

## Clara Sexton House

By Margaret E. Ingraham with Dr. Charles Stearns

According to Hazen's History of Billerica, the acreage, of which the house lot was a part, was owned by Jacob Brown who sold his granted rights to the location to John Stearns in 1663 and then disappeared from town. Stearns died in 1668 at the age around thirty-seven. No mention is made again of the location until 1723 when three quarters of an acre of this land was sold by the above John Stearns' son John and his wife Johannah "with buildings thereon" for thirty pounds to Jacob and Rebecca (Patten) Danforth. (Jacob was the grandson of the illustrious Jonathan Danforth who had "tied the town together" by means of his expert surveying of the early land grants.)

The framing of the house indicates that at this time it was of saltbox construction. Jacob, a blacksmith, lived here most of his married life. He died at fifty-seven, in 1756, predeceasing his wife by almost twenty years. David, one of his two remaining sons, in 1763, sold his share of his father's estate to the Reverend Henry Cumings who remodeled the home. Reverend Cumings, then twenty-four years old, had just become the Pastor of the First Parish Church in which position he was to remain actively for fifty years, with eleven years in semi-retirement until his death in 1823. He was a distinguished scholar, a leading figure in American Revolutionary affairs, and the author of over twenty published sermons, some of which are preserved at our Historical House. As was typical at the time, he numbered his sermons and delivered them at intervals, using each several times. He was married three (some report four) times and was the father of five children.

In a "Reminiscence" a granddaughter recalled Reverend Cumings as being "uniformly kind, but in those days any approach to familiarity would have been considered highly improper". She recorded several instances which show her grandfather in a different light. For example, he often spoke with deep emotion of his first wife. On Christmas Eve he trimmed his rooms, as she had done, with fresh evergreens, having at times gone far to obtain the double spruce which he thought the most beautiful. It is pleasant to surmise that he would be pleased to see that the custom of this type of decoration still continued at his old home. Continuing, his grand-daughter recounts, "He was a man of strong passions and quick temper but had learned the lesson of self-control. In his younger days he used tobacco freely, but when convinced it was injurious, he abandoned it; but he said it was like cutting off his right arm". A word to the wise! The scholarly reverend was buried in the South Cemetery under an impressive table stone, unique in Billerica.

After the reverend died in 1823, the property was bought and sold by several traders, eventually being purchased in 1840 by a young physician, Joseph F. Hill, who had been apprenticed to our Dr. Zadok Howe. After Dr. Hill's death in 1849, the premises were used by a succession of physicians-- Doctors Bickford, Herrick, Bundy, Monroe and Hubbard.

Interestingly, Dr. Hubbard advertised in a newspaper that he would care for insane people. It is said that the building was a "mad house" for a short time. Depressing thought! Visitors sometimes speculate on where in the house Dr. Hubbard kept his patients.

Fortunately, in 1879 the house once again became a private residence with no 'ghosts' surviving. It was purchased by prosperous farmer and land speculator Anthony Jones; in whose family it remained for thirty-seven years until 1916. Then for several years it was the home of Harry W. Essex, a well-known highway surveyor for the town. The home was sold in 1920 to William Henry and Clara Edith Sexton. We have but scant information on Clara's father, Patrick W. Tully. We do know that he was born in Ireland and married in Billerica in 1854. He was in the Volunteer Militia of Massachusetts during the Civil War and received support money for two daughters, the money being paid to their maternal grandmother. More is known, however, of Clara's mother, Clarissa A. Gustus. She was born in Boston in 1832, daughter of Jacob Frederick and Maine native Mary Colby Gustus.

The records show that Jacob was born in 1794 in Copenhagen, Denmark, came to Boston and married in Billerica in 1826. He was engaged in what appears to have been a successful business as a "hatter". After he died in 1850 at fifty-six (his residence being at the time at 267 Andover Road) his widow Mary married Hadley Crosby of Billerica in 1859.

Clarissa died at twenty-eight, leaving two-year old Clara and a sister who were brought up by their grandmother, Mary Colby Gustus Crosby. Both sisters later adopted the name Crosby.

There is little information on Clara's husband William, remembered as Billy by older residents. He was born in Concord, Massachusetts in 1855 and married Clara in Billerica in 1876. It is thought that his parents were born in Ireland. Like the original occupant, Jacob Danforth, William was a blacksmith. Their son Frederic was born in 1879 and died a university president, in Wolfville, Canada in 1955. This explains the recent, unexpectedly generous gift of Anne 8. Sexton of our beautiful Sexton sideboard, since donor Anne was the second wife of Frederic. By the time (1920) that William and Clara purchased the home on 36 Concord Road, he was sixty-five and Clara was sixty-two. Here they remained for the rest of their lives, Clara dying at seventy-eight on April 10, 1936, and William following six months later at eighty- one. They are buried in the North Cemetery.

As pleasant as it would be if we knew more of the details of their lives during the sixteen years they spent at their 'new' home, it is evident that Clara showed her love for the house in arranging for it to be preserved for the enjoyment of future generations. In her will she bequeathed the dwelling house, land and buildings to the Billerica Historical Society, as a Historical Landmark, with the provision that if the Society should be unable to maintain the property, should be conveyed to the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities of Boston "to be held as a Historical Landmark". Fortunately, even in difficult times, the Society has been able to maintain what became the Clara E. Sexton Memorial. She would indeed be proud if she could "drop in" at an Open House and witness the devotion which the Historical Society has had for her generous gift.

May it ever be thus!