

Sawin House Historical Summary – Draft 9/5/2017

Built in 1690, the Sawin House structure is 1) the oldest house in Natick, Massachusetts; 2) one of the oldest houses in suburban Boston; and 3) one of the oldest houses not only in Massachusetts but all of New England.

The Sawin House is a symbol that in many ways marks the beginning of what we have become. The Sawin House stands at the threshold of many profound economic, cultural, environmental, and political changes - some of which it set in motion.

The Puritans were an uncompromising and intolerant people to those who did not strictly agree with them. Puritan rule terminated in 1690/91.

In 1649, Massachusetts colonists established the 2,500 acres of Natick as a town in which only Native Americans could own land and whose local government was run exclusively by Native Americans. An act of the colonial legislature made it illegal for any European to own land in Natick. An act of the Native Americans in 1651 contributed all of their individual ownership claims to common ownership. (The Reverend John Eliot, a Puritan minister who had preached to the native population, learned their Algonquian language, developed the written form of their words, and both translated and printed the entire Bible into native tongue. He ordained Native American ministers and taught them how to read and write. These official local acts are recorded and maintained in Native American language in the records of the Town.

Following the King Philip's War, the Native American citizens of Natick petitioned the colonial legislature for permission to sell land in Natick to a European colonist who had been their comrade during the war- specifically 55 acres in Natick to Thomas Sawin as his homestead provided a) he built and operated a saw mill and grist mill, powered by water flow, and that b) the mill be operated for no cost for the benefit of the Native American people.

This established the first public utility in Massachusetts and as far as we know, the first in North America. The mill allowed the clear cutting of trees in and around Natick and provided the milling of lumber to build homes and ships. The mill incentivized agriculture and facilitated the conversion of forests to fields by providing the means to grind grain.

Until the mill burned down in the 1920's, the tradition continued of first checking if any Native American descendant needed lumber or grain milled before anyone else. The ruins of the mill remain.

The Sawin House represents:

- the formation of the first major business partnership between Native Americans and English Colonists
- the first public utility in the United States
- acceleration of the industrial age in North America

- agricultural and industrial birthplace of Natick
- a renewal of a sign of respect for Native Americans and of a model for coexistence between Native people and European Colonists that had sadly been lost
- the end of a war without which the United States would likely not exist

The Sawin House was also a mobilization point for the battles at Lexington and Concord as well as being an abolitionist focal point prior to the civil war.

The Sawin House is a symbol of the courage and values that guided the development of the United States. In many ways, the Sawin House is a symbol of who we are.

The Sawin House meets the established criteria for inclusion in the National Registry of Historic Places under criteria A, B, and D. In this regard, it represents a special learning experience for town residents, visitors, educational groups and those with an interest in local history. The rich culture, varied personalities and variety of experience associated with the house are unique.

Of special note is the location of the house within the confines of the Broadmoor Wildlife Reservation, a substantial refuge of over 600 acres located in South Natick and abutting towns. Protective covenants and the conventions of the reservation's owner, the Massachusetts Audubon Society, require that access to the house and eventual use be constrained to the extent that impacts upon wildlife are minimized.

In this way the unique, pre-modern character and setting of the house and the special requirements of wildlife preservation can be recognized, reconciled and harmonized. Such ambitious goals are affirmed in the parallels between the lives of Thomas Sawin and John James Audubon, with special reference to the extraordinary history, culture and ecology of Natick from the Paleo-Indian period to the present.

Thomas Sawin Homestead Preservation Committee
(Pursuant to Article 35, 2015 Fall Annual Town Meeting)

Duane Houghton, Chairman
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