Souvenir of Medfield

1651-1901



I.

A Visit to an Early Homestead



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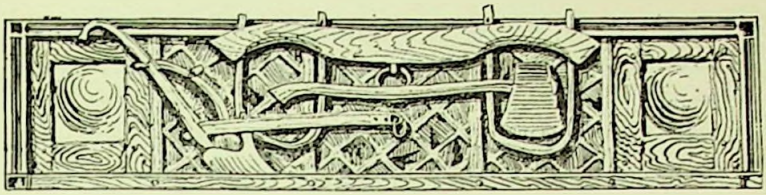
I.

A Visit to an Early Homestead

BY

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BOSTON
GEORGE H. ELLIS, PRINTER, 272 CONGRESS STREET
1901



A Visit to an Early Homestead.

LET us indulge our fancy, and turn back the hands upon time's dial to a period in the first decade of Medfield's settlement. We will look in upon one of the families this short winter afternoon. As we come near the homestead, we notice the barn, sheds, and great stacks of hay from the Charles River meadows, the pens for the sheep and pigs, with other farm appurtenances, at a considerable distance from the dwelling, so that they may be safe from the glowing sparks that come from the great stone chimney. Yonder is the well-trodden path, through the snow, down to the never-failing spring which supplies the thirsty wants of the household and the cattle. Near the house stands a huge inverted pyramid of wood, some six feet high, supported in a frame, and raised a little from the ground. That is the "lye-leach," into which the ashes from the hearth are gathered. In the springtime water will be poured in, and the

liquid potash which runs through — lye, they call it — will be used by the good wife to make the family supply of soap. We also notice a few young apple-trees: these came from some seed that Mr. Endicott got from England.

Now we come to the house. It is a log house,— good, stout logs, straightened a little with the axe where they lie one above the other, to form the walls, and locked together at the corners. Oh, no! the wind will not shake this house much, though it may find some crevices. But the cracks between the logs have been stopped somewhat by wooden wedges and clay from the town clay pits down by Bridge Street. No attempt at finish either outside or inside: all is delightfully rustic. If the joints were not so open, it would be a right warm house; and, at all events, no arrow from savage foe can pierce the walls.

There are two rooms below,— one large living-room, at once kitchen, sitting-room, and work-room. Here is the fireplace, and at the opposite end of the house is a small sleeping-room. The building is of one story; and the loft under the thatched roof, where the children sleep, is reached by a ladder. There are two windows of English diamond glass; but those in the loft and the sleeping-room are simply openings fitted with oiled paper panes, which let in a little subdued daylight.

In the middle of the front, toward the south, is

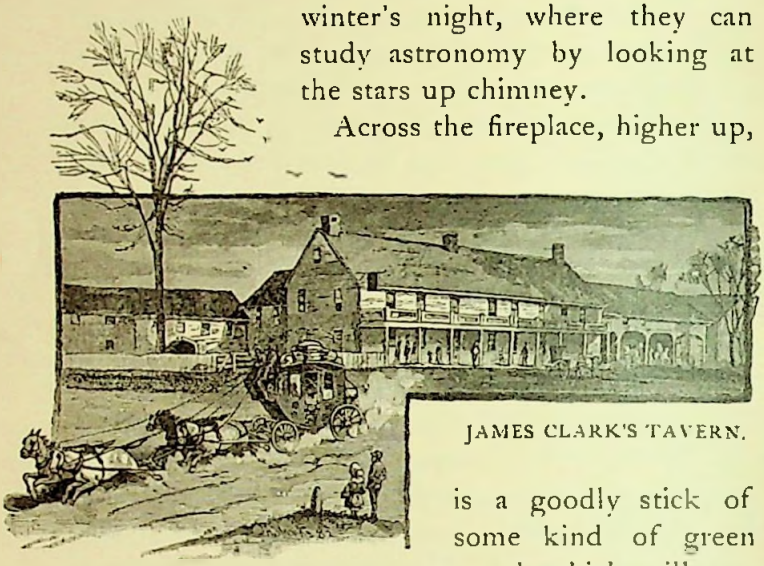
a wide heavy door, through which a horse comes sometimes to drag in a big back-log for the fire. A leather string hangs out through a hole in this door,—"the latch-string is out." We pull, hear the great wooden latch raised inside, enter, and are greeted by our ancestors of seven generations ago.

At one end of the big room is the cavernous fireplace, some ten feet wide, built of stone laid in clay, with a broad chimney of the same materials rising above the loft and the inflammable rushes with which the roof is thatched. Against the rear wall of the fireplace lies the great back-log which the horse drew in, and which took the united muscle of men and boys to put in place. Piled in front of it is a generous quantity of other wood, which sends up a roaring blaze, giving us a pleasant thrill of warmth as we come in from the cold north-east wind and the leaden, sunless skies. Wouldn't the floor break through with such a weight as the horse and those big logs which were hauled across it? Oh, you don't understand: this is a "puncheon floor," made of trees split in halves, with the split side up, hewn into some semblance of smoothness, the round side bedded in the solid earth. There is just a small cellar under the other room, reached by a trap-door. A few of our choice apples (our trees do not bear many yet), our turnips, cabbage, and other vegetables are there, safe from the frost. Potatoes? It will be a hundred years yet before they will be raised

much about here. Nobody at present ever saw one in this settlement.

At each side in the fireplace there is a stout, short bit of timber which makes a nice seat — "the chimney corner" — for the children to sit upon of a cold winter's night, where they can study astronomy by looking at the stars up chimney.

Across the fireplace, higher up,



JAMES CLARK'S TAVERN.

is a goodly stick of some kind of green wood which will not readily burn off, called the "lug-pole," from which are hung by chains and hooks sundry pots and kettles used in the housekeeping,— a style of the art that the good wife well understands, but which is a perfect mystery to us. Lying in the corner are several pine knots from which the pitch is oozing, which are to serve for lighting this evening; though sometimes, when company is present, one of the hoarded

tallow candles, kept for special occasions, will be burned.

On one side of the room is the "dresser," an open case of shelves, on which are kept various utensils for table and other uses. On the high shelves are packages of beans, dried berries, strings of dried pumpkin, and alewives (or herring) that were taken when they ran up the river last season at the fording place down by the great bridge, and cured for winter use.

It is drawing toward twilight this cloudy afternoon, and the cold grows bitter. We can hear the distant howling of the storm-wind out in "Rocky Woods," as it rushes up from "the deep-voiced neighboring ocean"; and scattered snowflakes are even now beginning to fall. We look out at the door, and, noting the appearance of things, begin to inquire if there is an "ordinary," or place of entertainment for travellers. We are told that Joshua Fisher has opened one since the law was passed requiring every town to maintain such a place. "It is the next house east of the minister's. But you must not think of going there to-night," says the goodwife. "Stay with us: plenty of room."

We consent. The goodman with the big boys would by and by be home from the woods; and it is nearly time for the little boys to be back from Mr. Wheelock's school, where they are studying the horn-book. "Jeremiah can read his a b, abs, almost alone now," says his mother.

Soon we hear shoutings at the teams as they get near the barns (where the poor beasts are so eager to get at their feed that the drivers' patience is much tried), the lowing of cows, bleating of calves and sheep, and squealing of pigs, accompanied by more yelling from the big boys, which, altogether, assures us that the day's work is about ended. The "critters" are soon munching their supper; and the



ONION'S CORNER GROCERY.

goodwife sends out one of the small boys, who have now arrived from school, with the milkpails. In a little while "father" and the big boys bring it in. A sturdy, ruddy-faced man he is, and strapping fellows those boys, all in their deerskin clothing, cowhide boots, and caps of woodchuck skin.

We are made welcome by their hearty though uncouth greetings. The father, born in England, has words quite suitable at his command. The boys have grown up in the wilderness: they simply gurgle something that sounds like *how-dy-du?* But

all is hearty good cheer, and we at once feel at home. An old matchlock gun, some seven feet long, which had been taken along against bear or wolf, or perchance the sight of a deer, is hung up across two stout pegs provided for it near the door.

Now a good, substantial meal is needed; for the men-folks have been working all day in Pine Swamp, cutting some of those old cedars to make shingles. They had only a bite at noon; and they are, of course, hungry enough now to devour dishes and all. Pile on a little more wood, it is getting chilly here, and hurry up the cooking. Where is the table? Oh, they gather round the "board," literally: it is a wide board, leaned against the wall when not in use, and placed upon supports, or "horses," when needed. From the "dresser" the table furishings are brought,—trenchers (or wooden platters), knives, pewter porringers, and spoons. Forks? There are none at this early day in the colony, as they ever heard of. If we have meat for supper, we must make use of fingers; and there are home-made napkins in plenty against the time of need. Cups and saucers? Of course not; neither tea nor coffee have yet been seen on any table in Massachusetts, as beverages. We shall probably have a loaf of white bread? Mistaken again: bread is not made by our housekeepers, and there is no baker in the town. Wheat does not thrive well, and what little is raised brings a good price in Boston; and it must

be sold or used to pay the minister's salary. Mr. Wilson is obliged to use wheaten bread: rye and Indian give him the heartburn.

But there is something stewing, steaming, and



THE WILLOWS.

sputtering in the kettles over the fire, the odor of which, though by no means unpleasant, will be, probably, not familiar at the Parker House. As the preparations for the meal go on, let us listen to the conversation. They talk over their neighbors' affairs and the little happenings of their day very much as their descendants will do two hundred and fifty years later.

The goodman says: "Have you heard the

news, Jerusha? You know Thomas Wight's oldest son, John, died soon after we settled here. He left his wife, Ann, with the little girl, Abiel. Well, what do you think? Isaac Bullard has been up from Dedham to see Ann several times. You know he used to be sweet on her before she married John, only he was so bashful he didn't dast tell her; and they say they are going to be married now in the spring. Right good little woman, Ann is. Isaac has property, and seems 'ough it's a good thing."

"Yes," says his wife, "and Miss John Bullard told me yesterday that Mr. Wheelock has been 'pinted to marry people; and that old widower, Tom Holbrook, at the 'Farms,' is going to marry the Widder Sheppard's darter. Mr. Wheelock is going to begin on them."

"And what's more," says the good man, "there's another of them Adamses coming to live here: Jonathan, his name is. That makes four of them boys we'll have here. Folks say that John Fussell's darter had something to do with this new one's coming."

At this the oldest boy, Samuel, remarks, "I'm glad she's got a bite at last: she's an ancient."

"Oh, no," says his mother. "I don't think she's a mite over twenty-eight; she says she isn't."

Says Samuel, "Hannah Albee told *me* that she knew 'Lizabeth Fussell was more'n that."

At this Jeremiah pipes up, "Sam b'lieves anything Hannah Albee tells him."

Here Joshua, the other big boy, puts in his oar: "Samuel has to look across to where Hannah Albee sets all meet'n time. Didn't look at the minister scarcely at all last Sunday."

To which Samuel rejoins, "S'pose you had your eyes on him every single minute's how you came to know what everybody else's about."

The head of the house did not seem to notice this colloquy among the youngsters much, and went on: —

"Mr. Wilson came down to the swamp when we were there to see about having some shingles made to put on the north side of the meeting-house where the wind comes in on him when he's a-preaching, and hoarses him up; and he said Cromwell had sent Governor Winslow with the expedition to the West Indies. He died on the way, and had to be buried at sea. In him another of our very best men has gone."

"And I hear," says Joshua, "that Abraham Harding's very sick, dangerous sick."

"Don't seem's 'ough that could be," said his father. "He's a young man, and tough's a knot; and I see him down in the cedars only a few days ago."

"Well," said his wife, "they must get something for his liver, an' he'll be all right. All the veins have their roots in the liver."

"Well," put in Samuel, "Mr. Wilson says he's

done all he could for him. He bled him three times a day, give him toad-powder and syrup of snails, besides chopping a live chicken in two and binding the halves on his two feet to draw whatever ailed him away from his vitals. Didn't do a mite o' good."

"Now," said his mother, "if they could only get some of seven kinds of herbs, cut in the old of the moon, and mixed with a few drops of black cat's blood, it might help him."

"They ain't got 'em," said Samuel. "And Goodman Woodward, going from Dedham up to see about a mill on Boggestow Brook, stopped on his way, and told 'em, if this was a time of year when we could dig fish-worms, a good poultice of fish-worms simmered in rattlesnake's oil, and placed in the bend of the left elbow, would be most excellent for what ails a person, when you don't know what the matter is. But, as it is, Mr. Wilson told 'em they'd better send down for a doctor. He came up, and give him some awful strong stuff. He's been again to-day."

"Oh," said his father, "I believe he'll get well yet."

"P'r'aps he will," said Samuel, doggedly; "but the doctor says he *can't live*, and he probably knows what that physic'll do to him."

And so tongues run on till supper was ready. Shall we sit down? There is one chair in the

house: that is for us, the visitor. A bench is brought for the father and mother to sit side by side upon, and the children stand around. Little Hezekiah has been snivelling in the chimney corner all along, but comes out to get his supper, where he is



BIRTHPLACE OF LOWELL MASON.

accosted by one of the mischievous urchins: "Ho! how did you like it when the schoolmaster put your tongue in a split-stick?" There is no reply; and the father promises attention to the matter before he sleeps. "You'll get in the stocks yet, as Joe Calley did, for stealing sheep. There he was, one lectur' day, with his feet clamped up tight in the stocks right in front of the meeting-house, with everybody hooting at him, and asking him if he was trying to

cool his feet or showing his new shoes. Sam Smith stuck a big tuft of wool on Joe's hat, and called out, 'Sheep, sheep!' The small boys took it up, made a ring around him, and kept yelling: 'Sheep, sheep, baa, baa, sheep! Old Joe Calley stole a sheep!'"

"Supper is ready," calls out the woman of the house.

The viands are set upon the board in the original packages. A kettle of mush is brought from the fire; and each helped himself, cooling it in his pewter porringer with the milk that had been brought in. No needless ceremony was allowed to waste time in the disposal of this part of the meal. Next a seething iron pot is set on whence the mush had vanished, holding stewed meat and vegetables.

"This is some of the deer you shot down by Henry Adams's mill the other day," remarks the wife.

The trenchers are now filled, — one for the father and mother to eat from together, one for each two of the children, and one for the guest. With the aid of knife, spoon, and fingers, we find here a palatable and nourishing dish. Not much is said, except a remark from Joshua: "And how's your tongue, Hezekiah?" At which the young culprit weeps again, the tears falling into his trencher.

The stew being finished, the goodwife goes to the fireplace again; but now an unlooked for calamity

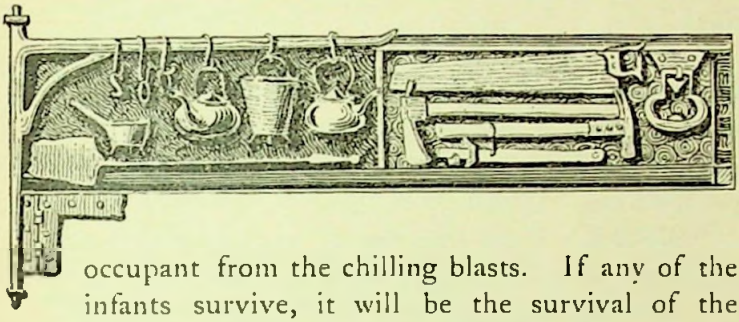
befalls. The "lug-pole," on which the various kettles were hung, has burned off, and suddenly gives way, precipitating the remaining kettle, with its contents, into the coals and ashes. There is a great sizzling and steaming accompanying this catastrophe, but the ruin is complete. Nothing can be saved from the wreck.

"Oh, dear," says the housewife, "there goes my hulled corn that I have been cooking all day long." But there is nothing to be done about it; and she rakes open the ashes, bringing to view a nice baked pumpkin. A big hole is made in the shell as it stands in the centre of the "board." The pewter spoons extract the savory sauce from within, and convey it by the most direct route to its destination.

We wind up with a piece of cheese, from which each in succession cuts a generous morsel with his knife. This is the sort of cheese made in the households of the times, and is a good, durable, substantial article; and it brings out from the head of the household the remark that, when he was a young man and was in the Pequot fight, he remembers well how that Lieutenant Bull would certainly have been killed by an Indian arrow, had it not been for a piece of cheese he was carrying in his pocket, and which warded off the shot.

The meal being now over and things put to rights, the fire is replenished; and, while we are toasted on one side, on the other we are chilled to

the marrow by the icy draughts that find their way through crevices, around loose-fitting door and windows, as well as by that which comes down the sides of the wide chimney, bringing occasional snow-flakes with it. The ink in Samuel's pen is chilled as he tries to do a little in long division by the light of the pine knot in the corner. The baby's cradle is made with a high wooden hood to protect the



occupant from the chilling blasts. If any of the infants survive, it will be the survival of the strongest, to become the hardy progenitors of a hardy race. The older people now draw up the high-backed settle toward the fire: the children pop corn in the hot ashes. It is a wild, stormy, biting cold night outside; but we manage to keep up good cheer within.

"Another addition to the bachelors' row," says the head of the house: "Henry Glover's old place on North Street has been sold to John Pratt, a young fellow from Dorchester. Tom Mason and William Partridge have got married; but there is a chance yet in the bachelors' row for somebody, with

Tom Ellis, John Partridge and this new man, Pratt. All got good houses and nobody to keep 'em. They say, though, that Magdalen Bullard's willin' to go and cheer up John Partridge's lonely lot."

"I'm afraid," said his wife, "that William Partridge will be without a housekeeper soon. Didn't you see how pale and sickly she looked last lectur' day?"

Jeremiah here speaks up, and says, "Did you know how Sam Sheppard cut his foot with an axe t'other day? They couldn't stop it bleeding: they doctored and doctored some of the blood, but they couldn't stop it."

"Shouldn't think they could," says Samuel, pausing in his long division, "working that fool-way."

"Nothing better in the world," says his mother; "and, if it don't get well afterwards, they must get the very axe it was cut with, and put salve on that."

"Nonsense!" says he of long division.

"Don't you try to know too much all at once," says the mother. "I remember, when we lived in Dedham, old Miss Woodward dropped the flat-iron on her toe; and she put a poultice on the flat-iron, and the toe stopped aching right away."

The head of the family now remarks: "That servant John Metcalf got over from England don't amount to much: he paid his passage for him, and it was to be worked out by three years' service.

Metcalf says he isn't worth his keeping: he will eat himself into a sweat any time, but he'd freeze to death working. Joseph Clark tells him he'd better gone down to Newport when the ship came in from Africa, and bought one of the 'Guinea blackbirds': you can wollop them, and make 'em work."

"Wish't Joseph could be carried to Africa," remarks Samuel, "and wolloped till he'd step round a little spryer."

"What was it," says the goodwife, "that you heard Mr. Eliot's Indians singing in their meeting at Natick one day last fall?"

"Oh, well," replied her eldest, "they kept singing it over and over till I got it by heart: —

"'Wah e e no mok manis wame,
Wu toh ti mo ne unk:
Wah e no mok ke nah au wame,
Mif fin nin nu og wonk.'"

"Soon understand the 'Guinea blackbirds,'" says his father: "what a plague does't mean?"

"Oh, I d'no," says Samuel, "only they told me 'twas the 117th Psalm."

"Sounds like Mr. Wilson's text when he read it in the 'riginal Greek," remarks Joshua.

"Joshua minds all such things," says his mother. "He wants to be a minister himself someday. Can't you read us a little bit of what you wrote down when you was trying to make up a sermon, Joshua?"

"I ain't writ very fur yet," replies the youth.

"Well, give us some of what you have writ,— that part you read to old Mr. Boyden, that he liked so well, about life being short."

So Joshua gets his paper, and begins: —

"Life at the shortest,— no,— short at the lifest, — no,"—

"Better sit up to the hearth where you can see," suggests Samuel; and the reading begins anew: —

"Life at the longest is short. There's old Thomas Parr, who died a little while before we came over, aged 152,— cut off by an accident in the flower of his age, as it were. Yes, the sunflower of man's life grows up and blossoms out big: before long it's wiltin' down like a cabbage-plant in haytime. He starts out going to take every fish in the brook: pretty soon he's lost his hook, snarled up his line, he shoulders his pole, and puts for the house. Truly, man comes forth, head up high as a woodchuck in tall grass. First you know he goes drooping away like an old rooster to a barn shed in a thunder shower. Yes, man"—

"Needn't read any farther," says Samuel. "What we've had will give us food for thought quite a spell."

"Joshua 's thinking of reading it some lectur' day, when Mr. Wilson happens to be sick and can't be there," says the fond mother.

"Guess there'll be a prevailing sickness in town if there's many out to hear it," remarks Samuel.

But we are taking no note of time: the only timepiece here is the rising and setting sun, with the noon-mark upon the window-sill which tells dinner-time in sunshiny days. One by one we at length perceive the inroads of drowsiness, in spite of the varied conversation and the enlivening influence of Joshua's literary effort.

The head of the household brings out his old black-letter Bible, and reads slowly,—"The Lord is my shepherd,"— then stands, and commits the keeping of his rude home in the wilderness, with its beloved inmates, to the heavenly Protector of us all.

The children now clamber up their ladder to the loft, the father following with the promised purpose to make some very pointed inquiries of Hezekiah as to his conduct at school and his intentions for the future. The replies are distinctly audible below, and partake of a sorrowful nature; but the good man is fully persuaded as to his duty to his offspring, and is faithful in the performance of it.

We, the visitors, betake ourselves to the sleeping-room, cold as the arctic regions; but the freezing clamminess of the linen bedding being mollified by the influence of the warming-pan filled with embers from the hearth, and an ample wolf-skin robe covering us over, we shall sleep without a thought of storm or cold.

Meanwhile, the heads of the family, having surrendered to us their usual accommodations, spread a

couch upon the floor of the "living-room." The goodman now replenishes and banks up the fire, lest, waking in the morn, he find it extinct with no means of rekindling it except by going to some neighbors for a brand or by the slow process of flint and steel, with much expenditure of time, tinder, and patience.

Then all is quiet within; and while the wind howls without,— the occasional cry of a wolf startles the dogs in their kennel out by the sheep-pen,— and the snow comes sifting down in the darkness, we all lie snugly in the realm of forgetfulness till another day dawns upon this primitive household, and they arouse themselves to their round of homely duties again, varied, it may be, by some news of what happened in old England three or four months ago, just brought out by some swift-sailing vessel, and by recounting the little happenings among their rural neighbors in the infant settlement "on the banks of Charles River next to Boggestow, called Medfield."

