

Finding Sarah

Part 2 - The Farmer's Daughter

By Joe Doherty

In 2004, without warning, the Pleasant Valley Country Club demolished a 19th-century barn on the south side of Armsby Road, across the street from the Vaillancourt Folk Art shop.



Pleasant Valley was within its legal rights to tear it down -- the barn stood on club-owned land. Why it was deemed necessary to destroy the historic structure remains something of an open question. Nothing has been built in its stead. The stone foundations can still be seen, collecting autumn leaves.

It's been said that offers by local people to purchase and preserve the barn were declined. Why, no one seems to know. The only certainty is that one morning folks who had passed by that barn every day of their lives awoke to find it gone.

The barn's destruction marked the loss of one of the last visual reminders that Armsby Road was once part of a thriving 19th-century farm complex. Even the indignity of Route 146 bisecting the property in the 1950s had taken less of a toll on the area's pastoral character. So long as the barn remained, one could still wander up Armsby Road and with a mere glimpse of its weathered exterior recall an older, simpler way of life.

The barn was built in 1839 by Joshua Armsby Jr. Armsby, like many men of his era, was skilled in several trades. He is described as a carpenter, a machinist and a mill superintendent -- but he was a farmer first and foremost. At a time when many Blackstone Valley men were abandoning the self-sufficiency of farm life for the wage-labor lifestyle of mill work, Joshua Armsby kept one foot planted firmly in each world. He was employed as a superintendent at the Wilkinsonville mills, but he never became dependent on the mills for his livelihood. In case of a bad economy, when mill work might slow or cease and fortunes be set adrift, Armsby always had his farm as an anchor.

He poured the best years of his life into that farm. The land had been passed to him from his father, Joshua Armsby Sr., who, according to the Reverends Benedict and Tracy in the *History of the Town of Sutton*, "was educated for the ministry, but for some reason never engaged in the duties of his profession; but retired, lived and died on this beautiful farm."

In 1823 or 1824, on the occasion of his second marriage (his first wife, Martha McLellan Armsby, died at Smithfield, Rhode Island in 1816, ten days after the birth of their second son), the younger Armsby erected a large, two-story double-pile house with a side ell on the property. He was about 36 years old.

By 1830, Joshua Armsby's farm encompassed 93 acres of land. His possessions included two oxen, four cows, two hogs and one "pleasure horse." Five years later he built a machine shop on the property, and in 1839, the "large New England barn." Sutton Valuations and Tax lists note that by 1841 Armsby had added three more head of cattle and another 30 acres of land. Over the next decade he improved his domain by acquiring even more land and livestock (see "The Industrial Revolution in Sutton, Massachusetts" by Nora Pat Small, www.eiu.edu/~localite/journal/2000/suttonmass.pdf)

The Armsby family seemed to expand at a similar rate. Joshua's first marriage had produced two children -- Lewis and Joshua McClellan Armsby. Fifteen months after his marriage to a 24-year-old neighbor, Sarah Woodbury (whose family lived in a house near the Armsby burying ground), Joshua Armsby became a father again. The child's name was Fayette. The following year, in 1825,

Benjamin Armsby was born. Two years later, George Augustine Armsby. And in 1830, John Dudley Armsby.

In 1832, at the age of 45, Joshua fathered a young lady of our acquaintance named Sarah Elizabeth Armsby. His youngest daughter, Mary Anna, was born in 1835.

Joshua Armsby was a man for his times. He had a large house full of children, fields teeming with corn, and a barnful of horses and cows. He was an accomplished farmer and mill official. The respect he commanded in the region is evidenced by his election three times to the Massachusetts state legislature and the various town offices he held.

The razing of Joshua Armsby's barn last year was an irreversible blow to Sutton history. But even as this local landmark fell victim to bulldozers, a new testament to the Armsby farming tradition has emerged from the distant past.

In February 2003, Sarah Elizabeth Armsby's 155-year-old school composition book appeared on the eBay internet auction site and is now in my possession (for a complete account, please see Part One of "Finding Sarah" in the Summer 2005 edition of the Sutton Historical Society Bulletin). Among the several essays written by 18-year-old Sarah in the autumn of 1850 is a vivid description of corn-husking, a farming activity very familiar to her, no doubt because she partook of it many times in her own father's barn.

Sarah entitled her essay, "A Plea For Huskings." She wrote it in response to an article she read wherein "a writer of the present age" had declared corn-husking an activity unfit for proper young ladies. Sarah Armsby, who prided herself on being a proper young lady *and* a seasoned corn-husker, had a thing or two to say about that.

Still, it was school work, so she strived to maintain an objective, scholarly tone. Luckily for us, her sentimental associations shine through for a colorful peek at the farm culture of her youth:

A Plea For Huskings

Although husking has been denounced by a writer of the present age as a most unladylike amusement yet I as a farmer's daughter shall venture to plead for it.

Nothing in the way of recreation can afford more pleasure or be of more benefit to the health and at the same time do more good than this almost obsolete practice of ladies assisting in husking the corn which their fathers and brothers have cultivated. What there is unladylike in it I cannot perceive, surely stripping the soft, silky husks from an ear of corn is a much more suitable amusement than many others which are allowed to be proper by all.

But aside from all this there are so many advantages connected with it that it demands our attention. If one has the blues, gentleman

or lady as the case may be, let them take a few kindred spirits and form a husking party. The blues will disappear as if by magic and in the animation which succeeds all troubles will be forgotten, care will be banished from the mind, the health will be greatly improved, and when they return to their former labors it will be with improved faculties of mind and body.

I do not know that I can better illustrate this than by relating an instance which once fell under my notice. A number of scholars exhausted from mental labor were requested by a pupil of the same school to assist in husking some corn which he had gathered the previous evening; the only [time] they had was during the intermission at noon, but promised him they would come.

Therefore, as soon as was convenient after the school dismissed they set out for the place of meeting which was at a little distance and on the outskirts of the village where the school was located. The corn had been flung in a pile on the side of a hill where the sun shone warm and bright and a flock of blackbirds in the neighboring trees made the air resound with melody.

All employed themselves immediately upon the corn and their spirits rose in proportion to the speed with which they used their hands, and they worked with so good a will that when the hour which they had to spend was gone, the corn was husked excepting that which was reserved for seed and this was braided, perhaps not in the most scientific manner but in one which answered all purposes.

The corn had been husked, something had been done which was of some use, and the pupils returned to their school with light hearts and cheerful looks. Their minds which had been bent as it were from labor rebounded as if a weight had been taken from them and instead of aching heads and weary looking countenances, the cobwebs seemed to have been shaken from their brains and their looks indicated a high degree of happiness.

The lessons for that day were committed to memory with a facility which surprised them; and that hour was spent so pleasantly that it will be long remembered by those who were there present ...

*Sarah E. Armsby
Sutton, 1850*

The next time you happen to be driving or walking past the old Armsby house (now home of Vaillancourt Folk Art), look across the street to where once a tall, wooden barn reared against the slanting New England sky. Remind yourself that everything within eyeshot was once owned by Joshua Armsby. Remember this industrious farmer of old Sutton, and remember the farmer's daughter, too, whose words have helped to keep the memory of her father's beautiful farm alive.

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