

A Brief History of the Jacob Messer Farm

By Jim Perkins

During the 1840s, Jacob Messer farmed atop Morgan Hill near James and Micajah Morgan. Exchanging labor, implements, and oxen, the three men raised and sheared sheep, planted potatoes, harvested and processed grains, and cut timber and cordwood. Family misfortune prompted each to move down to Main Street (whose extension is now called “Little Sunapee Road”), where Jacob Messer farmed 90 acres next to today’s Spring Ledge Farm, James Morgan farmed 122 acres nearby, and Micajah Morgan farmed 60 acres—much of it behind his house, which is now Tracy Library.

They were among the more prosperous of New London’s 136 farms in 1860, after which the number of farms declined as grain production shifted to the Midwest and demand for wool collapsed after the Civil War. In 1865 there were over 2,000 sheep grazing on 105 farms in New London; five years later there were 575 sheep on just 57 of its farms. Jacob Messer tended 30 sheep in 1870, but he also raised beef cattle, working oxen, and dairy cows—along with wheat, corn, potatoes, hay, maple sugar, and forest products. Altogether these items yielded \$1,106 in annual income.

Jacob Messer’s land on Little Sunapee Road was first farmed by James Colby, who moved to New London from Hopkinton, New Hampshire, in 1792. James was a brother of Joseph Colby, patriarch of the Colby family in New London, but James stayed only five years before returning to his native town. In 1809, however, James’ 16-year-old son, James Colby, Jr., settled at the homestead started by his father. He and his wife improved more of its acreage and had eight children before moving back to Hopkinton around 1825. The property then reverted to Joseph Colby, who sold it to Joseph Herrick, but taxes on the 90-acre parcel were often split between Herrick and Moses Adams, Jr., who leased a portion.

In 1855 Herrick sold the James Colby homestead farm to George Gardner, principal at the struggling New London Literary and Scientific Institution. A year later, Gardner swapped properties with Jacob Messer on Morgan Hill. Messer enlarged his holdings during the 1860s by purchasing the remnants of the Moses Adams farm across the road and two parcels back on Morgan Hill.

After Jacob Messer’s death in 1871, his oldest son, Edwin, paid \$2,000 to his siblings for their inherited shares of the property. He carried on his father’s work, including a dairy with five cows, and harvesting the same crops and wood products. In 1888, however, Edwin curtailed his farming and added a second story to the James Colby house, which in 1890 he opened to summer guests as Pleasant View House, offering fine views of Mount Kearsarge and Colby Hill from its new porch. The property was divided after Edwin’s death in 1927, with Pleasant



PLEASANT VIEW HOUSE,
EDWIN F. MESSER, Proprietor.

Visitors can testify that this house is not misnamed. Besides a wide range of mountains and hills it commands one of the most attractive prospects of the village, as well as a glimpse of Lake Sunapee. Located about midway between the village and Little Lake Sunapee, it combines the advantage of nearness to church, post-office, and stores with opportunity for boating, bathing, and fishing. Tennis court and croquet set supplied. The chambers are newly furnished, and will accommodate eighteen to twenty guests, whom every effort is made to please.

View House passing to his three daughters and its farmland passing to his youngest son, Charles Messer; then living across the road on the old Moses Adams property. In 1939 Charles bought his older brother’s Highland House, another summer guest house located just down the road at “Bucklin’s Corner.”

After a year at UNH, Robert Messer bought the Highland House and all the farmland from Charles, his father, in 1941. Bob expanded their milk processing, bottling, and delivery business. In the 1950s, they milked 80 cows and sometimes imported milk from Vermont to meet local demand. When asked in 1977 about his farm’s future, Bob said, “When I retire, it’ll probably be turned into a real estate development.” Between 1950 and 1982, he witnessed a 70% decline in New Hampshire pasture land and an 87% decline in cropland — even as the state’s population increased by 80% and New London’s nearly doubled. Local food production was disappearing.

Messer’s Dairy was the last of New London’s four commercial dairies. After auctioning his cows to the federal government during the Whole Herd Buyout of 1986, Bob Messer sold baled hay from his fields until his death in 2003. His wife, Mary, kept boarders at Highland House until her own death in 2014. Then her estate sold the boarding house with its 170 acres, severing the property’s link to the Jacob Messer family after 159 years.

Jim Perkins has served as New London Town Archivist since 2009 and works as a preservation consultant and independent historian. He has lived near the Jacob Messer Farm and enjoyed its woodland trails since 1993.