

The Blanchard Project

Cleaning out the garage and downsizing may not sound adventurous—unless you live in the historic district of Acton, Mass., and find a Revolutionary War-era bayonet wedged behind a radiator. **By Janice M. Ward**

Some homeowners might relegate the rusty relic to the recycling bin, but Ann Sussman donned her detective hat in the summer of 2012 and traced the origins of the 18th-century weapon that she found in her home, built by the philanthropic Blanchard family.

Acton is famous for its early contribution to the Revolutionary War. Every local schoolchild knows the saying, “The battle began in Concord, was fought in Lexington, led by the minutemen of Acton.” Thanks to the gunsmith trade of Captain Isaac Davis, Acton’s militia was, unlike other militias in the area, equipped with rifles outfitted with bayonets—knife-shaped blades affixed to their gun barrels. Because of their equipment and training, Capt. Davis and his 39 men led the advance on Concord’s Old North Bridge on April 19, 1775. Although Davis was killed, his minutemen and other militia forced the British to retreat.

Sussman believed that the Blanchard house bayonet she found might be linked to this pivotal battle—and set out to prove her theory. “I grew up in a historic house in Lexington, Mass.,” Sussman says, “and I like making connections that others may not see—bringing the past to the present.” She knew that her house was built by Webster S. Blanchard, the great-great-great-nephew of Luther Blanchard, fifer at the Battle of Concord and minuteman under Capt. Davis. The

fifer’s silhouette is memorialized on the town seal of nearby Boxborough, the town’s annual Fifer’s Day celebration is held in Luther’s honor, and its elementary school is named Blanchard Memorial. But could Luther—or his brother, Calvin, a fellow Patriot at the Battle of Concord—have owned the bayonet?

“I knew I could be holding not only something from the battle, but also something from Isaac Davis,” Sussman says.

At the Acton Historical Society’s Jenks Library, Sussman found postcards and letters about the Blanchard family, but no references to weapons. The librarian suggested Sussman visit the Concord Museum for further research. David Wood, the museum’s curator, believed that the weapon was created during the Revolutionary War period, and asked Joel Bohy, historic arms and militaria expert from Skinner’s Auction House, to further examine the bayonet. Tying the weapon to the Revolutionary War was one hurdle overcome; conclusively tying it to the Blanchard family was the next obstacle.

The imminent sale of Sussman’s home in the spring of 2013, coupled with her enthusiasm for history and architecture, informed her next step—

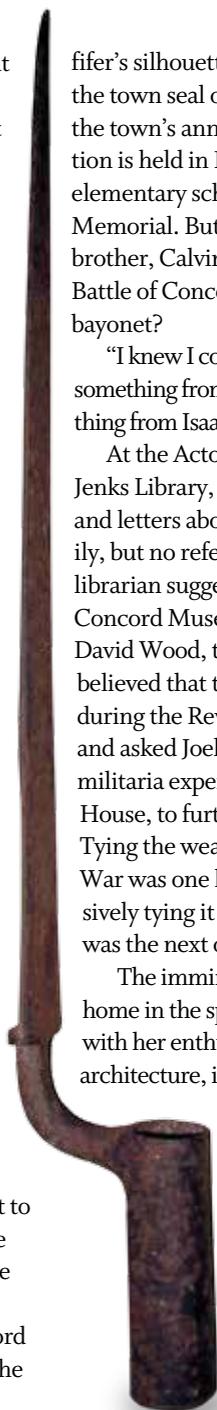
to include the bayonet’s provenance in a larger story encompassing the Blanchard house, family and legacy. Sussman collaborated with a filmmaker and this writer to create a documentary called

“The Blanchard Project.” She and her team interviewed local historian William Klauer, who told the story of Luther and Calvin Blanchard. Both were born on a farm in Littleton, which later became Boxborough; both were apprenticed as masons at Jonathon Hosmer’s in Acton near the home of Captain Isaac Davis; and both were minutemen at the Battle of Concord. A memorial stone in West Acton includes the following inscription:

“From this Farm Went Calvin and Luther Blanchard to Concord Fight and Bunker Hill. Sons of Simon Blanchard, who was killed at the Battle of Quebec, 1759. Luther was the first man hit by a British Ball at the Old North Bridge and died in the service of his country a few months later.”

The Blanchard lineage follows from Calvin (1754–1800) to Simon (1784–1867) to Luke (1826–1901) to Arthur (1864–1953) to Webster (1894–1953). Calvin’s heirs transitioned from farming to selling Pippin apples when the railroad came to Acton in 1844, and further diversified their business concerns in real estate, lumber and brick. The last two generations built stately homes beside one another on Windsor Avenue in West Acton—Arthur’s Victorian-style home, built in 1892, and Webster’s Dutch Colonial, built in 1922 and later purchased by Sussman, only the third owner. The wealthy, community-minded Blanchards donated more than \$300,000 to local public schools in the 1950s; their Blanchard Foundation funded an auditorium for Acton’s first high school and subsidized the Blanchard Memorial School in Boxborough.

Meanwhile, Bohy, the expert whose main subject of research is April 19, 1775, armaments, emailed Sussman the following: “As far as it [the bayonet] being from April 19th [1775], there is no way of saying without some sort of written provenance. It could have been used from the Revolution through the Federal period. Acton, as well as some other towns, purportedly were supplied better



than others on the 19th, and there were a variety of muskets or fowlers that were used . . . I guess we will never know, which makes the value of the bayonet around \$200 or so in a retail market.”

Undeterred by the indecisive news, Sussman and her team began filming the story of the Blanchards and the mysterious bayonet in Arthur and Webster’s side-by-side houses to capture period architectural details. “We’re still trying to ascertain if we can find any other Isaac Davis weaponry to see if it matches,” Sussman says.

While the Blanchard bayonet story is a lesson in the difficulty of definitively tying period objects to specific events, Sussman believes her journey to solve a mystery, uncover history and discover details about Blanchard benefactors has been valuable in itself.

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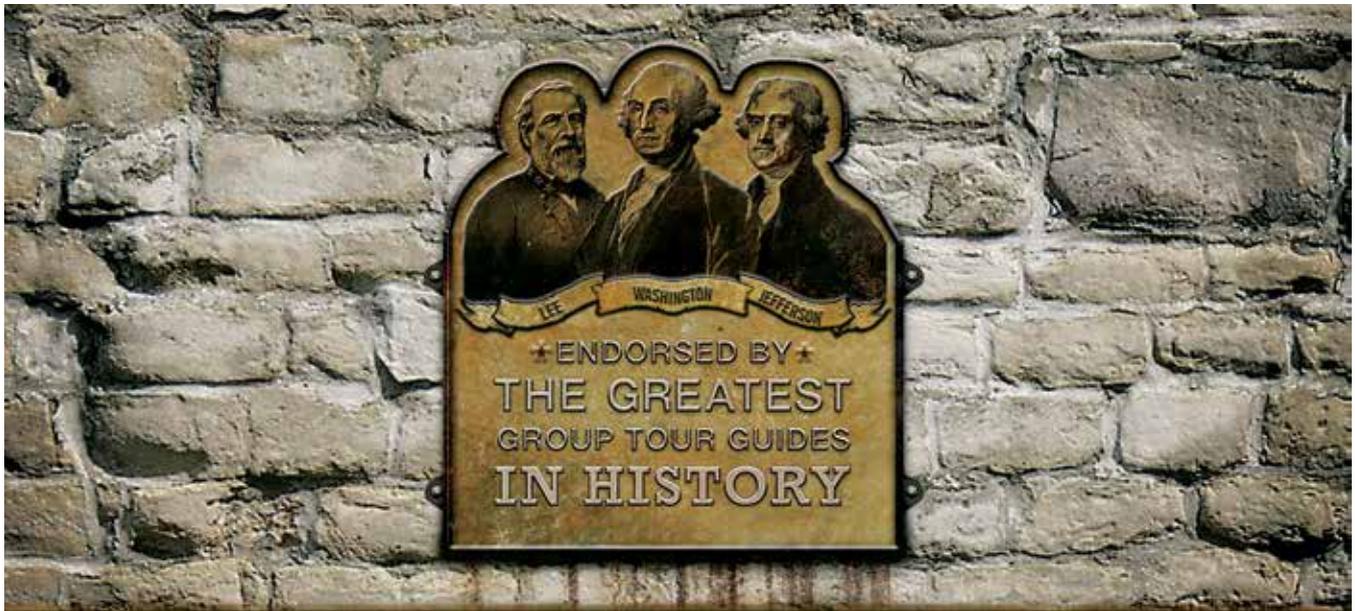


The Ephemera Society of America's 34th Annual Conference and Paper Show will be devoted to the theme “Field to Table: The Ephemera of Food and Drink.” Through presentations devoted to food and culinary ephemera—such as menus, home remedies, handwritten recipes, seed catalogs and packets, trade cards, food labels, advertising-related “little cookbooks,” almanacs, wine labels and cocktail-related printed material—the conference will reflect on how each step of the journey from field to table represents a different aspect of society's values.

The society is an international organization of dealers, collectors, academics and institutions that study paper ephemera of all eras. “Ephemera informs us of history in a way that is, literally, tangible—and provides deeper insight into the past than merely reading texts,” says Nancy Rosin, president of the society.

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