

# Treasures from the Sherman Room

*An Introduction to Brimfield History from the Library's Historical Collections*

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## The Story of Tower Hill

The following is a paper written by Lester W. Parker and read at the Historical Society picnic held at Hubbard Homestead on Tower Hill on July 27, 1964.

Even a brief outline of the history of what we now call Tower Hill must certainly include a reference at least to what little we know about the Indians of this area. If you stand on the stone foundation of the flagpole south of Hubbard Homestead, and look straight eastward, you will see the dark green outline of Indian Hill not more than one mile away. This was the site of the Indian village of Asquoash, one of the few fortified Indian strongholds in this area and an important stopping point on several trails used by the group of tribes known as Nipmucs (I do not speak with authority in regard to these matters but I hope Dr. Roy, who has done a good deal of research in the field of local Indian history, or perhaps I should say pre-history, will give us more information when he speaks at our next meeting.) One of these trails much travelled by the Indians at certain times in the year led from Asquoash over Tower Hill, over the north end of Steerage Rock Mountain (with a detour to the Rock as the occasion demanded) across the Quaboag and Chicopee Rivers and so on to Chicopee Falls, which was a popular fishing center and meeting place. Just where the trail crossed Tower Hill may never be known for certain; I like to think that the present little-used Dix Hill road may have followed the trail and that the ancient right of way and woods road which is still passable along the southern boundary of my father's wood lot, taking an easy grade over the north slope of Steerage Rock Mountain and so on through Dunhamtown to the river may also have been a part of the Indians' path westward.

Since the only other entrance to the Brimfield Valley from the west is the one now followed by Route 20 at the south end of the Wadoquaddock Range, it is quite certain that the earliest settlers from Springfield would have caught their first glimpse of our valley from either one point or the other. Our known history begins with their final choice of this hill and its southern slope as the location for their new settlement.

Most of you are familiar with the story as told by Rev. Dr. Hyde in his centennial historical address, generally called the History of Brimfield. When in 1701 a committee was sent out from Springfield to find a suitable site for a new plantation, their first choice was a hilltop similar to this one later called Grouts Hill – now East Hill in Monson – but the land grants made at that time and place were never fulfilled by settlement. And so in 1721 they laid out the town street starting from the spot already chosen as the site for a church and extending in a nearly straight line two miles long and eight rods wide to this very spot (this big lawn between the two houses is town property) then turning west to the school house and right as far as the old Prouty farm (now Earthrowe) and that was the end of what they called the Town Plot. And this is a copy of the original document showing the exact measurements of lots assigned on both sides of the road and the name of the grantee and the acreage. O do not yet know where the original of this chart is on safekeeping – nobody in Brimfield remembers seeing it, not even Mrs. Peirce who was our Town Clerk for many years, or Mrs. Spooner, present custodian of the Town Records. In any case this copy was made from a copy loaned to me by Mrs. Mary Homer Crawford made by or for her father, Bradford Homer, on connection with the book he wrote telling the story of his ancestors. This is a precious document and some of you will want to examine it later. The names on this chart do not coincide exactly with the list of the original proprietors, since several of the first grantees never settled here, and there were many changes and re-allotments during the first ten years before the first town meeting was held in 1731. In fact there are only three family names on this chart which are borne by descendants now resident in Brimfield – Lumbard, Hitchcock and Sherman, and only one family still living on the original grant of land, and that is Hubbard, altho [sic] the Hubbard name does not appear in Brimfield in this generation. To be more specific – this Hubbard Homestead farm, part of which appears on the town plot in 1721 as granted to Samuel Hubbard, has been in the Hubbard family without a break for 246 years [Ed. Note: through

1964] and the present owner, Mrs. Harriet Day Parker – wife of my late brother Sumner – is the 6<sup>th</sup> generation of Hubbards through her mother, Sarah Hibbard (Day) who was born and grew up in this homestead. To complete this bit of family history, we should know that this property was inherited jointly with Harriet by her sister, Gladys Day, wife of Charles DeLand, whose home is the ranch-type house across the road.

Now go back a bit – it is interesting to conjecture as to the reasons why the committee of restless pioneers from Springfield chose Tower Hill as a site for their town rather than the valley where the center village later developed. The reason given in the petition according to Dr. Hyde was that the land was considered to be the best in the township, a reputation that the Tower Hill farms still maintain. I have always wondered if some of the land, especially here on the hilltop, might have been clear and open for cultivation, as in all the traditions I know about these Tower Hill farms there has never been the slightest mention of clearing the land of forest trees.

Because of its nearness to the Indian Village Ashquoash, the name of which is supposed to have signified a plentiful supply of food, is it not possible that the Indians may have kept this hilltop clear by their usual technique of burning and that squaws may have planted corn fields here as well as in the valley near Lake Sherman? At any rate the site was chosen and sometime during the first hundred years, 7 or 8 homesteads were established in the first lower mile and at least 15 in the second mile from the present junction with Route 19 to the end of the road at the Prouty place. Incidentally it is worth noting that the present Warren Road from the junction just mentioned to where Tower Hill Road again joins 19 at the foot of Schoolhouse Hill was not built until many years later – the exact date I have never heard of or seen mentioned – and that Tower Hill farms on the west side of the road all extended well beyond the present Warren Road to include extensive wood lots which were a valuable part of each tract.

One other item needs to be mentioned at this point and that is the name by which this hill has been known. It was appropriately known as Hubbard Hill for at least a century and all maps published earlier than about 1860 used that name. I am not quite sure when the name Tower Hill began to be used but the earliest map I have seen which uses it is dated 1870. Uncle Sam Hubbard's daughter, Mary, who lived in this smaller Hubbard house, married in 1841 a man named Edward Tower, and they apparently lived here a few years before moving to Springfield. But the Tower name could not possibly have replaced Hubbard as the name of this hilltop considering the relative status of the two families, so I'm afraid the origin of the name cannot be attributed to the man who was undoubtedly known as Mary Hubbard's husband. So I am afraid the origin of the name will have to remain a mystery – at least for the present. [Ed. Note: I have found an earlier reference of the name Tower Hill; it appears in an article in a July 16, 1830 issue of the Boston Traveler.]



The Hubbard Homestead

To return now to the main theme of this talk I must limit it to three important families – Hubbard- Bliss – Homer and to the houses they built, and the Tower Hill Schoolhouse. This leaves the entire story of the lower areas of Tower Hill untouched and that will have to be saved for another time.

The Hubbards were the first of the three families to settle on the Hill. Samuel Hubbard, the first of his line, was well established on a part of this home farm in 1717, and was one of the original proprietors of Brimfield. This present house was built in 1795 but the family had lived here three generations and 78 years before that and this is probably the third house they built. A new barn was built in 1841 almost 100 feet long and there was a big carriage house and a string of sheds connecting the barn and the house – very convenient and comfortable in winter but a natural fire hazard. And in the fall of 1905 disaster struck – a fire was started by small boys playing in the haymow and everything was destroyed but the house itself and part of the ell. Even that could not have been saved if there had not been an auction on the Egan place a mile away, and the crowd moved on a body to the scene of the fire, manning bucket lines to every well and emptying the house of all its contents. The barn was never rebuilt, but the ell part was restored only to be destroyed by the hurricane of 1938. Again the kitchen and woodshed were rebuilt, this time with some modern conveniences. Through all these disasters the old house itself stood strong and sturdy on its field stone foundations and today after 168 years, Hubbard homestead seems ready for another century or two of usefulness. When the house was a hundred years old in 1895, Deacon Newton Hubbard, grandfather of Harriet Parker and Gladys DeLand, wrote a brief history of the house which was privately printed with illustrations. Precious as it is, it does not begin to do justice to its subject.

The modest Deacon does not tell of his years of public service in town offices and as a representative in the state legislature; of his son John who went to Tower Hill School and Hitchcock Academy, then to prep school, probably Williston Academy, and on to Dartmouth College, and then to Chicago to make a considerable fortune in the broom corn business; of the marriage of his daughter Mary to James Ormes, a successful promoter who organized the Southern Bell telephone Company and then was sent to Europe to organize telephone companies in several countries where he and his attractive wife were presented at court, and of Mr. Ormes' generosity to the Brimfield Church of pulpit furniture; of the trip to Europe the Deacon and his wife made to visit his daughter's family; of Mary's brilliant daughter, Alice, whom some of you remember, a gifted poet and teacher and mother of five children; of his daughter Sarah's marriage to Arthur Day who was in the publishing business in Chicago and of their two daughters Harriet and Gladys and of their cousin, John Hubbard, a brilliant mining engineer still living in Grasse Valley, Cal. and of the annual gathering of the clan for summer visits on the old farm. All this and more makes a New England family saga which deserves to be written.

From an architectural standpoint the Hubbard house is a splendid example of a type of New England farmhouse which was very common during the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries especially in Massachusetts and Connecticut. There must have been at least 25 houses of this type in Brimfield but this is one of seven or eight which have survived in their original form. One of these is the Bliss-Homer-Parker house now belonging to Mrs. Smith and that brings us to the other two families – Bliss and Homer. We shall have to consider them together because they were related and both were even related to the Hubbards and this is how it came about.

Soon after Samuel Hubbard came to Brimfield the first of the Homer family came to Brimfield in time for the distribution of lands in 1722 and his name appears on the town plot as Leonard Hoar, together with that of his son, Joseph. About 1830 descendants of these pioneers moved to New York state and settled in a neighborhood in the Finger Lake country where several towns were given Greek names – including Ovid and Homer. As the story goes this member of the Hoar family decided to take the name of the town he settled in and called himself Homer. The folks back home in New England thought this was a good idea and so by acts of legislatures in 1831 – 34 and 38 the Brimfield family took the name of Homer, which I shall now use although the original records spell it Hoar. Leonard Homer (named for a distinguished ancestor who was president of Harvard College 1672-75) married Esther Hubbard in Hadley in 1707 and she was a sister of Samuel Hubbard. So all the Hubbards and Homers were descended from common ancestors.

The Homers had two large grants of land on Tower Hill, one adjoining the Hubbard place on the south and the other on the south side of the road across from what is now the Smith place. The first home of the family was probably directly opposite Mrs. Smith's house where I can remember my father filling in an old cellar hole across the road from the present house where tradition says the original house and barn stood. We shall return to the Homers later but it is now time to introduce the Bliss family.

Our town history gives quite a detailed story of all three of these families we're talking about, especially the Blisses, and I shall not repeat it here except to say that the Blisses lived in Springfield where Thomas, the first of the line, apparently a man of considerable substance, deeded 40 acres of land on Tower Hill to his son, Ichabod, in 1732. Ichabod never lived here but his son, Thomas born in 1842, lived most of his life in Brimfield and eventually acquired three farms on Tower Hill, totaling 600 acres.

He is the man who, according to Dr. Hyde's account, was "one of the few in Brimfield who owned negro slaves and was the first in town to introduce potatoes." The first Bliss home was the old house on the farm directly below Hubbard Homestead, later for many years the home of my grandfather Sumner Parker, and in recent years occupied by my brother Stanley and his son Homer as the Parker Dairy. The house burned about ten years ago and much of the salvaged material, especially 12 over 12 windows, clapboards and blinds and interior wood work were used in the construction of the new wing added to our house a few years ago. When the old Bliss house was torn down after the fire, we were able to verify our belief that the back part of the house was the original Thomas Bliss home, probably built around the time of his marriage to Sarah King of Palmer in 1765, and that the main front part with two chimneys and four handsome fireplaces with mantels and a front hall with long straight stairway was built much later but probably before Thomas died in 1806.



Thomas Bliss House

Thomas Bliss had five sons the fourth of whom Timothy, born 1783, lived with his father and took over the homestead. His next older brother, Thomas the 3<sup>rd</sup>, built a home across the road from his father's which stood where the present Cummings house now stands.(in fact the new house was built on the old cellar hole). This house was exactly the same pattern as the Hubbard house and almost identical with the one built by Thomas' oldest brother Aaron, the house now owned by Mrs. Smith. The Thomas Bliss house, which some of us remember as the Fenton house, burned about 1900 and I remember well the great central chimney which stood there for years with its five big fireplaces showing where the principal rooms had been.

Aaron Bliss, who should have been mentioned first since he was the oldest, was born in 1766 and married Rachel Fowler in 1792. It is almost certain that he built the Smith house, presumably about the time of his marriage in 1792, but that date has not yet been verified. On any case no record of a previous owner or occupant has been discovered. It is interesting to note that three handsome farm houses, all of the center chimney, nine front window type and of the same interior plan, were built on Tower Hill at about the same time – roughly 1780 to 1800 – two of them by Bliss and one by the Hubbards. And in the same period 1796, Ichabod, second of the five Bliss brothers, built a handsome four chimney house down in the village, expressly designed for a tavern and operated as such until Ichabod's death in 1835. And the youngest brother, Levi born in 1788, became a successful storekeeper in the village and built for himself in 1825 a four-chimney partly brick house (now Roger Bennet's) which is still one of the handsomest of Brimfield's old houses. Adding these two village homes to the three Bliss homes on Tower Hill you have a

record of five handsome homes built by the five Bliss brothers and their father, Thomas the 2<sup>nd</sup>, a family record unequalled in Brimfield and no doubt rare anywhere. Unfortunately this fine family is almost extinct in Brimfield but we are happy to have with us today one representative of the Bliss family, Mrs. Florence Bliss Jaffrey – who serves as a delightful link with the past of her distinguished family. Mrs. Jaffrey is a granddaughter of Levi Bliss and was born and grew up in the Bennet house just described.

To continue with the story of Aaron Bliss who about the time of his marriage to Rachel Fowler in 1792 is believed to have built the house now owned by Mrs. Smith. By this time several parcels of land had been combined to make a farm of some 300 acres with a big forest tract to the west extending half way to Steerage Rock, nearly 100 acres of tillable fields on the hilltop, and big pastures which went over the top of the hill eastward to the beginning of the brook which flows south through the Hibbard and Bliss pastures and on to Sherman Lake. Aaron Bliss and his wife had no children but his brother Ichabod (who by this time had built the Bliss Tavern down in the village) was left a widower in 1804 with four little girls aged 9, 6, 4 and 2. So Aaron and Rachel Bliss took the two year old whose name was Ruth and adopted her as their daughter and legal heir. When Ruth was 20 years old she married a young man who had grown up in the neighborhood, and I'm sure they went to Tower Hill school together. His name was Alured Homer, and that brings us again to the Homer family and to the house which was to be their home for 50 years, the house which Ruth's foster-father, Aaron Bliss, had built and which he and his wife shared with the young couple as long as they lived. Originally taking land grants on Tower Hill, as previously mentioned, the Homers had soon moved a mile west to the place which folks of my generation remember as the Shanley farm, now owned by the Demetrius family. Here the first of the Homer line and Joseph born in Concord in 1708 established a homestead and eventually built a handsome two-chimney house similar in general style and dignity to the houses on Tower Hill. There Joseph Homer and his wife, Deborah Colton brought up their family of six while he gave many years of public service to the town and to the cause of freedom. He was one of the committee who drew up Brimfield's declaration of independence ( a remarkable document by the way – given in the appendix of the town history), and served for a time in the Continental Army. Deacon Joseph's son, Samuel was the one who migrated to Homer, New York and was responsible for changing the family name, and his son, Joseph, stayed in Brimfield to carry on the family tradition. He was an officer in the Minutemen and usually designated as Captain, altho [*sic*] he served first as Lieutenant on Colonel Danielson's regiment but that is another story. Captain Joseph Hoar died in 1816 and I must take time to quote from his gravestone in the Brimfield cemetery.

“Death makes a melancholy gloom  
It leaves an empty seat,  
Ye living mortals all must come  
And join the long retreat.”

In the next generation it was Colonel Solomon Homer who carried on the line in Brimfield, spending all his life in the family homestead. He was a Colonel in the militia in a unit which refused to serve in the war of 1812, and drew up a remarkable petition to the legislature which demonstrates the trend of opinion in New England at the time. And Solomon's son, Alerud, married Ruth Bliss who eventually inherited the Aaron Bliss farm and there he lived until his death in 1870. Three years later his widow sold the farm to my parents - Orus and Eve Ward Parker and it remained our family home until it was sold to Mr. and Mrs. James Smith about 1938.

The youngest child of Alured and Ruth Homer was William Bradford Homer born in 1849 – died in 1930 and he was the father of Mary Homer Crawford and the grandfather of her son Homer Crawford whom it is our great privilege to welcome back to Tower Hill on this occasion.

And now a few words about William Bradford Homer and his friends will bring my story of the three families to an interesting but somewhat tragic end. Bradford, as he was known, was the youngest of several much older children and was allowed to go to school when he was three years old (as I was at four) – perhaps because the teacher usually boarded at the Homers' (as later teachers did at the Parkers'). He remembered being put on the back seat to sleep and rolling off onto the floor – notice when you visit the school house the long built-in bench at the back of the room – I am sure that is the seat he refers to and I very likely slept there myself.

Further reminiscences of Mr. Homer's boyhood on Tower Hill are contained in his book (p. 98-101) – they are delightfully told and should sometime be published. In the year he was to become 13 years old the entrance rule at Hitchcock Free High School, as it was then called, was relaxed to allow him to enter with his cousin who was three months older – Orville Bliss – who was a great grandson of Thomas, the second, and grew up on the farm mentioned before as the Fenton Place. With them in school was John Hubbard only one year older and the three were close friends and inseparable companions. At sixteen Bradford and Orville were fairly well prepared for college but they were sent for final preparation to Willeston Seminary in Easthampton where

Bradford's older brothers, George and Charles, had previously continued their education. John Hubbard may have gone there too, altho [*sic*] both Monson and Wilbraham Academies had many students from Brimfield. There had been a Willeston-Amherst graduate as head of Hitchcock Free High School for several years previous to this time and a fourth boy from Tower Hill, my Uncle Oscar Parker, whose family by this time had taken over the old Thomas Bliss homestead, had gone to Willeston and graduated in 1864, about a year ahead of the others. Altho [*sic*] Oscar Parker was five years older than the other three Tower Hill boys, they had been together in school and were close neighbors. Oscar entered Amherst in 1864 and died at the end of his Freshman year in June 1865.

Finishing prep school the "three musketeers" from Tower Hill separated and went to three different colleges – John Hubbard to Dartmouth, Orville Bliss to Yale, and Bradford Homer to Amherst. After graduation from Yale, with the highest honor (that of class orator), Orville Bliss went to Chicago, practiced law, married and died in Florida while on his wedding journey at the age of 26. John Hubbard also went to Chicago after graduation from Dartmouth and became a successful business man but died young (at ) [*Ed. Note. No date provided*] Bradford Homer went to Columbia Law School after graduating from Amherst and then he too went west to join his brother, George in Illinois. Later he began the practice of law in St. Louis and spent the rest of his life there, becoming a judge and one of the city's most distinguished citizens. He used to come every few years to Brimfield for a summer visit, staying at the hotel, and I remember they would hire a carriage and drive up to Tower Hill to call on my parents and visit the old home. His daughter, Mary, tells me that during these visits her father used to spend most of his time pouring over old records in the town clerk's office, or visiting cemeteries hunting for the graves of his ancestors. His wife and children were not much interested in this hobby, but I understand the children at least found other means of amusement. My wife I am sure has a great deal of sympathy for Mrs. Homer).



Hubbard Homestead Parlor

One side light on the life-long friendship between Bradford Homer and John Hubbard was that they never knew of their common ancestry. Bradford discovered their relationship during his research after John died.

I have given the story of these three young men of Tower Hill in some detail because it seems to epitomize the history of the three families – Hubbard, Bliss and Homer – and to bring them all to the peak of their lives on Tower Hill.

For the three young men who went off to college together during the civil war period never came back to Tower Hill to stay. Orville Bliss' family was the last of the Blisses on Tower Hill; John Hubbard was the last of his line to live here, except for his father, Newton Hubbard, who survived him many years. I well remember when his remains were brought back to Brimfield for burial and my brothers and I watched the hearse and the long line of carriages leaving the old Hubbard House on the hill after the

funeral. And Bradford Homer's father died just before he graduated from Amherst and that was the end of the Homer family on Tower Hill.

It would be wrong to end this story of Tower Hill families on a note of sadness. If there was an end of an era about 1870, there was also the beginning of a new one. We have present evidence that the Homer and Hubbard families are by no means extinct and that the Homer tradition is very much alive, and I am sure there are Blisses somewhere (in addition to the one representative present) who are true to their inheritance. And of course I ought to mention the Parkers who took over the Homer farm in 1873 and brought up nine children of whom I was the eighth. I like to think that as a family we have done some honor to the Tower Hill tradition.

