

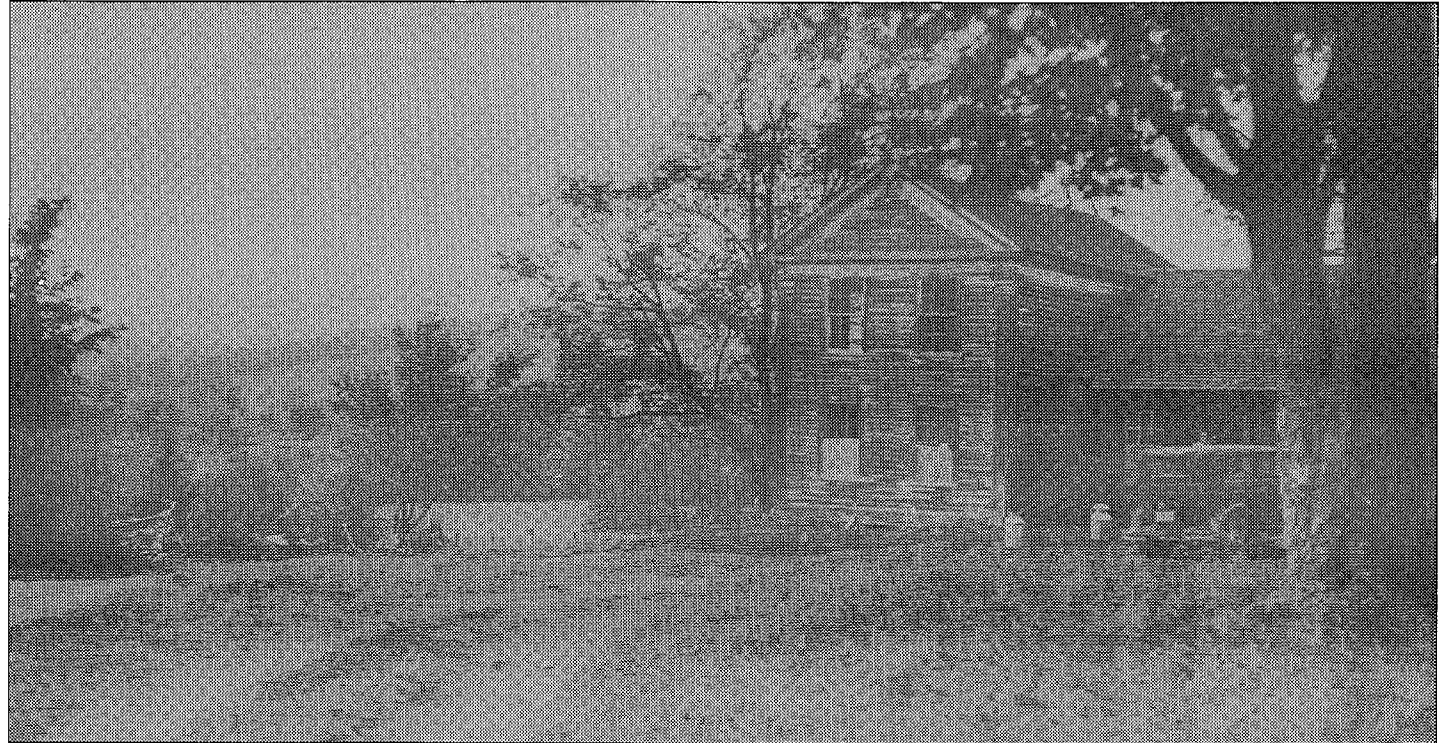
# House history travels a winding path

*Laura C. Stevenson*

In 1951, my family bought an old farm house a mile and a half south of Wilmington, with thirteen acres that straddled a narrow car track called variously Packard Hill Road and Boyd Hill Road. The house had no running water; its paint was faded, and its yard was overgrown with raspberries that flourished in the rotting remains of fallen sheds and barns. Inside, the walls were a yellowed white, decorated with four-inch swatches of contrasting brown and green floor paint. But handsome molding dignified the two downstairs rooms, the elegant front door looked west to the Searsburg range, and the north windows looked across a valley to Verne Boyd's mowing, which sloped up to his house, his maple grove, and the blue-gray silhouette of Haystack Mountain.

It was called the Old Sage Place. The deed said so. The 1942 survey map that came with it said so. Consequently, though I knew that some problem with the title had complicated our family's purchase of the farm's remaining hundred acres, for years I assumed it had been owned by generations of Sages, the way Carl Boyd's farm had been held by generations of Boyds.

It was thus surprising to learn that Jared Sage, the man whose name became indelibly stamped on the farm's identity, owned only half of it, and lived in its house for only 10 of the 160 it has existed. And although his tenure of the place was



*The Old Sage Place as it looked in the 1930s. The house still stands in Wilmington.*

in fact a matter of continuity, it reveals family unity greatly complicated by failure, oral contract, and legal struggles.

Difficulties with the property began in 1886, 20 years before Jared Sage set foot on it, with the financial ruin of its 46-year-old owner, Asa Boyd. Asa's father, Stephen, was one of the many grandsons of Abraham Boyd, a Revolutionary war veteran who had been one of Wilmington's first settlers. Ignoring the temptations of the Gold Rush, Stephen and his prosperous brothers had stayed

in Wilmington in midcentury, increasing the family holdings by buying land and building houses. Asa's house (later the Sage Place) had been built by his father in about 1850. Its north windows looked over the valley to the farm of his uncle, Warren Oscar Boyd, who in 1884 was the proprietor of 11 milk cows, 25 young cattle, 41 sheep, a sugarbush of 2,000 trees – and some 700 additional acres of land in Wilmington and Searsburg. But Asa, unlike his brother Charles, who had left town and become a lawyer, or his sisters,

all of whom had married well, was visibly unsuccessful: he was the proprietor of only nine milk cows, a sugarbush of 1,500 trees, and debts. His worried father tried to stave off disaster by leaving him extra money in a codicil to his will, but to no avail. On September 30, 1886, deeply in debt to his father's executors and without any prospects, Asa sold the farm, asking only that he and his wife be able to live in the house until May, while the buyer used the outbuildings and equipment to work the land and sugar the trees.

The buyer, Charles Upton, could afford to be generous. A 29-year-old member of a large Whitingham farming family, he had recently married Della May, whose father and uncle owned extensive farms near Coldbrook Road. Probably beholden to Della's father, Horace May, for the \$1,400 that had purchased their farm, and no doubt helped by the labor of Charles's numerous brothers, the young couple prospered for seven years. In 1893, however, Charles died so suddenly that there was no time for a written will, and his farm became a bone of contention. Charles had apparently asked Horace May, the estate's administrator, to auction the farm and distribute the resulting money to Charles's heirs. Instead, May sold it in a "private sale" to Della - who subsequently married Charles's brother Forrest. The deal (not to mention, the marriage) caused familial consternation that surfaced in 1899, when Della herself died (at age 35), leaving the farm to Forrest. It turned out not to be a gift; five years elapsed before the contested will passed probate on April 12, 1904. On that very day, Forrest, now remarried, sold the farm to Perry Davis and his wife for \$800 - a price that suggests that the years of legal limbo had done the place no good.

The Upton family, however, was not through with the farm. It seems that Davis and his wife bought Forrest out only after entering into a private contract that committed Forrest's ubiquitous brothers to buy it back from them within two years. Thus in 1906, the farm was split. James Upton bought the parcel west of the road on May 31; a month later, Harlie Upton and his wife Lilla bought the house and land on the eastern side. The purchase was evidently too expensive for the Harlie Uptons, for they immediately sold it to Lilla's father, Jared Sage.

At the time he bought the farm, Jared Sage was 58, and his wife Mary was 57. The farm seemed an unlikely project for a man in late middle age, and yet, with the help of the Upton brothers (and possibly the Boyds, after Fred Boyd, whose father now owned the farm in the view, married Maud Upton in 1907), Jared Sage gave his farm its glory days. A picture, taken from the Boyd Farm in 1910 or thereabouts, shows the house dominated by two huge barns and an impressive array of connected outbuildings, surrounded by treeless fields, and protected by a sugar grove. Its prosperity, coupled with its lovely view - and respect for the patient, healing hand of its owner - made the Sage Place a landmark still remembered with sad affection 40 years later.

The affection was sad because during those 40 years, all the work of the Boyds, the Uptons, and Jared Sage came undone. Looking around for someone to blame, one finds only people blindsided by the changes that turned Wilmington from a prosperous village into a struggling community.

One of these people was Fred Ward, who bought the Sage Place from Jared's widow in 1920. He was a neighbor who lived half a mile down the road in the handsome house that his father, O.J. Ward, had built for his family. But he was also an investor. In about 1919, he bought all the land adjoining his, netting himself some 450 acres between the two handles of Boyd Hill Road. It looked like a shrewd move, because the New England Power Company planned to build an enormous earth dam in Whitingham, making the Deerfield River into a lake - and covering the fine houses and fertile farmland in the valley. Fred Ward calculated that his land, being well above the waterline, would soon become valuable. What he had not anticipated was that the lake, besides devastating Wilmington's economy by drowning its chief industry and covering the train tracks that connected it to the outside world, would irrevocably change the status of Boyd

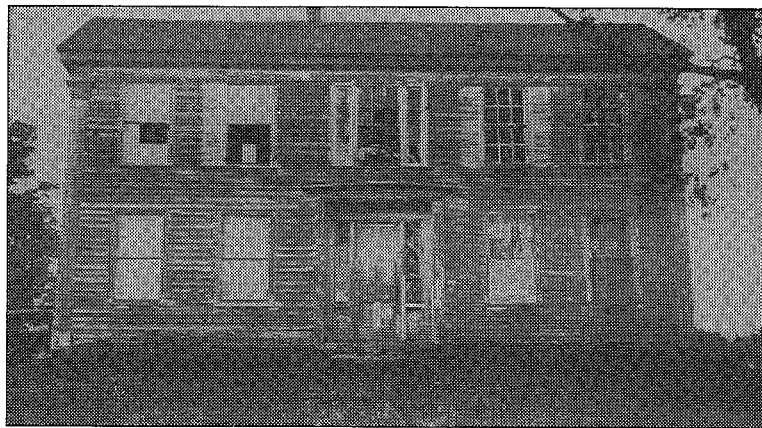
Hill Road. Previously a well-traveled route from Wilmington to Whitingham and Jacksonville (via the road that now dead-ends at Ward's Cove), it became a cul-de-sac, both physically and financially.

Fred Ward was substantial enough to survive the collapse of Wilmington's economy, the Great Depression, and the early years of World War II. There was, however, no extra money to put into maintaining the tenant houses on his extensive, unsold property. And so the Sage Place began to deteriorate. The outbuildings without foundations went first, then the barns, and finally most of the long ell of the house. There is a pervasive rumor that at one time it was abandoned. Quite possibly. In 1951 we found that one of the overgrown fields had been plowed but not harrowed. The harrow was rusting by a nearby tree.

The rest of the story is a complicated one of investment, as Herbert and Mallory Waller, a couple from New York, bought the Ward property in 1942, had it surveyed, and restored what could be salvaged of the Sage Place. But Herbert died, Mallory remarried, and she sold the whole property in 1949, taking a mortgage which she later foreclosed. The beneficiaries of the legal wrangling that ensued were my parents, who bought the Old Sage Place as a summer house. Little did they know that it would remain in our family longer than it had in any other.

And yet, even after nearly 60 years, my husband and I live in the Sage Place, not the Stevenson Place. That's fine with me. The wispy presences that float around the old barns and outbuildings, the invisible observers who one occasionally feels in the garden or the fields still care for the place. They made it what it is. We can share.

*(The author gives special thanks to Harriet Maynard, Carl Boyd, Carolyn Palmer, Susie Haughwout, Carol Waseleski, and the shade of Margaret Covey Green for assistance.)*



*The front of the Old Sage Place, also taken in the 1930s*