

Touring the Peter Rice Homestead

This grand old building was home to six generations of the Rice Family. Over the years it has had many names - Rice or Russell Home, the Fitch Farm, the LaBelle Place, and finally the Peter Rice Homestead, headquarters for the Marlborough Historical Society. The Society had been chartered in 1965 and was in need of a permanent location when the Honeywell Corporation made a gift of the homestead to the Society by means of a long-term lease. Restoration efforts began after Mr. John Curtis, Curator of Sturbridge Village toured the house and outlined his recommendations. It was a bootstrap operation with Society members doing most of the hard work. Roy Estabrook was the President at that time and he had a wonderfully willing group of Society members hard at work over the next several years. The results you see today are due to their hard work and dedication and the continuing efforts of the present membership.

Mr. Curtis outlined the research necessary to provide background information to flesh out architectural clues the house itself provided. He suggested we search probate records for wills and inventories of the property for each generation, check printed genealogies and town histories for information about the families who had lived here, locate any existing old photographs of the place and interview former residents whenever possible. Our research is the basis of the information contained in this tour.

The Rice Family

The first member of the Rice family to settle in this country was Edmund Rice, one of thirteen residents of Sudbury to petition the General Court in 1656 to settle a new "plantation" eight miles to the west to accommodate their growing families. He and his sons shared in the first land division and built in the area of Lake Williams. Our Peter was grandson of Edmund. According to Charles Hudson, in his book *The History of the Town of Marlborough*, the early history of Marlborough is somewhat confused by the fact that there were two plantations, the Indian (Ockoocangansett) and the English (Whipsupnicke), with the Indian land partly included and partially surrounded by the English lands. When the Sudbury petition was granted, it infringed on this previous grant to peaceful Indians who were already living in the area as part of a Praying Indian Village under the protection of the Reverend Mr. Elliot of Natick. The early settlers chose to build their homes on land surrounding the Indian planting field, which was located about where the Walker Building stands today, and extending roughly 3 miles northward towards Marlborough Hospital. Settlers and Indians seem to have been able to coexist without major incident until the time of King Philip's uprising in 1676 when roving bands of Indians destroyed much of the town. In Thomas' will dated 1681 he leaves land "north of the pond" to his son, Peter. We believe this site to be part of that property.

Tradition tells us the Peter brought his bride, Rebeccah How, to this hillside overlooking Mt. Wachusett at the time of their marriage in 1688. How it looked at that time is speculative. The dwelling might have been a rather simple building and there is architectural evidence in the existing two front rooms of the homestead of an earlier period. It was common at that time to build two rooms flanking a central chimneystack with loft, or sleeping quarters, overhead.

Peter and Rebeccah had 11 children, many of them with musical sounding names - Elisha, Zipporah, Zephania, Cyprian, Pelatiah, Elnathan, Peter, Abigail, Deborah, Rebeccah, and Abraham who inherited the homestead. Town records list Peter Rice as the captain of a "train band" and his home was designated a garrison house in 1711. The house served as a fortified refuge in case of Indian attack and was most probably surrounded by a log palisade type fence.

As the children married, they removed to surrounding towns with only the youngest son, Abraham, remaining in Marlborough. Both Peter and Rebeccah lived to a great age and when Peter died at age 95, Abraham was the executor of his will. The property at that time consisted of the homestead and several acres of woodland extending into the present town of Northborough.

The first floor

This house has a story to tell.

The large room on the first floor is used as the meeting room for the Society, but if we look carefully we can see some of the earliest and some of the latest features and relate them to the families as they lived here.

The corner cupboard as built into the framework of the room indicates that it was in place at the time the house was built and it is mentioned in an inventory dated 1786. Across the room, the existing fireplace masks a much earlier kitchen fireplace complete with bake oven and ash pit. Even the overboard is still in place, half hidden behind a later mantle and much later fireplace. Overhead the encased beams are trimmed with dentil molding which a former resident, Mrs. Hallie Fitch McLeod, told us were added as part of her updating of the homestead in the 1920's, which also included adding the bow window. In fact, she told us that she had been married in this room while standing in front of the corner cupboard.

In the present kitchen the huge fireplace with bake oven may be a later add-on to the chimneystack. It is certainly sizeable enough to have accommodated the large families of the Rice's. Notice the way the hearth extends into the room, allowing the cook to build small fires using red-hot coals to surround several cooking pots. The bake oven was fired by building a small hardwood fire directly in the oven. When the cook had assured herself that the oven was hot, the fire was raked out and the oven floor swept clean. Food was put into the oven in proper sequence with the beans, which required longer cooking, to the rear and the quicker puddings and breads to the front. The main kitchen is a future restoration project. For now it serves a very necessary function for the Society by providing working space for our cooks as they bake for our socials and fundraisers.

In the West Parlor some hard decisions had to be made to adhere to the Society's policy of letting the house itself dictate how it would tell its story. Most of the features uncovered were changes that architecturally dated to the time when Abraham Rice was living in the house. He and his first wife, Persis, had seven children, and it is possible that the home was expanded to a full second story at this time. The reuse of earlier wood sheathing as lath for the ceiling in the parlor indicates changes, which probably included the paneling. Upstairs there is evidence of exterior wall construction in what is now the midsection of the house.

When a 1940s style fireplace was removed, the fireplace you see now was in place. But even this is just another layer with an even earlier fireplace still hidden beyond. Beneath this paneling is some of the original wood sheathing from the earliest period, still held in place with rosehead nails, a remnant that was left in place to show the evolution of this room. A stairway to the second floor which corresponded to the mid 19th century west doorway was removed.

The hallway to the second floor is just about complete, but the front doorway with its sidelights is a 19th century addition. An early sketch of the house shows a triangular pediment over a simple door. This same sketch shows some of the outbuildings, which are no longer here, the mill house and the woodshed. A large barn that was part of the property has also been removed. Exterior changes to the front of the house included changing the window placement back to its original nine-window façade.

The second floor

The room to the left on the second floor is now the John Frye Memorial Room, used to house changing exhibits of the Society's accessions. It is the aim of the Society to bring together bits and pieces of local history and display them in a safe and meaningful way for the enjoyment and education of all the people of the city of Marlborough. Even the cases on the wall are meaningful; they were formerly used to display playbills outside the old Marlborough Theater on Main Street. The toy closet is a favorite of all our younger visitors.

Abraham's son, a second Peter, lived in the house during the time of the Revolutionary War. There is no record found, as yet, that he served in the Continental Army. Both Peter and his son, Eli, were among the petitioners to the General Court for the formation of a second parish in Marlborough in 1806. They were both active in all phases of planning, building and supporting this effort. They shared Pew No. 10 in the new meetinghouse. At Peter's death in 1812, the homestead passed to Deacon Eli. The inventory at that time lists 45 acres of land, homestead and other buildings, 3 acres of Millham meadow, Bare Hill pasture, lot in Cedar Swamp, woodland and one lot call "French land" containing 30 acres.

To the rear of the room the doorway leads into a schoolroom setting, complete with desks and teacher's podium. It was originally open space used as sleeping quarters, storage and providing access to the attic. There are interesting clues to the house's progression with evidence that the interior wall with a wind brace might have, at one time, been the exterior wall of a smaller house. The school benches came from Mrs. Greenwood's collection at the old Goodale house and were originally from New Hampshire. When children's groups visit the Society, they gather here and there are lively discussions about what schooling was like for the Rice children. It seems appropriate to have this setting when we tell the story of Eli Rice, in the next generation.

It seems that Deacon Eli met and married Lucy Brigham after she had come to board with his family while she taught in the neighborhood. It was the custom then for district school to be kept for a few weeks at a time on a rotating basis throughout the town, usually during a season when children could be spared from their farming chores. Evidently Eli was smitten by the schoolmarm, thought to be the first female hired for a teaching position by the town. They had 13 children and he served the town in many capacities throughout his long life, including Magistrate, Representative to the General Court, Assessor, Selectman and State Senator in 1846.

The room at the head of the stairs is now used as the Curator's Office where accessions are processed and stored. The archives contain many photographs, including the Moineau and Otterson collections. There is an extensive clothing collection, which includes clothing worn by Marlborough folks from homespun working clothes to the fanciest bridal outfits. The files contain manuscripts, maps and a street file built on information from many sources pertaining to older houses and neighborhoods. The library has many genealogies and local histories. Access to this information can be arranged by making an appointment with the Curator.

The next room has an eclectic assortment of Marlborough Memorabilia, including a mantle from the old Williams Tavern and chair bought at the auction of its contents. The fire department is represented with photos and equipment. In the corner is the old steam whistle from the John Frye factory that called many residents to work each day.

The final room on our tour is the first room that was restored. At the time the Society took over the house this space was divided by a partition and hall. In the room was a closet and on the floor was the outline of the sidewalls of a tiny fireplace. It was enough of a clue to allow the fireplace, the only heat source on the second floor, to be rebuilt. With crowbars and lots of enthusiasm, members of the Society undertook the job of restoring this room to its original condition. When the partition came down, a thin strip of green block printed floral wallpaper was found still in place. Hardwood flooring covered the wide floorboards you see today. The paneling was intact except for the fireplace surround and Roy Estabrook came up with one of the same period from a neighboring house, which was being dismantled. It fit as though made for the spot. The furnishings have come from Marlborough families, Howes and Tayntors, and represent what would have been found in the homes of substantial farm families in Marlborough.

The rest of the story

After Deacon Eli's death in 1850, his eldest daughter Levina and her husband, Otis Russell came to live at the homestead. Levina had married in 1817 and their large family of 17 children was born while they live on their Millham farm. Only their firstborn son died in infancy. Their family portrait is the only photograph located so far of people who lived in the homestead. Sadly, Levina's husband died shortly after the move. She spent the remainder of her life on the farm doing for others even as her eyesight faded.

The children of Levina and Otis Russell continued to play an important part in the life of the town and we find their descendants among city residents today.

- Lucy married Ephraim Howe and live at "Howe's Corner," Bolton and Union Streets.
- Maria Lovina married Tileston Brigham.
- Henry Russell married Harriet Witherbee and ran a shoe manufactory on Lincoln St.
- Cynthia Russell married John Klenet.
- Martha married Abel Howe.
- Harriet married Jesse Butterfield in 1870.
- Elvira married John A. Frye, founder of the John Frye Shoe Factory and according to their grandson, John, their wedding trip consisted of "once around Lake Williams in a buggy" before setting up housekeeping at the corner of Pleasant and Elm Streets.

- Betsey married a Mr. Hubbard and moved to Amherst, NH
- Eli Russell went to Boston at age 16 to take a job with the Suffolk Bank where he continued to work for 30 years.
- Lauramon Russell served as a private in Co. I, 13th Reg., MA Volunteers in the Civil War.
- Benjamin and John both died of injuries suffered during the war.
- George Russell was active in the 2nd Parish Church and was vice-president of the Marlborough baseball club, "The Fairmounts."
- Austin, Sophronia and Herbert never married and continued to live in the homestead.

Sophronia Russell was born in 1835, moved to the homestead as a young woman and is inseparable from the history of the house. She was weakened by ill health, but with her two brothers, Austin and Herbert, managed the farm for many years. It was finally sold out of the family in 1894 when it was purchased by Edward Fitch. Sophronia continued to live with the family as a "favorite aunt" until her death in 1903. Hallie Fitch McLeod was a little girl when her father bought the farm and remembered Sophronia very fondly. The farm was a truck farm at that time producing cabbages in fields where Route 495 now passes and was well known for its peach orchard. Hallie Fitch McLeod and her husband opened the homestead to summer guests from the city featuring good food and fresh air.

Finally, in 1939, it was sold to the LaBelle family and divided into several apartments to accommodate returning World War II veterans.

In 1980 the Peter Rice Homestead was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Compiled by Suzanne Brigham, long-time member of the Marlborough Historical Society, in 1993

Sources:

A Genealogical History of the Rice Family: Descendants of Edmund Rice
Andrew Henshaw Ward, A.M. 1858

History of the Town of Marlborough, Middlesex County, Massachusetts
Charles Hudson 1862

Massachusetts Probate Court Records

Interviews with John A. Frye and Hallie Fitch McLeod

Poem written by A. W. Rice

"In token of affection for an aged sister on the occasion of her eighty-first birthday the within lines were written, and with some additions are here printed. Together with a sketch of the Old Homestead as it appeared fifty years ago, with the hope that the descendants of the honored Fathers and Mothers will feel a renewed interest in the genealogy and final resting places of those who by their virtues have made it a hallowed spot in our memories."

DETROIT, Oct. 19, 1881
by A.W. Rice, brother of Lovinah Rice Russell

Homestead of the Late Deacon Eli Rice, Marlboro, Mass. 1830

In the west part of Marlboro' on the slope of a hill,
There stands an old Elm, like a sentinel still;
Its half-buried roots bracing upward each side,
Like buttresses seem, against gales to provide.

Generations of children in it alcoves have played,
With brickbats and crockery their houses have made;
While its giant-like trunk, with limbs stretching all ways,
Gave grateful protection from the sun's scorching rays.

No one can determine the age of this tree,
'Tis a mystery to all, and always will be;
For the sires of the past, each and all to a man,
Said, "When in our boyhood the tree was there then."

This Elm has long buffeted many a storm,
And Time and the tempests have shattered its form;
Yet with all the wild ravages of winds and of ice,
Has protected for centuries the families of Rice.
Two centuries ago 'neath the Elm's grateful shade,
Foundations substantial for a dwelling were laid;
The lord of the soil was then known well to fame,
For a captain was he, and Peter his name.

His father was Thomas, who had his abode
Nearly southward a mile, on the main traveled road;
Whose father was Edmund, from Old England came.
The first of the Rices, styled "Goodman" by name.

He married Rebekah, whose surname was Howe,
And her he had plighted a connubial vow,
That 'neath the broad shadow of this stately tree,
In view of Wachusett, their homestead should be.

First built was the chimney, ten feet or more thick,
Foundation of stone, while above it was brick;
And each apartment's fire-place, whether downstairs or up,
Had a separate flue from the hearth to the top.

Two sides of the chimney a cellar was made,
Where roots, pork and cider in winter were laid;
While down the front hallway ran uneven stairs
Of rough blocks of timber, just piled up in squares.

In the hall of the dwelling huge beams may be seen,
Deep scored and hewn roughly, twelve inch by fourteen;
While o'erhead, in ceiling, great "summers" extend,
Aside of the chimney and across to each end.

And how was it furnished by this happy pair?
A carved oaken chest - now standing up-stairs,
A spinning and flax wheel, big settle and loom,
And the common utensils, from cheese-press to broom.

There were born eleven children to this wedded pair,
And ten of these left them to settle elsewhere.
But Abraham, the youngest continued to bide,
And succeed to the homestead when Peter had died.

This Abraham was Ensign, Persis Robinson his wife.
She dying, had Anna quite late in his life.
Seven children by Persis were born unto them,
The sixth being Peter, who inherited the "*Home*."

This Peter, like grandsire, married a Howe,
Lovinah, her name, that is often heard now.
But three children only to them were given,
The last being Eli, in seventeen seventy-seven.

Below the East Village, on the old Boston road,
Lucy Brigham, the daughter of Winslow, abode.
While near his home teaching was invited to come,
And, together with Eli, help bless the old Home.

In places of trust was he called to stand,
Was Captain, Mod'rator and often S'lectman,
Representative, Senator, Deacon, Esquire,
And President of county agricultural fair.

The year eighteen hundred, an October day,
Lovinah was born, thus blessing their way.
The first of the off-spring unto them to be sent,
And the Elm waved a blessing o'er the joyful event.

But 'ere her good grandsire had gone to his grave,
Thirteen little babes hearty welcome he gave.
In childhood, or manhood, or woman's estate,
Have ten crossed the river, the three to await.

Up to a young maiden Lovinah soon grew,
And the Elm softly waved her a nuptial adieu
For Otis had wooed her and made her his wife,
To walk thro' together the journey of life.

Near the home of his father, a mile or more west,
Their nest of affection was signally blessed.
While merited prosperity continued to come,
Seventeen happy nestlings gladdened the home.

"Ah! these are my jewels," Victoria once said,
As unto her courtiers three children she led.
And if they were so prized by the good English queen,
Can who judge the value of this seventeen?

What the fortunes of each we cannot here say;
Some, families are rearing, and some "borne away."
Two sons to their country their young lives have given,
A sacrifice noble, recorded in Heaven.

In due course of time, when the Deacon had died,
And successor had gone to the West to reside,
Lovinah and Otis decided to come
And spend the remainder of life at the "Home."

But Death, that had visited so often this house,
Came soon and bereft it of father and spouse.
And the Elm then a sigh of sympathy gave,

As another "Home father" was borne to his grave.

In the "Old Common" churchyard, where moss fungal thrives,
Are the graves of old Peter, Abraham and wives;
While in Cemetery "Brigham," with its fair western view,
Are those of our parents and grandparents too.

Near by, neatly terraced, by the Packard stone mound,
An evergreen hedge-row all bordered around,
Are the graves of a husband and dear father gone,
And the patriot soldiers - young Benjie and John.

And now, my dear sister, grieve not nor repine,
Tho' the health-giving sunlight seems dimly to shine;
'Tis sweet consolation the thought to obtain,
"In living for others one's not lived in vain."

The children, with grandchildren, vie in their care,
As they tenderly gather around by your chair,
Tho' sight be denied you, your sensitive ears
Get love's benedictions and comforting cheers.

Our father and mother, in memory dear,
Their life-work so fruitful, long since ended here;
And e'en her first converse with angels of love,
He saw her sweet beck'ning and joined her above.

Thus we are reminded that partings must come,
But reunion awaits us in Heaven's dear home,
As we sail o'er the river with Christ at the helm,
Then all will go safely who've lived by this Elm.

Six generations have lived in it shade,
The house built by Peter, Rebekah to aid.
And it still spreads its arms to welcome all home,
Imparting a blessing to children that come.

But Time works its changes, for since childhood's day,
The mill-house and wood-shed are both moved away;
And e'en the old bucket and sweep at the well,
In which brother Matt accidentally fell.

But the house is still standing, improved in its way,
Tho' the Elm is fast breaking and going to decay,
From Rice now to Russell the "Home" takes its name,
But still in our heart's love is prized just the same.

Long live yet, dear sister, to welcome each guest;
With faith strong and cheerful await God's behest;
And may all be as worthy, when life's race is run,
To inherit His Kingdom as you at *eighty-one*.