The Wing Family

The tract of land now known as Heritage Museums & Gardens played an important role in the history of the town of Sandwich. In 1677, Lydia Wing Hamilton Abbott was the first resident to live on the land. As the widow Hamilton, she resided with her two sons on a spot near what is now the Special Exhibitions Gallery just south of Upper Shawme Pond. She lived there in great poverty despite a second marriage and assistance from her family and the Quakers of the town. After her death, Lydia’s brother Daniel Wing, Jr., and his two sons, Samuel and Zeccheus, bought Lydia’s little house, now known as Orchard House.

Samuel, his wife and six children lived in the house until the children married and moved away. When Samuel died suddenly, Zeccheus bought out Samuel’s children’s share of the estate. Zeccheus died in 1784, and in 1794 Orchard House itself was sold, dismantled and reassembled as an ell on a house at 14/16 Grove Street, where it can still be seen today. At present much of the Wing family farm remains part of the grounds of Heritage. Although members of the Wing family have not lived on the property for years, their heritage remains a vital part of our history.

Charles Owen Dexter

The internationally-known Charles Owen Dexter was the next owner of the land. He bought the property, then known as Shawme Farm, in 1921. Mr. Dexter was a successful textile manufacturer in New Bedford. With his uncle and cousin, he established the Beacon Manufacturing Company which became one of the largest manufacturers of cotton blankets in the United States. A true renaissance man, he was active in civic affairs as well as a photographer, violinist and yachtsman. At the age of 59, Mr. Dexter was told that he wouldn’t have long to live which led him to purchase Shawme Farm. However, despite the warning, he lived for another 22 years. Beginning in 1921, Mr. Dexter and his wife spent summers at the farm and for the next 15 years he worked in his garden hybridizing plants. He started with vegetables and expanded his interests to rhododendrons.

It was for the latter that he became well-known. Mr. Dexter employed a landscape architect, Paul Frost of Cambridge, to turn the wooded farm into a country estate. In 1935, he moved to the farm full-time and commuted to work every day.

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Heritage History

The Lilly Family

The Lilly family, originally from Indianapolis, Indiana, spent their summer vacations in Falmouth, MA so when Josiah Kirby Lilly, III wanted to found a museum dedicated to his father, he chose Cape Cod.

Mr. Lilly first thought that he would create an automobile museum, but after researching other institutions, he decided that it would not have a broad enough appeal. It was after his father’s death in 1966 that the idea of creating a public place to house several of the Lilly family collections began to take shape.

After J. K. Lilly, Jr. died, his son, Heritage’s founder, bought the antique firearms and military miniature collections from his father’s estate. With architect Merton Stuart Barrows and landscape architect Philip Ansell, he planned the buildings and grounds to be a suitable background to showcase the collections. They decided on a replica of the Round Barn from the Shakers of Hancock Village in Pittsfield, Massachusetts for the cars. A replica of the Temple of Virtue from New Windsor, New York, where George Washington awarded the first Purple Heart to a soldier, was selected to hold the antique firearms and the military miniatures. Plans were made to add the gatehouse (ticket office and museum store) and the Old East Mill, from Orleans. In 1971, Mr. Lilly bought the Charles I. D. Looff carousel. Housed in a building built especially for its display, the carousel would be joined by three galleries holding American art.

Today the Museum serves more than 1440,000 visitors annually who come from around the world to visit. In addition to the gardens and galleries, Heritage is home to The Hundred Acre School, a STEM-based preschool, and The Adventure Park at Heritage.