

## **MYOPIA HILL & THE MYOPIA CLUB**

**By Ellen Knight<sup>1</sup>**

With a splendid view overlooking the Mystic Lakes, extending out to the Boston skyline, why was the hill west of those lakes ever called Myopia?

The answer lies in the history of Winchester baseball, its nearsighted players, and a marriage which linked one of the young men to a wealthy local benefactor.

The hill was known to seventeenth-century colonists as Squaw Sachem's farm, since the area west of the lakes was that which the native leader reserved for herself after deeding other local territory to the men of Charlestown. After her death in 1650, her lands went to Jotham Gibbons and then to his daughter, Love Fowle, and to her children. About 1709-1717 Deacon Joseph Hartwell purchased much of it. From the Hartwells, this area went in 1783 to Seth Wyman.

Through all this time, to judge by the old maps, if any of these owners built houses, they did so along Cambridge Street and High Street. Atop the hill farmers had houses along Ridge Street and Hutchinson Road. The wooded hillside evidently remained undeveloped until the late nineteenth century.

In the 1860s a dentist named Bartlett built on the hill on Arlington Street, on the site of the later Schrafft estate, and was apparently quite isolated, his nearest neighbor being Stephen Swan who had a house at the base of the hill, at the town line (now the country club). Probably the oldest extent house on the hill was built by Henry Hight about 1880. Though accessed from Cambridge Street, it was set far enough back from the street to be now numbered on Swan Road (#5).

The hill apparently did not take a name from any of the land owners until Edward Everett (1794-1865)—former president of Harvard University, Governor of Massachusetts, U.S. Senator, Secretary of State, minister to Great Britain, candidate for vice-president, and orator at Gettysburg along with President Lincoln—purchased a considerable area of the original Squaw Sachem farm on the hill plus land abutting the lake from the Wyman and Gardner families in 1858. The hill was called Everett Heights prior to the coming of the Myopia Club. Everett did not build on the hill but rather on “the pond plain” next to the lakes, in the present Robinson Park area.

### **THE MYOPIA CLUB**

The Myopia Club began with a group of boys accustomed to playing together, at first around Wedge Pond where they could go boating and where they built a tennis court during the 1870s. When they took up baseball, they took on a name. Charter member Frederick Prince related that, upon deciding to play a match at Lexington, “it was necessary that the club which we had formed should have a name, so someone selected (as we four brothers and others present were all short-

sighted) the name 'Myopia,' and a large red banner with black letters 'Myopia' was hung out when the game took place."<sup>2</sup> That was in July 1876.<sup>3</sup>

The town's baseball diamond was on Bacon Field at the corner of Church and Bacon Streets. But the club acquired a clubhouse on the hill. Dedicated in 1879, it was built by David N. Skillings, whose son-in-law W. D. Sanborn was a charter member of the club.



The house, visible from the railroad, reportedly had a wide verandah, living room, billiard room, card parlors, and cool bedrooms. Adjacent to it were stables, tennis courts, a shooting box, and acres of woodland.

When the club incorporated in the fall of 1879, its stated purpose was "for encouraging athletic exercise and yachting and establishing and maintaining a place for the use of a reading room and for social gatherings."

In 1882 more members were interested in hunting than in playing ball and changed the name of the club to the Myopia Fox Hounds. Although foxes were said to have been plentiful on the hill, soon members moved on to other grounds, particularly in Hamilton.

In 1883, after just four years on the hill, the club gave up the hillside house and grounds. The clubhouse was sold and turned into a residence. Eventually the original house was torn down and a new house built on the site (or the foundation), now numbered 27 Myopia Road. The adjacent house, 31 Myopia Road, is allegedly built on the site (or foundation) of the club stables.

The Brookline Country Club is generally known as the first (or oldest) county club in the country, though Myopia might have a claim. The formation of the Brookline club in 1882 is directly attributable to the success of the Myopia Club. When organized in 1882, its members included a number of Myopians. Frederick Prince recalled that "the Myopia Club at Winchester had become so popular and its membership had been so enlarged that the members were anxious to find a place nearer Boston. It was then that J. Murray Forbes and Robert C. Hooper obtained an option on Clyde Park in Brookline, and they suggested that we transfer the Myopia Club there. This we decided to do, and all of us became members of The Country Club. At the first meeting, when the by-laws were accepted, there was a discussion as to whether to call it The Country Club or Myopia, but the former name was finally chosen."

According to Forbes, the Myopia Club, while maintaining a separate existence, for years had close relations with the Brookline Country Club, hunting from there. There was a Myopia Building at the Brookline club, Forbes wrote, "removed to the rear of a new building to be used by the

Myopia members and henceforth was to be occupied by the grooms.” It served as kennels and a harness room before later being converted into locker rooms for the indoor tennis courts.

As parent to the Brookline Country Club, it is therefore justifiable to call the Myopia Club in Winchester the first country club, though the club in Brookline was first to take the name.

### SUCCESSORS TO THE MYOPIA CLUB IN WINCHESTER

After the departure of the Myopians, clubs for individual sports were formed in Winchester. The Wedgemere Tennis Club, formed in 1886, maintained six courts (2 cinder and four grass) at Wedge Pond. It was succeeded by the Calumet Club, also located at Wedge Pond. (Since 1917, the tennis courts at Wedge Pond have been Town-owned public courts.)

The focus for boating moved from Wedge Pond, where there were once 25 rowing and sailing craft at the close of the 1870s, to the Mystic Lakes with the formation of the Shu-shu-gah Canoe Club in the late 1880s and the Winchester Boat Club in 1900. Both clubs also built tennis courts.

The new sport of golf encouraged yet another club. Formed in 1897, the Golf Club originally rented land for its game on vacant land along Pond Street and Woodside Road. After five years, the club was incorporated as the Winchester Country Club. It bought the Stephen Swan estate at the base of Myopia Hill at the Arlington-Winchester line, used the Swan house as a clubhouse, and laid out a nine-hole course (later developed into an 18-hole course), as well as tennis courts.



### MYOPIA HILL DEVELOPMENT



*Myopia Hill viewed from Bacon Street. The McCall mansion is prominent on the left.*

Until the present century Myopia Hill was a wooded hillside with barely a structure to be seen upon it. When the Myopia clubhouse was erected there in 1879, it was reportedly a conspicuous sight from the railroad and the talk of the town.

The clubhouse was not the first building on the hill, for some houses had been built along High and Arlington streets before 1900, but planned development of the land did not begin until after the Myopia house had demonstrated the beauty of the siting, particularly for the wealthy looking to build prominent homes.

According to one history of the Myopia Club,<sup>4</sup> David N. Skillings, who developed Rangeley and built the Myopia clubhouse, planned to sell house lots nearby. But since Skillings died in 1880, the development had to wait for other planners.

They came along in the persons of George Fernald and Samuel McCall. These two men acquired the land bounded by Cambridge and Arlington streets and Myopia Road (excluding one Arlington Street lot), plus the available land along the northern side of Myopia Road (not including the Myopia Club lot and two other lots).

McCall and Fernald hired the Olmsted Brothers firm of landscape architects to plan the development. The plan, drawn by landscape architect Edward P. Adams, shows two new roads named for the developers, Fernway and McCall Road, and a spacious arrangement of 31 lots, most about one to four acres in size. Adams even sketched suggested locations for houses and stables.

## MCCALL HOUSE

The first to build according to this plan was McCall himself. When he first came to Winchester about 1881, McCall (1851-1923) lived on Washington Street and practiced law. He embarked on a political career when elected to the state House of Representatives and was a U.S. congressman when he built his Myopia Hill house.



*The McCall mansion (above)  
and Elder home*



McCall chose a prime site overlooking the Mystic Lakes with a view of Boston. His lot (now five lots) included almost four acres stretching from McCall Road down to Cambridge Street. His house, which still stands, was designed by Robert Coit and was one of the most prestigious in town, particularly from 1916 to 1919 when it served as the governor's mansion.

The next to build, in 1905, was the distinguished lawyer (president of the Boston Bar Association) Samuel Elder, also a state representative and a leader in peace societies. He combined two of the lots between Fernway and Cambridge Street and also hired architect Robert Coit to design his house, called Grey Rocks. Many entertainments were given there, and guests included Elder's classmate from Yale, William Howard Taft. This house stood until 1978 when destroyed by fire.

## BUILDING CONTINUES

During the first 15 years after the plan was made, only three other houses were built in the development. 16 Myopia Road was built around 1908 on the lot north of McCall's. 16 McCall Road was built two lots south of McCall's in 1914.

The largest lot, adjacent to Elder's Cambridge Street lot, was taken by businessman Jere Downs who built a mansion, one of the show places of Winchester, at 1 Arlington St. The house was subsequently home to the Medical Missionaries of Mary.



*1 Arlington Street (left) and 45 Arlington Street*

Another show place was built on the hill in 1916 by candy manufacturer William Schrafft at 45 Arlington Street. This one, however, was not built on McCall-Fernald land but rather on a site where a lone house had stood since the 1860s. The new 26-room house was built in the Elizabethan and Tudor style.

Subsequent building on the hill did not go quite as originally planned. Few of Adams's lot lines can be traced on the current map, where much smaller lots are shown. Where Adams sketched six lots between Myopia and McCall roads (east of the Schrafft house), 15 houses have been built. South of Fernway, Adams planned only eight houses, but so many were built that Wood Lane was laid out in 1953 to provide additional access. To the north of the McCall-Fernald development, Swan Road appeared in 1911 and was accepted in 1917.

Visions of Myopia Hill have changed over the years. The Myopia Club's vision of a recreational area overlooking the lakes lasted only a few years but was succeeded by the organization of the Winchester County Club as a resort for local sportsmen just to the south of Arlington Street.

Adams's plan for the McCall-Fernald development did not work out according to plan. Nevertheless, the vision of developing Myopia Hill into a neighborhood of exceptional homes was indeed fulfilled.

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<sup>1</sup> This article © 2018 is a revision of earlier articles by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on June 18 and June 21, 1999. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Allan Forbes, *Early Myopia*, 1942.

<sup>3</sup> According to *The Middlesex Journal*, July 22, 1876, the “hastily constructed” Myopia nine, captained by Charles Prince, played against the Menotomy Club of Arlington in Arlington in mid-July.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Weeks’ *Myopia: A Centennial Chronicle 1875–1975*, Hamilton, MA, 1975.