

SIDE WALKS SANDI SERKESS THE UNTOLD TALE OF BILLINGS FIELD

(Author's note: The following article could not have been penned were it not for the loving dedication bestowed upon the West Roxbury Archives by Bob Murphy, President.)

I will start with the end of the story as I know it, and hope that others can fill in the gaps. I moved to West Roxbury in 1954 and started playing in Billings Field just a few years later. We played tennis (without nets) mostly, and rode our bikes, and sledded down the hills on our coasters. We sat in the corners of the field and talked. We watched games and listened to concerts. We had races of all kinds on the grassy parts and rode on the swings and slid down the slides. But never did I associate in my head the word "Billings" with people. Because it really is not a word, which denotes a thing, but rather a name, which connotes living beings. And here is the end of their story as I know it.

In a local newspaper of which I have a copy, the Dedham Transcript published May 28, 1878, there is a notice by one Henry S. Russell, who identifies himself as the administrator of the estate of the late Joseph H. Billings. This notice announces that all of his real estate, business and domestic, on Center and Mt. Vernon Streets, is to be put on public auction on Thursday June 24th, 1878, at 4:00, by virtue of a license by the judge of probate court. (I know this is a run-on sentence.)

What could have happened to this prosperous and prolific family such that all their properties had to be auctioned? Well, back to the beginning.

The Billings family, now buried in Westerly Burial Ground next to Walgreen's, began in Milton where Ebenezer Billings, (1719-1766), son of Joseph and Rehumah Billings operated the Blue Hill Tavern in Milton. Ebenezer took over the tavern from his dad. He had two children by his first wife, Jerusha Vose, and seven by his second wife, Miriam Davenport. Lemuel, Joseph, and Benjamin figure most prominently in my story.

Joseph, born in 1755, stayed in Milton with their father and helped run the tavern til his death in 1809. There he and his father, Ebenezer, were acclaimed for their "elegant boarding house and fruit gardens."

I have in my hand a picture of Lemuel Billings as I write this. He is dressed as a gentleman, driving a buggy down what was probably County Road, now known as Center Street. Born in 1757, he was a soldier in the Revolutionary War, and in 1781 married Hannah Whiting, probably of the Whitings Tavern family. This tavern was located in West Roxbury further down on Center Street. Hannah and Lemuel settled in West Roxbury after the war and built a large tomb in the Westerly Burial Ground. The tomb is on the right hand side of the lot. Across the street on the corner of Lagrange were two large residences occupied by his nephews, two sons of his brother Benjamin. Lemuel was a hatter by trade ("good felt hats") and had his home and shop on Center Street, at the corner of what is now Lorette Street. He was a man of means, but by no means as wealthy as his brother Benjamin became, even though Benjamin established his business after Lemuel. Hannah died in 1828 at the age of 24, leaving Lemuel, who died in 1842, and three children: Ebenezer, Hannah, and Lemuel.

Benjamin Billings was born in 1765 and he married Susanna Weld (of the Weld family) in 1790. They lived on the other side of Center Street (at Lagrange) on 35 acres. His business, directly across the street, boasted a sign which read "Benj. Billings- leather dresser and breeches maker". He tanned sheep and goat skins, as well as wool. Susanna's father, David Weld, owned hundreds of acres of land which helped to fuel the skins for Benjamins' factories. During the Federalist Era, 1790 or so, when money became of value, he gathered quite a bit of it and extended his property up to Bellevue Hill and down to the Charles River. He was well regarded by his townsmen and was treasurer of the school district. With 8 children, it was the least he could do!

It was not easy importing what he needed as the "highway" that was Center Street was alternately muddy, rutted, dusty, or frozen. It twisted and turned and was quite a rough road. There was no money for road development then as the country had to establish itself after the Revolutionary War, fight the War of 1812, and then the Civil War. Not to mention the fact that paper currency was still fairly worthless at this time as there was not yet the gold to back it. As late as 1897 the road was still being plowed by oxen after a huge snowfall!

Benjamin Billings died in 1829 and his youngest son, Joseph, the willing heir, was not yet quite old enough to inherit. So Ebenezer stepped in to fill the gap and expanded the tanning business into Dedham! Both Benjamin and his son Joseph were solid citizens. Theodore Parker, minister and near neighbor, was a close friend of Joseph's. Father and son were both loyal to their parish and their town, accepting volunteer duties where needed. Even their homes were staunch!

The golden age of business in West Roxbury began in 1846, after Andrew Jackson's presidency. Roxbury was granted a city charter, the railroad was completed by 1850, and a considerable number of immigrants had settled in West Roxbury along Baker Street to meet the demand for the railroad. As such there was labor enough for the factories with no thought of a forty-hour week or of labor unions.

By the documents I hold, the latest of the Billings tale ends in 1899 or thereabouts. The factory itself burned down March 4, 1891. But there are so many questions still unanswered by the documents I have retrieved from our archives. What happens to result in a public auction of all these lands and factories in 1878? Where is the family?

What happened? I want to know!!

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