One of these was Edgar Craig, a local banker, who befriended brothers George and Dwelly Smith who lived at 162 Chestnut Street. Craig loaned the brothers money, and when they died their home, built around the 1850's, became his. Craig kept his own home at 18 Main Street and renovated the old farm house for business entertaining and hunting. Immediately after the renovation, he held a house warming party that lived up to its name. A spark from the fireplace burned the place down. Undaunted, Craig rebuilt changing the style from a farmhouse to a lodge. The interior including wainscoting, paneling, a carved built-in sideboard, and an oak bar came from Governor Ames' house in North Easton which was torn down in the 1930's. Thus, ironically, parts of the boyhood home of Poquanticut's most famous resident, Oakes Ames, found their way to within a mile or two of Ames' estate at Borderland.

The woodwork for the Craig home was moved to Chestnut Street by the horse drawn wagon of Tom Williams. In later years, Mr. Williams and his team were beloved figures on Easton streets due to his famous hayrides. He died in the stall with his horses, the apparent victim of a heart attack, although rumors of possible foul play still circulate as another Poquanticut mystery.

Oakes Ames and his wife Blanche were two others who came to Poquanticut to find

solace in its wild beauty. Strangely, their efforts to create a quiet refuge from the world has become the prime tourist destination in Easton. Borderland State Park with its miles of trails, varied terrain, interesting animal life and unique mansion is a treasure of national stature. One of the most attractive natural features is the beautiful water lilies that grace the park's ponds every summer. Once these lilies were the basis of a substantial business.

As noted earlier, Leach's Pond was created in 1825. Apparently within a few years, its shallower waters became home to substantial quantities of water-lilies. According to a late Nineteenth Century news article discovered by Frank Meninno, during June and July the lilies were "quite a bonanza for several poor families." The pioneer of the business was Joseph Randall who was living "a sort of hermit life in a small house on the Bay Road" when the article was written. Then 86, he told of gathering lilies nearly fifty years before which he sold for a penny each.

The old hermit recalled:

I used to go to Winneconnet to get them. Old Captain Perry [probably Nathaniel Perry who died in 1857 at age 75] and I got upset one day in the middle of the pond. We thought we should be drowned, but we swam ashore. It was a very narrow escape. I have been in the mud where it was hard work to pull out. "I had the whole business to myself for several years, as no one round dare do it. I had the name of selling the best ones in Boston."

As the supply of lilies grew, the prices dropped. Eastoners would gather lilies and then fathers and sons would go to Boston and sell them on the Common for six to eight dollars a thousand. For some reason this was banned, and the Eastoners then had to wholesale their lilies for only a dollar or a dollar and a half per thousand.

As the prices dropped, premium quality was needed to hold the market. Thus, Leach's Pond with its fertile soil producing better shaped and more fragrant flowers became a focal point of the trade.

According to the article a lively boy or man could pick a thousand quickly. The pickers arrived at the pond in the early morning just as the lilies opened. Some used a flat-bottomed boat to gather while others donned overalls and long rubber boots to wade around "often," according to the article, "up to their necks." The Johnson family gathered up to 150,000 flowers a year while James Mackey picked 100,000 in a single season.

The beautiful lilies on Leach's Pond may have been one of the main attractions for Oakes Ames as well. Whatever the cause the arrival of Ames changed the neighborhood greatly. Born in 1874, Oakes Ames was the younger son of Governor Oliver and Anna C. Ames. Unlike most of his family, Oakes had no interest in business or politics. As a child he had learned an appreciation for plants in the greenhouses on his father's estate. When he graduated from Harvard in 1898, he founded the Ames Botanical Laboratory for orchid and economic plant research, and joined the Harvard faculty. A gifted botanist, Oakes established his reputation as an expert in orchids. In 1900 he married Blanche Ames, the sister of Harvard classmate Butler Ames. In later years his work focused on plants of economic value.

Blanche's accurate illustrations of orchids enhanced her husband's work, but this intriguing woman was more than just her husband's assistant. Four years younger than Oakes, Blanche Ames was born into one of the leading families of Lowell. Her father Adelbert, a general in the Civil War and later Military Governor of Mississippi, was from an unrelated branch of the Ames family. Her mother was the daughter of General

Benjamin Butler. General Butler, nicknamed “Spoons” by the citizens of Louisiana for his troops’ looting activity, was one of the most eccentric and successful politicians in Massachusetts’ history. Sarah Hildreth, his wife, was a Shakespearean actress. Oakes’ father served as Butler’s Lieutenant Governor in 1882. With this background it is little wonder that Blanche became an outgoing and dynamic woman. For example, in keeping with the martial traditions of her family she took time off from college to serve as a nurse during the Spanish-American War. When she graduated from Smith in 1899 as President of her class, she gave a graduation speech that was heard by President McKinley. In the first decade of their marriage Blanche had four children and developed her considerable artistic talent.

The young couple lived with Oakes’ mother in North Easton. Anna C. Ames was a beloved figure in North Easton by this time, but her Victorian propriety did not blend well with Blanche’s exuberance. Shortly after his marriage Oakes began to quietly buy up property in Poquanticut along the border with Sharon. In 1906 Oakes decided to move his family to the old Tisdale farm on Mountain Road. This led to increasingly harsh battles with his mother. For example, on February 23<sup>rd</sup> Oakes noted in his diary:

That I do not understand the vagaries of my mother’s mind I freely admit. She resembles much a gun that is as likely to discharge from the muzzle as from the breech.

May 26, 1906 was the family’s first day in their new home, but Oakes had been unable to bring all his possessions with him. His mother, who had been away from home when the move occurred, responded badly. On June 8 Oakes was informed that he could not take another orchid from the family greenhouses until the trustees of his father’s estate were consulted. The war between mother and son continued until the June 14<sup>th</sup> when Anna Ames sent Oakes a letter of reconciliation. Although the war was over, Oakes never moved his orchids to his new home. Instead, he gave them to the New York Botanical Garden and never grew another orchid again!

There were challenges at the new home that were not easily resolved either. On January 1, 1900, Oakes wrote in his diary:

Mr. Hayward came to see me about the land around Wilbur’s Pond [Leach’s Pond today]. Our way is not altogether smooth, although we hope to succeed in our purpose. A man, Gibbs by name, owns an island [really a peninsula] in the Pond, and has a two year’s lease of the hunting and fishing privilege. He is willing to sell his island but demands seven or eight hundred dollars for it, a price I am not inclined to pay.

Mr. Ames should have paid. This diary entry marks the beginning of a feud that would last for more than half a century.

George Gibbs owned about two acres of land on the Sharon side of the pond where he built a gunning stand. It became a popular gathering place for sportsmen including members of the Boston Red Sox and Braves baseball teams. Herman Long, a star shortstop for the Boston Braves from 1890 to 1902, was a frequent visitor, for instance. Railroad conductors also used the stand during stopovers in Easton. The problem was more complex than Ames imagined because Gibbs had divided ownership of the property into ten shares held by ten different people. When Ames began to buy property in the area, the ten owners entered into a pact never to sell a share to Ames. Under pressure one did sell, but the others held firm.

Mr. Ames was not one to give in. The Hayward company of surveyors was hired to

stake out the land, research the deeds and find a defect in the title. Despite some promising leads, Gibbs and his friends had a clear title. Ames' next strategy was intimidation. Ames had a hen house built in the middle of the lane leading to the duck stand. One of the Gibbs faction responded by putting his truck into first gear and neatly pushing the hen house out of the way. Later a building on Gibbs' property burned under suspicious circumstances, but the Gibbs faction held firm.

Over the decades use of the site dwindled, but still the remaining shareholders would not sell to Ames. In 1950 Oakes Ames died and in 1959, the 87 year old Gordon Grant agreed to sell his six shares to the 81 year old Blanche Ames. The negotiations and the sale were managed by Tyler and Reynolds of Boston, to whose representative, on the telephone, Mr. Grant is quoted as having strongly demanded: "And I want to be paid off in Hoover dollars. None of those Truman dollars for me."

Despite the irritation of the Gibbs feud, Blanche and Oakes continued to develop their plans for a showplace estate. As early as 1906 Oakes was writing to Gifford Pinchot, a pioneer conservationist and forester, for advice on managing his woodland. A swamp was soon cleared and a dam, designed by Blanche, built creating Pud's Pond, the first of several engineering projects by the family which created the current system of ponds in the park. They also explored the woods and fields of their property discovering what they thought was a colonial powder house on the north edge of Leach's Pond. The "powder house" is still to be seen, but it is much more likely to have been some kind of storage cellar. A fort which legend said was on the property was never discovered. Blanche and Oakes' walks of exploration were the preliminaries to the building of a new home for the family.

From the first, the family had not intended to live permanently in the old Tisdale farmhouse, so in 1908 they chose an architect. Both Oakes and Blanche quickly tired of his grandiose plans and fired him. Blanche then took over the design of the new mansion. One of her main concerns was to make the home fireproof to protect Oakes' extensive library. She pored over architectural books and consulted an engineering firm about the use of steel reinforced concrete. The final design drew upon her mother's new mansion in Tewksbury and reflected the family's love of the outdoors with its numerous windows and porches. The lodge on the shore of Leach's Pond was built to test her innovative use of concrete and fieldstone. Finally in 1910 a location was chosen at an old farm house on the property and construction began. The house and its two story library wing are completely fireproof with concrete floors and walls built from fieldstones from the property. The family moved in during August, 1911. The old Tisdale farm was used to house estate employees. It was destroyed by a fire set by vandals in 1984.

Today, an interesting feature of Borderland is an old bell that sits on the roof at the east end of the mansion. The bronze bell weighs more than a ton and has a tone perfected by the inclusion of gold coins in its casting. It was cast about 1840 and served to call the slaves of the San Francisco sugar plantation to work in Cuba. This large plantation was located about forty miles from Havana in the town of Artemisa.

On one side the bell has a beautifully carved crucifix while the other side is embedded with bullets. These bullets are remnants of the Spanish American War when rebels attacked and destroyed the plantation which was owned by the Spanish government. Oakes Ames discovered it in the ruins during an orchid collecting expedition in 1900. He bought the bell and put it in storage in Cuba for a decade until the

mansion at Borderland was ready. Then it was moved by ox team, freighter, and railroad to North Easton. McCarthy's livery in North Easton had to design a special flatbed wagon to complete the move to Borderland

The bell hung for many years in the estate's garden on two iron crossbeams. During Blanche's struggle for a woman's suffrage amendment, the bell was rung only once a day at noon. Later the bell was moved to the roof and connected electrically to a clock. On a clear day it could be heard for miles around.

Once the family moved to the mansion, Blanche and Oakes expanded their projects to improve the natural beauty of the site. The area around the mansion was landscaped with flowers and flowering trees while more distant locations were managed to create a varied natural environment for wildlife. Blanche added a swimming pool of her own design below the tennis courts. While she was alive, the pool filtration system worked perfectly. After her death, however, no one could understand its operation, so the pool today has been turned into a sunken garden.

The family also undertook various farming projects. Oakes and Blanche had raised chickens in incubators even at the old family home in North Easton. At Borderland they started a turkey farm. As was often the case Blanche seems to have been the driving force. She designed wire cages to keep the turkeys off the ground and even wrote articles on how this method prevented disease. Today turkeys are readily available year round, but when the family began their turkey farm they were primarily for Thanksgiving and Christmas. Advertising for the farm attempted to promote the birds for "week-end parties" and invited prospective customers "to motor out to the farm and choose your own bird." Despite premium prices the Ames' turkey farm was successful for many years.

In the 1920's Oakes and Blanche's son Amyas also operated a game farm which was managed by a man named Lou Phillips. They stocked the ponds with trout and raised partridges and quail. How long this project lasted is not known.

During World War Two Blanche devised a plan to bring Hereford steers from a family farm out west and fatten them on the grasslands of the estate before slaughtering them for beef in the fall. They duly arrived and were herded up Lincoln Street by truck to the Bay Road entrance to the estate. Upon examination, she discovered that instead of steers the ranch had sent heifers. Typically undaunted, Blanche bred the cattle with a local bull to produce a successful beef herd. The herd was left out all winter with only an open barn for shelter. During the summer they kept the grass in the estate's many fields cropped low.

Once at Borderland Oakes Ames seemed content to retire into his work and private recreations. His place in the history of American science is secure. For example, a 1939 book by Oakes was one of the first to suggest that women may have invented agriculture, a view now widely accepted. His research on corn indicated an earlier date for human habitation in the Western Hemisphere than was commonly accepted at the time.

Throughout his adult life, this rather shy man kept a detailed diary of his life. Thanks to the publication of candid excerpts from these diaries and his letters by Pauline Ames Plimpton, his daughter, Oakes Ames is better known as a person today than at the time of his death in 1950. Mrs. Plimpton's son George, a successful author and editor of the *Paris Review*, has also written about Oakes' and Blanche's life at Borderland. Pauline Plimpton died in April, 1995 leaving Amyas as the last surviving child of Oakes and Blanche.

For Blanche Borderland was a haven from the tumult of modern life, but it was not a place of retirement. In the early years there she was an active suffragette. Her achievements there have been amply documented in the second volume of the *History of Easton*. In summary, she served as the President of the Easton Equal Suffrage League, led rallies, held fund and consciousness raising fairs, and used her artistic ability to create political cartoons. In 1918 she chaired a suffragettes' committee to defeat the arch conservative Senator John Weeks. Her daughter notes that when the Senator was indeed defeated, Blanche danced around the desk in the library at Borderland.

Her interest in women's issues did not stop with suffrage, however; in 1916 she co-founded the Birth Control Legal of Massachusetts, an affiliate of Margaret Sanger's national group. Since men in general and the laws of the Commonwealth in particular were opposed to birth control, Blanche preached that women needed to practice self-help. To further that goal she invented a birth control device based on an infant's pacifier.

Borderland was also the site of Blanche's effort to contribute to winning World War II. Having noticed that a single thread could stop a sewing machine, Blanche believed that cities like London could be protected from bombing by catching planes' propellers in strings hung from balloons. Blanche rented a plane and a windmill to test her idea. Two large spools held the string at propeller height. The plane was driven across the field to the north of the mansion, and the propeller snagged the string and stopped the plane. Army brass and the President of MIT came to Borderland to witness the experiment, and the Army actually accepted the idea in principle. Blanche got her idea patented, but it was never put into practice. It is said that she used the pool on the estate and model ships to test her idea as a way of stopping submarines as well.

The death of her beloved husband in 1950 was a severe blow to Blanche. She designed his tombstone for the Unitarian Cemetery at North Easton. Each of the four sides has a different, scientifically correct orchid created by Blanche. Another loss of Blanche's last years was failing eyesight which ended her ability to paint. So, in 1958 the eighty year old Blanche turned to writing. Perceiving a slight to her father in John F. Kennedy's *Profiles in Courage*, she began research on a book to justify her father's tenure as military governor of Mississippi. She travelled to Mississippi and spent hours in libraries before completing her book, *Adelbert Ames: Broken Oaths and Reconstruction in Mississippi*, at age eighty-six.

When Blanche Ames died in 1969, Poquanticut was much as she and Oakes had found it almost seventy years before. The following quarter century has brought rapid change. The former farms of Poquanticut have become subdivisions and even after years of housing development this neighborhood is still one of the fastest growing in Easton. Borderland could have easily succumbed to development as well. After Blanche's death her four children could not maintain the estate. Rather than destroy the far-sighted plans of this unique couple, the family sold the estate to the Commonwealth and donated the contents of the mansion to the people of Massachusetts. Thanks to the family of Oakes and Blanche, Poquanticut still retains the wild heart that once frightened all but a few of Easton's pioneers.