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Hobbs Pond and the 80 Acres

Above: Charles Hunt fishing at Hobbs Pond in 1954. Below: Picnic at 80 Acres in 1954, with "Pit" and "Buck" Dumaine in the center, flanked by Pit's sister Lid Sargent and mother Ruth Bradlee Williams at left and Pit's sister Ruth Breed at right. (Photos by Peg Hunt, courtesy of Charles Hunt)

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1979 photo of David (left) and Charles Hunt, with Polly Hunt [Mendoza] in the background, on Hobbs Pond. (Photo by Joan Hunt, courtesy of Charles Hunt)

Hobbs Brook Dam: Rebuild or Remove?

At the May Town Meeting, voters will be asked to decide the future of Hobbs Pond, located just north of Drabbington Way and Melone baseball field. Severe rainstorms in March 2010 caused flooding that eroded and collapsed a portion of the earthen dam and spillway. The breach measures 25 feet wide by 30 feet long by six feet deep, and as a result, the water level of the pond is now about two feet lower than previously. Temporary measures are protecting the remaining portions of the dam. The Weston Conservation Commission is studying three options cost-

ing up to \$500,000: rebuilding the dam to 30- or 50-foot spillway designs or removing a portion of the dam to reestablish the stream channel. The Con Com will choose a preferred option; however the final decision will be made at Town Meeting because voters must approve use of Community Preservation Act (CPA) funds.

The article “80 Acres History” on page 4, written by Al Hunt in 1993, tells the story of how Hobbs Pond was created in the mid-1950s by Hunt and Frederic “Buck” Dumaine. They built the original dam across Hobbs Brook, and what had been a marsh became a small pond that attracted wildlife and provided recreational opportunities. For more than half a century, Weston residents have used the pond for fishing, nature walks, cross-country skiing, and as a playground for children and dogs.

Hobbs Pond is part of 130 acres of town-owned land known as “Cat Rock and the 80 Acres.” Hobbs Brook runs through the area, connecting the Hobbs Reservoir in Waltham with the Stony Brook Reservoir in Weston south of Boston Post Road near Route 128. These reservoirs were created in the 1890s and still supply water to the City of Cambridge. Hobbs Brook takes its name from Ebenezer Hobbs, who operated a tannery at the intersection of North Avenue and Church Street, using the brook as a water supply.

Ye Olde 1970s Mill Wheel

Hobbs Pond was never used as a mill pond to supply water power for industry. Why, then, do some residents remember a waterwheel located below the dam? The answer is that Carl Von Mertens, son-in-law of 80 Acres owner Al Hunt, built the waterwheel in the late 1970s. The following is Von Mertens’s account:

I did build the waterwheel with the idea that it might be something I could contribute on my upcoming trip to Nepal. The [original idea was to] teach myself the design factors in building a waterwheel large enough to power a grain mill or other simple machine. The first thing I did was try to figure out how to make an axle in a large log. I made a drill that allowed me to insert a two-inch pipe about 12 inches deep in each end. Of course the log and the paddles were not equally balanced so the entire piece rotated slightly off center. This allowed the wheel to turn, and squeak as you may remember, but after awhile the pipe became loose and the wheel fell apart. The project gave me a good sense of what was required; and I realized that any practical application would require much more work, and I didn't have the time. I did go to Sturbridge Village and places like that to study old designs. Many wheels in the old days were reinforced with steel bands and brackets. The old craftsmen knew what they were doing.

80 Acres History

[Editor's note: The following history of the "80 Acres" was written by Albert Hunt in 1993. Many thanks to Hunt's son, Charles, for making it available]

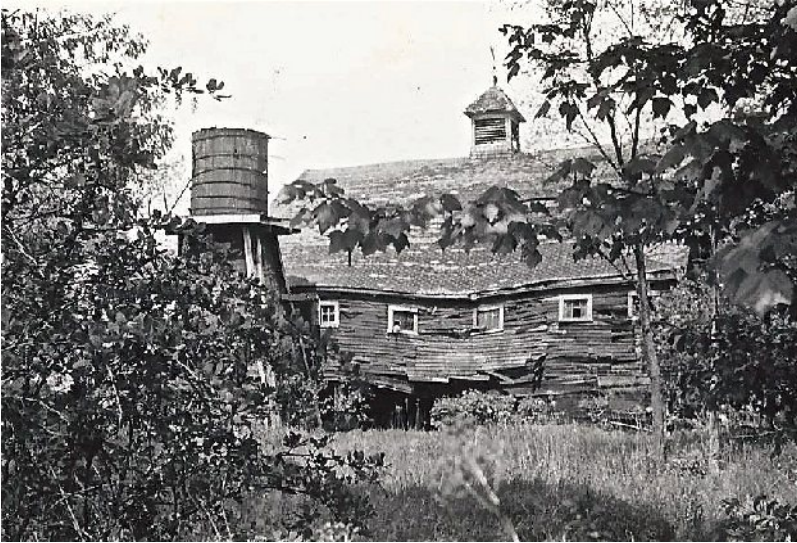
80 Acres was the area name given by us to the Bert Tyler farm on Lexington Street in Weston (1) after purchase in common by the Albert B. Hunts (2) and Frederic C. Dumaines.(3) Buck Dumaine got to know Bert Tyler, a town selectman representing the declining farmer interests, and had permission to run dogs on his farm. The friendship grew to the point where Bert offered Buck right of first refusal should he decide to sell his farm. Bert and his wife were living in separate homes on the farm, he in the main house and she in a smaller house beyond the barn to the north and close to Lexington Street. Both homes were in almost total disrepair.

The first time I met Bert he was sitting in the kitchen of the main house with a cat on his lap. The nearby sink was hanging at an angle and surely had no drain or inflowing water. When walking in the kitchen one had to watch closely the placement of feet as numerous floorboards were missing. Bert spooned from a can of cat food, a mouthful for himself and then one for the cat. Further inspection proved the house was generally in the same condition as the kitchen. An interesting observation concerns Bert's living habits. His bedroom was the front

southeast corner room on the second floor nearest the street, heated by an iron wood-fired range. Disposal of ashes was through a hole in the tile floor to the room below, where a substantial pile of ashes had collected. I was surprised



View of the Tyler farmhouse at 178 Lexington Street from the north, before the extensive renovations of 1954. (Photo by Peg Hunt, courtesy of Charles Hunt)



The Tyler barn was beyond repair when the property passed to the Hunt and Dumaine families. At their request, the Weston Fire Department burned it down as a training exercise. Note the water tank. (1954 photo by Peg Hunt, courtesy of Charles Hunt)

when cleaning out the house to find so many panes of glass collected but never used to replace the many broken or missing panes in the windows throughout the house.

The property was purchased on November 1953, and Bert and his wife moved and lived together in a Waltham nursing home. We used the firm Everett M. Brooks Co. to survey the property and prepare a plan following the descriptions in the Tyler deed, which in areas had the boundaries along a non-existent wall, to a tree and by a brook. We originally planned to have the plan reviewed by the Land Court, but this bogged down with a Waltham law firm and by our addition of adjoining property. According to the plan, we had purchased some seventy acres in Weston to the west of Lexington Street and six acres in Waltham, also to the west of Lexington Street. There was also some four acres to the east of Lexington Street, all in Weston except a questioned area in Waltham claimed by Cabot, Cabot and Forbes. To settle the dispute, CC and F gave us six acres west of Hobbs Brook in Weston that they had acquired with the Waltham property now owned by GT & E. We next added 16 acres in Weston and six acres in Waltham for a total cost of \$61,277, half paid by Buck and one quarter each paid by my wife, Peg, and me.

Buck and I immediately started plowing, harrowing, and planting all of the open fields. Buck furnished the tractor and tools; I supplied two steel ramps that were part of the oil change pit in the abandoned gas station in front of 725 Boston Post Road. These were used to span Hobbs Brook. I also furnished a steel bucket from



Photo of the dilapidated Tyler barn about 1954 (Photo by Peg Hunt, courtesy of Charles Hunt)

which I hand spread tons of lime over all of the plowed fields. Buck avoided this operation, claiming asthma or something not compatible to lime dust. The plantings were largely as recommended by the State Fish & Game and Bill Pollock (4) to attract the birds. For several years we had a successful field of alfalfa that we mowed and sold to the Hamlins in Wayland. After the planting season, we tackled the whole area west of the Lexington Street with power saws—cutting brush, thinning trees, downing all dead chestnut and elm, and burning the huge piles. Each day ended in a protected spot from wind, snow, or the existing weather, where we relaxed with a bourbon bottle and comradeship, content with our day's effort. One winter, I built a Boy Scout lean-to covered with boughs and open to the warming fire.

One year Buck strung a string around the entire property and registered it as a game preserve, and with Bill Pollock's assistance stocked pheasant and chucker partridge within the 80 Acres. I never knew if we were supposed to shoot the birds or Buck wanted them for running his dogs; whatever, it was never successful. The pheasants flew over the string boundary and the chuckers just sat and tamely watched people approach. We did find several locations where native grouse could be found each year, one below the dam and another where the office building is now located.

Although we shared the planting and brush and tree cutting, we split the development of the property. I assumed the renovation of the buildings and Buck took charge of land development. At that time Buck was President of the New Haven Railroad, which had a lot of construction underway in the South End. Under Buck's direction, one of the New Haven contractors moved in with bulldozers and crane-operated drags. Without seeking approval from anyone, the meadow below the Tyler house was excavated, a dam was built, and the incoming stream

draining the area to the east of Lexington Street soon filled the excavated area. In this way the upper pond was built. The access road that originally crossed the now submerged meadow was relocated around the southerly side of the new pond, with entrance and gate on Lexington St. At the same time, the large marshy area through which the Hobbs Brook flowed with Cambridge city water from the reservoirs above to those below was transformed into the present large pond of many acres. Trees growing on the edges of the marsh were downed and removed. The crane-operated drags scooped up the marshy soil, which was used to form several islands. Some was piled on higher land and spread by bulldozers over the bordering fields. A dam with spill way was built at the southerly outlet, where the water had flowed from the marshy area into the defined course of Hobbs Brook. A culvert with covering road was installed over Hobbs Brook at the head of the large pond, replacing my two steel channels. The roadway continued around the westerly side of the pond to the dam and spillway. There we chose our future



Tyler farmhouse reconstruction at 178 Lexington Street about 1954. Note the windmill at the upper left. (Photo by Peg Hunt, courtesy of Charles Hunt.)

picnic spot.

While this was proceeding under Buck's direction, I hired Roy Baker who had experience restoring old properties for the New England Society for Antiquities [Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, SPNEA, now Historic New England]. He first tore down and removed the smaller house on Lexington Street where Mrs. Tyler had lived. He then took on the rebuilding of the old farmhouse, which I believe was originally built in 1761 (5). At the same time, for a contribution of \$100 to the Weston fireman's fund, the department ran a training operation. The nearby brook was dammed, a pumper sucked the water, and the trainees directed the water on the large old Tyler barn that was being demol-



At left above and below: The Tyler farmhouse at 178 Lexington Street, during and after reconstruction in 1954. At right: 1954 photo of the Tyler farmhouse during reconstruction. (Photos by Peg Hunt, courtesy of Charles Hunt)



ished. It was beyond repair. The fire was kept under control with alternate full stream and umbrella-like spray, behind which the firemen could advance close to the burning barn. The result was a totally destroyed barn with no damage to the nearby house under repair. The house was rebuilt with little change from its original room layout. Two chimneys were torn down with little effort and one rebuilt with an added outdoor fireplace. The original rebuilding cost estimate was \$15,000; however, the final figure was \$49,000. This included moving and installing a stable formerly located on the Dumaine's Conant Road property. To this was added a garage. I had Edith Cochran lay out a circular drive from Lexington Street, with plantings and a brick terrace with ledge for approaching the never-used front door. With the assistance of Jack Marsh's son, John, I followed Edith's plan and installed the loam, seeded the lawns, laid the brick terrace with ap-



proaching steps, and added a fieldstone patio off the kitchen and outdoor fireplace.

We rented the rebuilt farmhouse to several tenants but soon tired of that endeavor and sold it with two acres of land to Jack Thayer for \$75,000, retaining the right of first refusal should he wish to sell. Thayer left the country; his wife continued to live in the house until remarrying. So the farmhouse came on the market, our first refusal was given to Charles Hunt, and Thayer agreed to sell at his original cost, \$75,000 in 1971.

While I was concentrating on the farmhouse, its renting and final sale, Buck completed the building of the two dams retaining the two ponds. Peg Hunt organized the 80-Acre Fishing Club, membership open to the youth of Weston. Each qualified member was given a large, circular metal disc inscribed "80 ACRES FISHING CLUB," to be worn for admission. In 1957, five hundred 3 1/2 inch large-mouthed bass and five thousand blue gill were placed in the big pond, and three hundred 7" to 9" brown trout were placed in the smaller, upper pond. Any lure was allowed in the big pond, but use of the upper pond was limited to fly fishing. The bass have survived but the trout soon disappeared because the water was too warm and not a steady flow. Buck's land development costs eventually came to \$25,618. At this point I should add that all costs and income while we owned the property in common were split fifty-fifty between Hunts and Du-maines.

In 1974, I decided our common ownership should be changed so I proposed a split of the Weston property west of Lexington Street and the six acres in



*Present day photograph of the south facade of 178 Lexington Street.
(Courtesy of Charles Hunt)*

Waltham. The Dumaines were given first choice and chose the easterly half with Lexington Street frontage and southerly bordering the town road to Cat Rock. The Hunt portion surrounded Charles's two acres, including Lexington Street frontage to the Waltham line and upper pond land bordering the Waltham line on the north. Both families owned approximately one half of the large pond.

When my oldest daughter, Francie, married Carl Von Mertens, Peg and I gave them—or rather offered them should they so wish—a portion of 80 Acres owned by us. They accepted the offer and chose a house location overlooking the large pond and Cat Rock hill beyond. To prevent a subdivision approval, we included land with adequate frontage on Lexington Street. Peg and I gave them the land and Carl, with one master carpenter, built their home. This later became the home of my youngest daughter, Maggie, and Ron Pownall.

In 1993, Buck and I ceased to own any part of 80 Acres. In that year we gave the few acres east of Lexington Street still owned in common to the Weston Conservation Commission. The six acres in Waltham west of Lexington or West Street had been sold with certain interests retained. Over several years, Buck gave all of his land in Weston west of Lexington Street to the Weston Conservation Commission except for 14 acres bordering on Lexington Street, which he gave to his daughter, Ruth Brooking. Peg and I sold 36 acres to the Weston Conservation Commission, including all of our land west of Hobbs Brook and interest in the large pond excluding a strip bordering Maggie's house. The price was \$5,000 an acre and community gift of \$55,000. The balance of land owned by me after Peg's death, including the small upper pond and adjacent land, has been given to Charles and Maggie.

Footnotes

(1) Herbert “Bert” Tyler was the son of Sydney E. Tyler, who had purchased a 92-acre farm on both sides of Lexington Street in the 1870s. Sydney Tyler’s farm was noted for sweet corn exported to the Boston market. Bert Tyler kept about a dozen cows, raised chickens, maintained an apple orchard, and grew vegetables. He served as a Weston selectman for 36 years, from 1912 to 1948.

(2) Albert B Hunt (1910 - 2009) headed Rivett Lathe & Grinder, a machine tool and hydraulic parts manufacturing company in Brighton. He served on many boards both corporate and non-profit, including the Meadowbrook School Board of Trustees as president. He also served on the Weston Planning Board. His wife, Frances “Peg” Parson Hunt, founded the Country Evening Concert Series that held classical concerts at the Town Hall for many years. Their children were Francie [Von Mertens], Charles, and Maggie.

(3) Frederic C. “Buck” Dumaine Jr. (1902 – 1997) was a business executive who served as president of the New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad from 1951 to 1954, Avis Rent-a-Car System from 1957 to 1962, and the Delaware and Hudson Railroad from 1967 to 1968. He also served as an executive with numerous railroad and manufacturing companies. From 1963 to 1965 he was Chairman of the Massachusetts Republican Party. His wife, Margaret, was nicknamed “Pitty” because she wasn’t a boy after the first two girls.

(4) Bill Pollock worked for the Massachusetts Fish and Game or similar state agency and helped in determining what birds and fish to stock on 80 Acres. He was a good friend of Al Hunt and Buck Dumaine.

(5) The following information about the house and property is taken from the Town of Weston inventory form, prepared by Pamela W. Fox in 1994.

178 Lexington Street appears to have been built before 1768 by farmer Abraham Sanderson. Sanderson is shown on the 1768 and 1771 tax records as owning a dwelling. In 1771 he also owned 1 horse, 3 cows, 4 goats/sheep, 7 acres of pasturage, 3 acres of tillage land, 4 acres of mowing land, and 2 acres of fresh meadow, a total of 16 acres. This was a small farm for that period and his net worth was on the low side in comparison with other town residents at the time. Sanderson still owned the property at the time of the 1795 map.

The present Greek Revival exterior detailing appears to date from a mid-19th century remodeling, probably done in the 1840’s or early 50’s. On the 1852 and 1866 maps the house was owned by J.W. Cutting. By 1875 it was owned by S.E. Tyler, and the property remained in the Tyler family until the 1950’s.