

A sad tale of how a bit of Concord's history is being lost

Sept. 27, 2001
(epilogue update, Nov. 8, 2001)



(*Bensen-Ball house in 1904
with old central chimney,
H. Gleason photo courtesy CFPL*).

There once was a beautiful old farm hidden away in Concord, Massachusetts. The photographer Herbert Gleason took this handsome picture of it in 1904. It was so special that historian Ruth Wheeler wrote, only a few decades ago, "The best way to get an idea of what Concord farm houses looked like a hundred fifty years ago is to drive down Ball's hill road and look at this picturesque little house, probably built about 1710 by Caleb and Experience Ball." Though exterior evidence and local legend suggested a date of 1685, the house is now thought to date from 1724-1740. [During the dismantling, however, research by Concord Historical Commission is continuing, and new evidence may emerge.](#)

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Essentially, only two families owned and inhabited this house over the past 275 years or more. The Tarbells (Ball in-laws) lived there in Thoreau's time. It is now called the Benson (in the 1800s, spelled "Bensen") place, for the family that has lived there in the last 125 years.



(*H. Gleason 1904 photo, courtesy CFPL*)

With its old house, barn, well, and stone "root cellar," the farmstead is a classic. Reuben Ball, one of the house's young men, fought in the Revolution, and "April 19" may be written on the wall in a back cupboard. The house is small by today's trophy-house standards, but families of nine children were raised there. In 1851, Henry Thoreau wrote of it fondly: "Tarbell's hip-roofed house looked the picture of retirement--of cottage size under its noble elm with its heap of apples before the door & the wood coming up within a few rods--it being far off the road. The smoke from his chimney so white & vaporlike, like a winter scene." Still at the end of a narrow lane, it is almost as isolated now as it was then. In some ways little has changed there.



(Remnants of old fields south of house)

The farm's setting was lovely. The house is tucked under a lilac knoll. The front door faces the southern sun across fields (now mostly overgrown) that gently slope away to the Concord River to the south.



(Tarbell's Bay from east porch)

Just out the kitchen window to the east, however, a slope drops sharply to Tarbell's Bay, a cove full of wildlife. Even now, no other houses can be seen



*(Tarbell's Bay in 1918
H. Gleason photo,
courtesy CFPL.)*

One town official says, "That old house and barn grow out of the site. It's the most organic setting I've seen."



*(Bensen-Ball house,
Aug.26, 2001)*

But the farm had fallen on hard times in recent decades as the owners struggled to get by. It had run down a lot, had no running water, and no major work had been done in many, many decades. Click on ca. 1987 photograph to see Sanferd and Coburn Bensen and a sympathetic essay by John Hanson Mitchell:



Coburn, the last member of the Bensen family to own the 27-acre farm, had lived there until very recently. He had expressed interest in selling, but the town was started when he signed a purchase & sale agreement with a developer for \$5.1 million. Because the land had been receiving a real estate tax reduction (as a farm), the town had an statutory right of first refusal. But by law the town's right would

expire quickly.



(Proposal presented to Town Meeting in Jan. 2001. Red dots are old structures. Blue dots are proposed wells.).

Thus, Concord had to act fast. Alarm bells rang, forces were mobilized, and ideas were explored. Not much was known about the house, but it was clear from the town's historic building survey that it was old. Some were put off by the house's decrepitude; others saw that in this "time capsule" state the house revealed its history. Private open-space negotiations failed, however. Other citizens advocated town wells and/or affordable housing. To meet the deadline, a special town meeting was called for January 2001, and a plan was endorsed by the selectmen--the town would buy the whole 27-acre farm for \$5.1 million. The southern half would be used for three needed municipal drinking water wells plus a conservation buffer with public access. To reduce cost, the northern ca.13 acres would be put up for sale as a limited-development lot for ca. \$3.1 million.

The town meeting VOTED the plan and the town purchased the old farm. In many ways it was prudent, and it took much hard work by citizens. **Hooray!**



(Bensen-Ball house, 1937 [CHC])

BUT wait a minute. The old house and barn were part of the land to be SOLD. Were they to be **preserved on-site**--were they to be preserved at all? Unfortunately, the selectmen wanted to sell the northern lot quickly to reduce short-term interest payments. So, the town rushed out with a 3-week Request for Proposals (i.e., for bids) to sell the northern part. The RFP **did not require on-site preservation**, and this rush meant there was insufficient time to marshal those people and organizations who might have put together a proposal that could have preserved the farmstead **on its site** in private or charitable ownership. It would have been a lovely site, now buffered by all that town conservation land. The RFP did give some preference if the bid offered cooperation with preservation-- but it was a fuzzy priority.



(Bensen-Tarbell pasture, 1904)

So, in summer 2001, the town **resold** the northern ca. 13-acres (containing the old house and barn) for \$3.1 million. The only bidder was the adjoining property owner, whose bid had informed the town of the intention to demolish the structures and to bulldoze the foundations. Though the northern parcel is restricted to one buildable lot, the new owner intends to carve out a second parcel as a better driveway to four possible riverfront lots. The old farmstead was said to be in the way of the footprint of the new house and of the new driveway. This successful bid, however, offered cooperation with any preservationists who wanted to salvage the historic structures. As of August, 2001, title of the land has been transferred from the town to this successful bidder.



*(The outside "root cellar,"
Aug. 26, 2001)*

Faced with this disappointment, and through much hard work, Jeri Bemis and other committed and generous volunteers and historic commission members made arrangements to study, document, dismantle, and preserve the house and barn for reconstruction somewhere else. As of current writing (Sept. 27, 2001), the buildings are giving up their secrets board by board: the rooms with their original 15" feather-edge paneling, and the walls with shoes hidden inside, to propitiate the house's spirits.



(Click here for a [gallery of interior pictures](#) about these investigations.)

New findings suggest the age of the house as 1724-1740 or earlier. The barn is now dismantled; its timbers were last week put in a big metal storage box. By October, 2001, the house will also probably have been put in a box.



(The 30 x 40' barn being carefully dismantled on Aug. 26, 2001)

These hard-workers hope that a new site(s), when located, can be appropriately located and provide some public benefit. Please help in finding suitable site(s). But all of these committed people mourn the removal of these structures from their original site. **They know**

that relocated history is second-best history,
at best.



(Bensen-Ball house,
upper gambrel story.)

Much has been learned about this old farm since the proposal was presented to the town meeting and since the resale bid was accepted.

On-site preservation received too low a priority then. It drew the short straw. Now, documents recently submitted by the Concord Historical Commission to the Mass. Historical Commission call the house the **sole surviving example** in Concord of such a 18th-century, gambrel-roof saltbox cottage. Current studies at the site are documenting finds early in the first half of the 18th-century. And the documents call the survival of the 18th-century barn "**extremely rare.**"

The report concludes that the site has "**a high degree of integrity of location, design, materials, workmanship, setting, feeling, and association.**" And so it does.



(West side, Bensen-Ball House,
1937 [CHC])

Though I fully support the effort to study, dismantle with care, and relocate the house and barn to some beneficial site, I and others hope that a final effort can be made to preserve the house and barn **on their home site**. Perhaps the selectmen (as the recent owners of the old house) can be persuaded to approach the new owner(s) and ask for a reconsideration and greater design subtlety in light of the new historic information. **There is surely enough space on a ca. 13-acre parcel for both a new and an historic house.** It is not too late for leadership and citizen and organization support. And a loss like this should not happen again. We don't have enough 1724-1740 farmsteads left to lose them so hastily. It's a frightening precedent. The volunteers also need help in finding a suitable home for the old house and barn. Thank you for your attention.
[Epilogue follows ->]



(Bensen-Ball house in 1918 [CHC])

Epilogue- May 14, 2002

The house and barn are gone. The cellar hole and foundations have been erased. Preservers

saved a few of the house's chimney stones to be used if a new site is ever found. The root cellar remains for the moment. As one former member of the Concord Historical Commission says, soon there will be no sign at all that an 18th-century farmstead ever existed here. It will have been successfully (and **unnecessarily**) erased from the historic landscape.

As for public access, there is no indication there is new town land nearby and there is no place to park that is not adjacent to a no trespassing sign.

Extra! See the colorful web-article in the November 2001 *Concord Magazine* at <http://www.concordma.com/magazine/novdec01/benson.html> and the letter to the editor about the Benson house at <http://www.concordma.com/magazine/novdec01/ltred.html>.

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