

The Ulmer Place (Hinsdale/Putnam/Robinson Farm)
355 Robinson Rd, Hinsdale, MA

The Tract Origins

The Ulmer place on Robinson Road in Hinsdale is located on a mile-long slope extending westerly from the Housatonic River East Branch. It lies in a section that was originally a part of a huge tract of 9423 acres in an area once called the Ashuelot Equivalent. The tract was initially marked out of province-owned wilderness land east of Pittsfield (the Pontoosuc Plantation) by Col. Oliver Partridge in 1743. Col. Partridge of Hatfield, MA was a leading land surveyor in western Massachusetts and active in province affairs in the 1740's to 1770's.

The large tract that the Partridge survey crew created out of the wilderness was done as compensation to a group of proprietors from eastern Massachusetts who once owned land in the Ashuelot River valley of southwestern New Hampshire. Their land rights in that region were cancelled when the Massachusetts-New Hampshire boundary dispute was settled in 1740 in a way that gave the Ashuelot valley lands to New Hampshire land owners. As compensation for their lost Ashuelot land, the Massachusetts General Court granted the losing proprietors the large western Massachusetts tract, hence the name Ashuelot Equivalent. In 1784 it was named Dalton after a Speaker of the House, Tristram Dalton.

Some of the Ashuelot Equivalent proprietors then sold their undivided land shares to other land speculators and settlers. An Edward Dwight of Hatfield owned much of the tract in 1743. Six years later, in 1749, the large tract was divided into separate lots for permanent settlement, lots also probably surveyed by Oliver Partridge, though his survey is apparently lost. The earliest surviving survey is one by Captain Elisha Hawley in 1753. In the part of the old Ashuelot Equivalent lying along the eastern slope of the Tully Mountain-Day Mountain ridge, Hawley's survey created parallelogram-shaped lots of 100 rods, north to south, by 160 rods, east to west, known as "hundred-acre lots". Some contemporary lot boundary lines in Hinsdale still reflect Hawley's survey. For example, the stonewall line between the Ulmer and Tench properties, and the line that is now Longview Avenue and Plunkett Reservoir Road, still persist from the rod-and-chain work of those early survey teams.

The First Settlers

A rough road was cut out over the mountain probably by 1760, the future Robinson Road, although the main route east from Pittsfield through Dalton to Hinsdale skirted around the northern shoulder of Day Mountain in the vicinity of the current railroad tracks. In 1793, Epaphras Curtis, originally from Connecticut, settled at the top of the Tully Mountain ridge on the south side of the rough-cut road about a hundred yards east of the current Allegrone place. A cellar hole could still be found there in the woods in the mid-1900's. The next Curtis family generation moved about a mile eastward down the slope where Epaphras Curtis's son, Anson, built the white house on the southwest corner of Longview Avenue and Curtis St, providing the future name for the street to his house. Anson's location had earlier been known as Merriman's Corner.

Rev. Theodore Hinsdale of Windsor, CT moved to the Robinson Road hillside in 1795, the first known settler of the Ulmer place. The town of Partridgefield, named for Oliver Partridge, had been incorporated in 1771 with a church built at the Peru hilltop. But that location was too far away in wagon-travel days for the people in the Housatonic East Branch river valley, and it was also too far for the Robinson Road area settlers. Consequently in 1795, the families from the two areas immediately east and west of the Housatonic River joined to form a West Parish of Partridgefield. Theodore Hinsdale was one of the spokesmen for the group. He was a justice of the peace, as well as being active in organizing the West Parish church that became the First Congregational Church. In 1804 the new West Parish, including the valley region of Partridgefield and the twenty-four "hundred-acre lots" from the Ashuelot Equivalent, was incorporated as a separate town, named for Theodore Hinsdale. A few years later the remaining East Parish adopted the name Peru.

Theodore Hinsdale lived on the slope for some twenty-three years, dying there in 1818. One of his sons, Theodore, Jr., had become active in a Pittsfield business and moved there. Another son, William, bought a farm on Middlefield Road later known as Riverbend Farm, which had more level and fertile meadows than did his father's slopey tract. None of the Hinsdale family descendants chose to stay at the original Hinsdale place.

About 1820, shortly after Theodore Hinsdale's death, his hillside farm was acquired by John Putnam who had first settled near what is now Plunkett Reservoir and Camp Romaca. In fact, Putnam sold some of his land there to Charles Plunkett, the Hinsdale Broad Mill owner, who wanted to build a reservoir with water to power his village mill. During their years at the site, the Putnam family, for more sheep pasture, acquired additional adjoining land, enlarging the original Theodore Hinsdale farm. John Putnam's son, Henry, inherited the farm on his father's death in 1826. The father's will reported that he owned over two hundred and fifty sheep, showing that the hillside had been largely cleared as pasture for sheep, producing wool for the village mill. An inset of the village of Hinsdale on the Walling 1858 map of Berkshire County shows the Putnam name on the site.

Henry Putnam, an active participant in Hinsdale affairs, ran the farm for thirty-seven years until his death in 1863, when he left it, along with a farm he also owned in Windsor, as an undivided estate to his two married daughters. A special court commission was eventually created to arrange and authorize division of the estate between the two daughters, Julia Putnam Page and Martha Putnam Gleason. Julia's husband, Phinehas Page of Pittsfield, as guardian of their minor sons after her death, arranged for sale of the Hinsdale shares in 1872. The Putnam family ownership thus extended some fifty years from the 1820's to 1870's.

The Robinson Family

The next owners, the Robinson family, acquired the site from the Putnams about 1872. The next atlas depicting Hinsdale, Beers 1876 *Atlas of Berkshire County*, shows the Robinson name there. Calvin R. Robinson, who bought the farm, and his wife Susan Stebbins Robinson, moved to Hinsdale early in the 1870's. They had four sons: Clifford E., Archie D., Calvin C. and Irving F. . These Robinsons were not related to another Robinson family, the brothers Samuel E. and Alec of Pittsfield, who had acquired land on the west side of Plunkett Reservoir by the early 1900's, part of which is now Camp Romaca.

Of the four Robinson brothers, young Calvin ran the farm at first after Calvin R's death, and Clifford was associated with the Crane business in Westfield, MA, but later, in 1899, he moved to the family farm. Archie also lived in the Westfield area and owned land at the top of Tully Mountain. It was probably Archie who developed the stationery store item, the Robinson Reminder, an early pocket-sized booklet of tear-out note slips, a forerunner of today's "stickies."

Clifford E Robinson, who had inherited the farm, operated it as a dairy farm and summer boarding place on what had been the former Hinsdale-then-Putnam homestead. In 1908 he added a nine-room annex for summer guests to the main building, and in 1911 added some small bungalows. His brother Archie, acquired land across the road at the top of the mountain, and in 1911 built the first wooden observation tower there where summer guests used to hike and picnic. The site was locally known as The Ledges. The tower was later destroyed by storms and then re-built by Robert Harrington of Hinsdale who had acquired the hill-top site in 1925.

Newspaper items about Hinsdale in *The Springfield Republican* used to report the names of summer guests at the town's summer boarding houses, and in August 1899 one item listed thirty-four people at the Robinson Farm. In July 1911 the farm had forty-eight guests including Colin Alexander from Kansas who had met his future wife there, Lillie McMakin, another summer boarder at the farm, who came from Spartanburg, South Carolina. The young newly married Alexander couple liked the area so much that in April 1911 they bought some seventeen acres of Clifford Robinson's land further up the slope, part of a small section that Clifford Robinson had bought from Catharine Curry in 1909. The next year in April 1912 they enlarged their holding, buying a small second parcel of about five acres. Beginning probably in 1911, Alexander dismantled two former Robinson Farm summer cottages and re-assembled them on his new property as a summer residence.

Colin Alexander was a professor of English at Baker University in Kansas. Mrs. Alexander (Lillie Carr McMakin) during their summers on the mountain wrote a novel called *Candy* which won a ten-thousand dollar prize in 1926. After Lillie's death in 1944, Colin sold the two parcels to Carl Pierce whose widow, Emily Pierce, donated the first directly to Rev. Samuel Ross and Grace Leonard Swift on his retirement from the ministry so they would have a summer place in Hinsdale. The second parcel she sold to Albert Reinhardt, Sr. to raise funds for supplying electricity to the two cottages on the first parcel. The former Robinson Farm/Alexander bungalows are now the Swift/Wolfson summer cabins.

The pre-World-War I decades were a heyday for summer boarding houses in Hinsdale, and a few continued afterwards, such as Shady Villa (now the Stritch Studio) and Kirchner Farm, later named Ashmere Lake Hotel, at Ashmere Lake, where summer campers' parents stayed on parents' weekends. In later decades, with improved roads and auto travel, many summer residents purchased or built their own cottages, occasionally converting them to year-round residences, and the farm summer boarding houses faded out.

In addition to the decline of farm cottages, there was another hazard. The large stock barn across the road from the Robinson residence burned in mid-August 1923, reportedly from spontaneous combustion of newly stored hay. Viewers from Maple Street on the other side of the valley could see the spectacular blaze. It was too big for the local fire department to control. Mrs. Ulmer reported that Charles Tighe, the next owner, built the red barn now standing there.

The Robinson's, like the Putnam family, occupied the farm for two generations, some fifty or more years. At one time Clifford E. Robinson was the president of the Pittsfield Milk Exchange, the main milk processing plant for central Berkshire dairy farmers over many decades. But getting older and less interested in farming, Clifford sold the farm to Charles Tighe of Watervliet, NY in May 1924. After the sale, he and his daughter, Helen, moved into the village, later buying the bungalow built by Carl Pierce, Jr. at the Maple and Taylor Street corner. Helen for a while operated a tearoom in the modified old railroad station on Main Street next to the river bridge.

Though the Robinson family left the hillside, their name remained. In the 1890's, the United States Geological Survey topographic-quadrangle map makers gave the name "Robinson" to the town way extending from Curtis Street across the mountain to Dalton's Grange Hall Road. By then it had evolved from a rough cut road first to a widened, single-lane, gravel-surface route and then to a two-lane, paved town highway.

Later Owners

The Tighe family lived on the Robinson Road place until 1930, continuing the dairy and boarding house activities. Charles Tighe then sold the farm to the Chenail brothers, Ernest and Eugene, from North Adams who operated the dairy for sixteen years, adding truck garden crops of cabbages and potatoes.

During their occupancy, the house with its original Hinsdale part and the Robinson additions, along with an attached shed and nearby barn, burned beyond repair on Dec. 19, 1940, with fire apparently from windblown chimney sparks. The fire ended the Chenail brothers' interest in the site, for in 1946 they sold the farm to the Samuels family and returned to North Adams. For a residence the Samuels built a small cottage a few yards east of the site of Theodore Hinsdale's original family house, the beginning of the Ulmer residence.

Apparently unable to maintain the farm, the Samuels family after some six years left the place unoccupied for a time until the Ulmers acquired it in 1955. The Ulmers from Salzburg, Austria, had immigrated first to Pittsfield in 1952, then to Hinsdale, initiating another long period of occupancy for the site. Willi Ulmer, Sr., a machinist in his Pittsfield day job, operated the farm, raising Hereford beef cattle for many years and haying. He also added a small pond for cattle watering in the pasture on the north side of the road. He enlarged the Samuel house and with his wife raised six children there. The parents after fifty years (2002) are still occupying land originally made productive by the Hinsdale family,

Though the early occupants have long gone, three of their names, Hinsdale, Curtis and Robinson, left their mark on the town, "Hinsdale" as the name of the town. "Curtis" and "Robinson" as the names of streets.

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Note: This article began as a sketch of the predecessors of the Ulmer family on Robinson Road, and was originally written in response to a question relayed to me by Mrs. Ulmer from Major James Tighe who was born on the farm in 1926. On a visit to his old home in 1978, he had asked her about the site, the land around it and the town.

The sketch was revised first in September 2002. Some information was drawn from deeds at the Berkshire Registry of Deeds and Court records in Pittsfield, some from old *Springfield Republican* and *Berkshire Eagle* newspaper clippings, and some from direct personal knowledge and observation.

L. F. Swift

June 2011. This sketch has been edited for improved style from time to time. The latest revision was added to note the street naming and to mention Colin Alexander's wife, Lillie McMakin, since a McMakin couple, Jackie and David, arrived as residents at Wake Robin, a retirement community in Shelburne, VT where I now live. David reports that his father was related to Lily McMakin. L. F. Swift