

WELLESLEY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

Historical Assessment and Recommendation:

The Beebe House 53 Grove Street, Wellesley

Introduction

At its meeting of February 5, 2013, the Wellesley Historical Commission declared the Beebe House, an 1876 residence located at 53 Grove Street, to be a structure of significant importance in the history of the town of Wellesley. The Commission voted to issue a statement to that effect immediately, with a more detailed report to follow. This document is that report.

Architectural Interest

The architectural form of the Beebe House can be traced back to the earliest vernacular houses of the Colonial period. It is a gable front entry, a type remaining in existence in Wellesley in the Cottage Street Historic District. This version has an added wing, and as is appropriate for a house of significance in its day, it has embellishments at the rake of each of its gables and at their eaves. The former include timber arches at the rake and eaves of each of its three gables, and decorative brackets under its cornice. In the front gable of the house, there is distinctive infill between the curved timbers, including intricate filigree at the peak and eaves. In contrast to the simpler workingmen's cottages on Cottage Street, this house was intended for an owner of substance.

The Beebe House has been adapted to meet the changing needs of owners since it was built in 1876. The early Victorian Period was an eclectic architectural period, and the years since the house's construction have seen numerous stylistic changes, including most noticeably bay and other window extensions and larger additions to the rear. The house is a tangible record of how, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, buildings were adapted to the needs of changing owners, rather than discarded.

The House and Its Neighborhood

The Beebe House is one of only two pre-1900 residences that have survived the commercial development of Wellesley Square. The origins of Wellesley Square can be traced back to 1774 when the first meetinghouse was built on the current site of the Wellesley Village Congregational Church. The area remained otherwise entirely residential until 1840 when the first commercial building was constructed on the northeast corner of Washington and Grove Streets.

Through the rest of the nineteenth century, as Wellesley Square continued to grow, it remained an equal mix of residential and commercial buildings. That began to change in the early 1900s as the stretch of Washington Street east of the main intersection took its modern form. This shift further accelerated in the 1920s with the development of Washington Street south of the intersection and west along Central Street. During this time, many residences were torn down and replaced with large business blocks. The only houses that still stand within Wellesley Square are the Beebe House and the Currier House (the Turnabout Shoppe) at 30 Grove Street.

The House and Wellesley Public Schools

The house at 53 Grove Street was constructed in 1876 by Daniel Grant, who built a number of homes in the area, especially on the tract of land between Washington Street and Grove Street near Wellesley Square. That same year, Grant sold the property to Benjamin H. Sanborn, who had just arrived from Vermont with his new wife. Sanborn entered a career publishing textbooks, of which he produced more than two hundred titles before his retirement in 1913. He also served on the Wellesley school board for many years and helped organize the Wellesley National Bank, serving as its first vice-president.

The House and Wellesley College

The second owners of 53 Grove Street were Captain John Allen Beebe (1830 – 1907) and his wife, and it is their name which is now attached to the residence. The Beebes purchased the house in 1893 from Benjamin Sanborn and his wife. Like the Sanborns, the Beebes were successful and wealthy. Captain Beebe had made a considerable fortune in a twelve-year career as a whaling captain on Nantucket. Their only child, a daughter, Alice (1874 – 1966), entered Wellesley College in 1892, and in her second year the Beebes moved to Wellesley to be close

to her. They used the Grove Street house as a winter residence keeping their Nantucket property as a summer residence. Captain Beebe died in 1907 but his widow or his daughter owned the Wellesley property another thirty years. In 1937 it was sold in quick succession to Captain Flagg and then to Helen Temple Cooke, the longtime owner of Dana Hall School. The Beebes were Town residents for 43 years. In 1932 their daughter took vows as a nun at the convent school of St. Anne in Arlington teaching English and German.

The Beebes are remembered most notably as important benefactors of Wellesley College. In his will of 1907 Captain Beebe left the financially strapped institution the very large bequest of \$80,000. The College trustees divided the gift. One half was allocated to meet an imminent deadline for a challenge-gift by Andrew Carnegie for the construction of the Main Library and the other half for a new dormitory for 150 women subsequently called Beebe Hall (opened in 1908). The Beebe gift did much to stabilize the precarious financial condition of the College which less than a decade earlier had seemed headed for bankruptcy. The Main Library laid the foundation for the College's scholarly reputation and the dormitory met a critical need for expansion in its student numbers.

The House and Dana Hall School

With its acquisition by Helen Temple Cooke in 1937, the Beebe House became part of the facilities of Dana Hall School. In a letter to Cooke dated Oct. 12, 1937, Alice Beebe wrote, "Ever since you took over the Hannah [?] place I have wished that you might have mine also. With every good wish for you and the house, Very sincerely yours, Alice G. Beebe."

The Beebe Cottage, as it came to be known, mainly served as a dormitory for students and is the only remaining Dana Hall cottage. At one time the school owned 17 cottages along Grove Street and Eastman Circle (the site of Wellesley Green). The Beebe House and Bardwell Auditorium mark where the old campus was located and are Dana Hall's only physical connection to the early school.

In 1973, having completed its move to its present location further south on Grove Street, Dana Hall School sold the house to William White, owner of the Wellesley Inn.

Summary

The Wellesley Historical Commission deems the Beebe House to have significant value as a historic asset of the town because of its:

- architectural significance
- prominent location in the center of town
- presence as a reminder of an earlier era of village life in Wellesley Square
- associations with Wellesley's rich history of education, finance, and philanthropy.

The Commission recommends that every effort be made to assure the house's preservation and rehabilitation.

Wellesley Historical Commission
David Wright, Chairman
Lawrence McNally, Vice Chairman
April 4, 2013