

VINSON FARM

By Ellen Knight¹

The west side hills of Winchester were an active agricultural area through the mid-20th century, involving one of Winchester's most famous families.

Aerial photographs from 1951 show wide open spaces along Ridge and High streets where residents still owned farms. The Locke Farm, a remnant of which survives as the Wright-Locke Farm, was one. In the early 20th century, Thomas Cox was a market gardener on High Street Extension. Right around the corner on High Street, Thomas Vinson was another.



Thomas Vinson is remembered today primarily as the father and grandfather of the champion skaters Maribel Vinson Owen and her daughters Maribel and Lawrence Owen. Professionally, he was a lawyer and, in his own time, was well known as a speaker at Town Meeting. His wife Gertrude Cliff Vinson was a Radcliffe graduate (magna cum laude in 1902) and a suffragette who not only was a member of the college Equal Suffrage League but also served as secretary of the Massachusetts Suffrage Association.²

In 1911, a year after marrying, Vinson bought property on High Street including a lot with a house, barn, shed, and about 9 ½ acres of land. He also bought another lot with a house, barn, shed, and 40 acres of land (9 acres, 23 acres mowing, 4 acres meadow, and 14 acres pasture).

One lot lay to the north of High Street, where the family had its home, called The Locusts. The other Vinson lot lay across the street and extended south to the country club (roughly within the bounds of Mayflower Road) and abutted the sites of the current West Side Fire Station and Mullen Playground.



The property not only abutted Locke land, it once was Locke land. The Vinson house was built by Josiah Locke, brother of Asa Locke, whose farmhouse is now part of the Wright-Locke Farm. In 1913, the assessors' records list about 46 acres with the same structures as 1911, plus two

henneries. The henneries suggest something which is confirmed in records at the Winchester Archival Center, the Vinsons got into farming.



Looking north up Ridge Street with High Street entering from the right with the Locke farm (left) and the Josiah Locke / Vinson house (center).

Preserved in the Vinson Owen Collection in the Archival Center is a ledger in which Thomas Vinson kept records of his receipts and the expenses of running a small farm. The ledger begins with 1911, suggesting that the Boston-born Vinson may have chosen the Winchester property with the express intent of farming it. In that year he purchased grain and fertilizer, 100 chickens, followed later by 25 hens and 50 chicks, and what looks like “cow medicine,” among other items. Other records show that he owned at least one horse, since there were expenses for horse feed and shoeing. Ledger records of egg sales begin in 1911. In 1912, records for fruits and vegetables begin, including corn, carrots, tomatoes, beans, cucumbers, and peas.

One of Vinson’s important crops was asparagus, for which he kept separate records for many years. One of his early customers for asparagus (among other crops) was the Country Club. He

also sold his produce during the first several years to the Richardson Market (in Winchester), Boston Market, and Cambridge Market.

Vinson's fruit crops, like his vegetables, were varied, including raspberries, strawberries, blackberries, currants, plums, peaches, wild grapes, and different varieties of apples.



Vinson did not sell all his crops at markets. Most of the lines in the ledger record names of individual customers or indicate produce was sold "at roadside" or "at door." In 1925 and some later years, there are notations that it was Maribel, future ice-skating queen, who sold the products. For example, in the strawberries account for June 19, 1925, the entry reads "at door (Maribel) 22 boxes." Maribel was then 13 years old.

The records are more detailed for some years than others. They end with a record for currant sales in 1934, though there is a loose sheet with some figures (mostly apples) for 1944.

The figures for 1914 detail the financial benefits of the Vinson farm. Receipts for eggs, fruits, and vegetables totaled \$791.82. Expenses (such as grain, hens, and seed) totaled \$598.47. To the profit of \$193.35, Vinson added the "value of food used at home if bought," which he figured to be \$181.13 for milk, butter, cream, and eggs. He calculated the total profit at \$374.48.

Other expenses, including help with picking, weeding, and delivering, show that he did not manage all the work of the farm alone but hired boys to help. The farm, like other farms around town, was thus a seasonal economic help to local youth.

It is not clear if Vinson downscaled farming in the mid-1930s or eventually quit. He kept the land throughout his life. In 1951, the year before he died, Maribel was the owner of record, and the estate still included 40.7 acres of land and one of the henneries besides the house and garage (the second house ceased to be listed back in 1914).

In 1952, when her father and husband both died, Maribel Owen did not need a farm. Not only a skater, she had busy careers as a skating coach and writer, and she had two young girls to raise. During the 1950s she contracted with the Robert Stone Company to sell off lots, which Stone advertised as the Maribel Vinson Acres. Twenty-six lots along the south side of High Street and both sides of Lockeland Road were sold by 1956.

A plan to run Vinson and Maribel roads into the property from Lockeland, however, never materialized. Instead, Mayflower, Plymouth, and Pocahontas roads appeared in 1958 to access new residences. Whatever plans Owen had, they ended with her tragic death on the way to the World Championships in Prague with her daughters.

Owen did not sell the old home at 195 High St. The Josiah Locke house, one henery, and about 2 acres of land remained in the family through the death of Gertrude Vinson (1969), the last surviving member of her family.

A set of aerial photographs of the Vinson estate taken in 1951 show large tracts of undeveloped land up and down both Ridge and High streets. One photo has some lines drawn on it over the land across from 195 High St., suggestive of street planning. Except for Lockeland Road, which appeared the next year, the penciled lines do not correspond with the streets eventually laid out.

All the photos capture the look of the hill on the eve of massive housing development, not only on the Vinson estate but all around that area, and document the loss of expansive wooded and agricultural land that came with the second half of the 20th century.



Looking east down High Street from Ridge Street, with the Vinson House left and the area known as The Flats in the background



Looking southwest along High Street to Ridge Street, with a corner of the Vinson House on the right

¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on June 11, 2007. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² Obituary *The Winchester Star*, Oct. 23, 1969. Before her marriage, she invaded the floor of the Boston Stock Exchange and the Chamber of Commerce to distribute leaflets, according to Betty A. DeBerg, *Ungodly Women: Gender and the First Wave of American Fundamentalism*, 2000, p. 33.