

A Brief History of Wagon Hill Farm

The land which comprises Wagon Hill Farm was settled around 1654 and was owned by the Davis Family. The original house was located closer to the Oyster River. Then, in the 1790s the first New Hampshire Turnpike (now Route 4) was completed. The orientation of the farm from the river toward the road occurred when the present farmhouse was built around 1804 by Captain John Bickford .

Captain Bickford owned seven farms in the area but did not live on any of them. His farms were operated by tenants. He owned a mansion in Salem, Massachusetts. In 1814 while on a voyage to the southern tip of Africa, Captain Bickford died. All of his New Hampshire property was sold except for this Durham farm which remained under the management of his widow, Mary Birkford.

In 1830, the farm was sold to Samuel Chesley who moved here from Madbury. Four generations of the Chesley family made this their home for the next 130 years.

The Chesley's managed the land as a diversified farm. They raised dairy cows, chickens, ducks, and kept several horses and oxen. They established a large apple orchard. At it's peak, the Chesley's orchard covered most of the hillside. The stone foundation of their cider house can still be seen where an animal powered mill produced cider and vinegar. Some of the fresh fruit was shipped by railroad to Boston. A few of the old apple trees still remain scattered around the property.

Products of the Chesley farm included, milk, eggs, meat, cider, vinegar, apples, corn, potatoes and other vegetables. Hay was the largest crop grown in the open fields. Salt hay was harvested throughout the farm's history.

In 1960, Elizabeth Chesley sold the farm to Loring and Mary Tirrell. Farming had ceased entirely by the time the Tirrells moved into the house but the fields were kept open and it's agricultural past was honored by the placement of an old wagon on the crest of the hill. Over the years, the farm has become known to local residents as Wagon Hill Farm.

Wagon Hill Farm was purchased by the Town of Durham in 1989 "to preserve its scenic vistas, provide for future municipal purposes and preserve open space in order to provide for a healthful and attractive outdoor environment for work and recreation, and to conserve land, water, forest and wildlife resources."

