

Layers by Honey Sharp

Houses and gardens have many stories to share. When they have been around for a long time, they hold a multitude of layers, waiting to be revealed.

Not immediately apparent—perhaps never—the stories, like parts to a puzzle, gradually come together. At times, fragments such as rusty hand-hewn iron tools and pottery shards resemble cryptic messages, placed snugly in a bottle that the tide swept onto a beach. And yet, paper messages are left intentionally. Within a house however, they remain concealed, much like archeological strata. Outside, such strata are found in discarded, no longer needed, remnants from the past.

Back in 1971 and just out of college, I came upon what became my home, Seekonk Farm. A typical 18th century farmhouse nestled below Tom Ball Mountain, it had been neglected for years. Little did I know how long it would take to restore it. And I had no inkling what path I might follow. My gut sense, however, led me to believe that, somehow, a hint of its former identity would emerge. Perhaps it would assume a new identity. Probably both.

Laden with old baggage: dilapidated barns, rubbles of moss covered stone walls, cracked split rail fences, Seekonk Farm had “character”. The landscape, although quite respectable thanks to a couple of majestic American elms, ancient hydrangea, Bridal Wreath spirea, and, of course, old sugar maples, badly needed work. Much was overgrown. Overtaken by invasives such as honeysuckle, buckthorn, and barberry, the woods were a formidable place to enter. Thus, only with time, patience and ultimately a little dose of experience, would I nudge it to come back into its own.

Although never to become a farm again, at least it was given a chance to rediscover a few of its former roots that might lay in a New England dooryard garden. Thus, while introducing herbs and vegetables, I came upon a smattering of heirloom perennials, almost entombed by weeds. These heirlooms include phlox, purple irises, blue thistle and white peonies. All they needed was the chance to breathe. A little access to the gardens wouldn't hurt either. So, with a little digging, sure enough, I came upon some old marble stepping stones leading down the garden.

What lay below the surface—both within the structure of the house and barns as well as the soil grew into an obsession. By uncovering what

had been concealed by a ceiling, buried in the ground or thrown away in the woods, I began to obtain some snapshots from the past.

My first “archeological foray” took place while ripping out the low, sagging kitchen ceiling with Harold. An older gentleman and a true Yankee, with deep wrinkles with his hands and face and cobalt blue eyes, he came from a Tyringham family, dating back to the Revolution. While his family had run a quarry that furnished marble for Gilded Age mansions, Harold was more inclined towards Berkshire farmhouses and their old fashioned gardens.

Thus, while poking about, we soon uncovered the house’s “bones”: hand-hewn white pine, cherry and chestnut beams, many with brown bark still clinging, some dangling. It soon dawned on me that the trees probably dated back to the early settlers.

While excavating for a new foundation or building a pool, you never know what that back hoe might yank out. Unfortunately, you may never find out either. For me, here at Seekonk Farm, it was usually a slower, physical, personal, almost intimate process. It was also haphazard. Whether it be weeding, digging and planting shrubs or burying bulbs, I’d often come upon clay pottery shards, hand hewn tools, chipped porcelain teacups, blue glass bottle necks and many other mysterious fragments of ordinary household items.

Invariably, I began wondering how they were used; how they got there; who threw them out; and why they had landed there. One day, I finally pinned down the identity of what had been providing little gifts year in and year out: a dump.

Although I often still keep my eyes peeled and my fingers well-tuned (with diminishing success), most satisfying have been the most unexpected discoveries. Not found so much in the soil or within walls, they were in places we rarely trod. One day, straying over to the abandoned chicken coop, Harold and I overturned a white marble stepping stone to the door. Upon turning it over we saw the words:

ALICE

WIFE OF OLIVER WATSON

DIED SEPTEMBER 16, 1836 AGED 31 AND 6 MONTHS.

‘CLING NOT TO EARTH’

As we carried it to a new location, it slipped out of our hands, landed on the ground and split in two. Now it sits flat below a wooden

bench in what I call my 'Cling Not to Earth' garden. Here, the old white hydrangea flowers forming a canopy above echo the marble. Will a future owner one day attempt to find what lays below?

Adding greater intrigue—or perhaps perspective on this—was a more recent discovery: as it turns out, the Watsons were the predominant family in what was called Seekonk, a long-lost hamlet of Great Barrington with its own schoolhouse, post office and mill.

Years later, after Harold's death, I stumbled upon a massive, stone well cover near what may have been the foundation to a building in a field. It is a focal point in a garden out in the field. Supported by a metal base and dabbled by mustard colored lichen, it resembles a Chinese Moon gate. Today, both the tombstone and well-cover appear like they always been there. In many ways they have.