

# The Varnum Family and Hawk Valley Farm

The Varnum family has owned the land where Hawk Valley Farm lies since 1664, when English immigrant **Samuel Varnum** (c.1619-c.1705) and his neighbor bought from John Webb eleven hundred acres on the north side of the Merrimack River, above Pawtucket Falls. There, he and his sons grew crops and kept livestock, while the family lived on the south side of the river near a small garrison to protect them from Native American attacks.

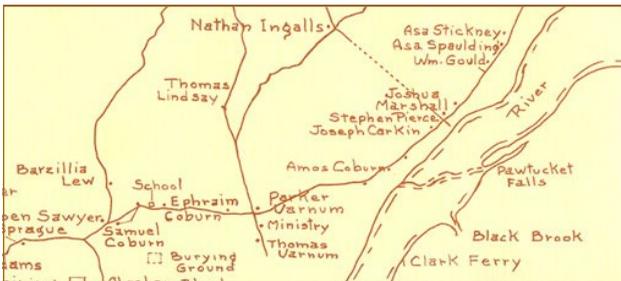
Even with this protection, colonists were not always safe. Varnum's two oldest sons, George and Samuel, were shot and killed by Native Americans (during King Philip's War) as they were rowing across the river to tend their livestock.

Thomas, Samuel's oldest surviving son, inherited the family home and a large portion of the farm when his father died. For the next 240 years, he and his descendants farmed the land that was later named Hawk Valley Farm.



Above: Portrait of Joseph Bradley Varnum, c.1819, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. Below: portion of map of "Dracutt," 1775-1783, showing Varnum ownership.

But not all Varnums were farmers. The family was prosperous, and as it grew, the Varnum sons pursued careers other than farming. Samuel Varnum's great-grandson **Joseph Bradley Varnum** (1749-1821), at left, fought during the Revolutionary War, then went on to serve as a U.S. Senator, a Congressman, and Speaker of the House.



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In addition to membership dues, LP&CT has established the following endowment funds to support these projects:

LP&CT Endowment Fund    Hawk Valley Farm

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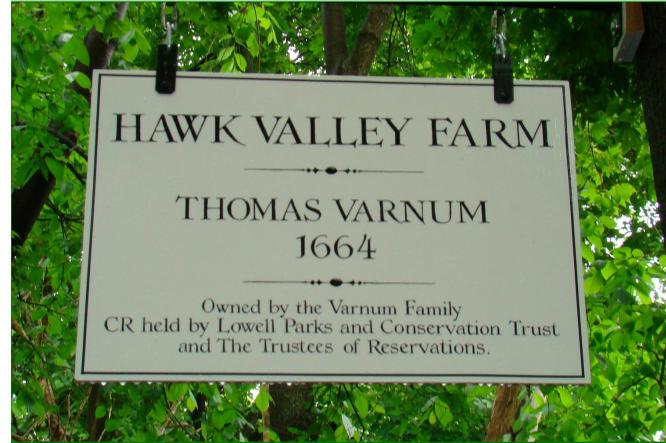
**Please clip and mail to:**  
**LP&CT, PO Box 7162, Lowell, MA 01852**



massculturalcouncil.org

This document is based on the research of **Gray Fitzsimons**, historical consultant to LP&CT for his publication, "Hawk Valley Farm," funded by a grant from the **Massachusetts Environmental Trust**. For all images within this brochure please refer to LP&CT's "Hawk Valley Farm" webpage, available at [www.lowellandtrust.org](http://www.lowellandtrust.org). We thank the **Lowell Cultural Council**, a local agency which is supported by the Massachusetts Cultural Council, a state agency, for supporting our work to develop field trip curriculum for Lowell schools to visit Hawk Valley Farm. We also thank **Dr. Patricia Fontaine**, UMass Lowell Graduate School of Education, for her support of this project. Special thanks to **Kate DiTullio** for creating this brochure.

# Hawk Valley Farm



## A place to explore land use history, the landscape, farming, and land conservation



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## Native Americans

Native Americans first settled the Merrimack River Valley 3,000 years ago, and first began trading with English colonists in the area in the 1630s. Although this and later trading relationships began with both sides having equal social power, this power dynamic later changed into one of inequality as European settlements became stronger and Native American tribes grew weaker.

In the first half of the seventeenth century, diseases carried by colonists ravaged New England natives, sometimes wiping out entire tribes. At the same time, European colonists were growing in numbers and buying land, pressuring weakened Native Americans to sell ever more property to them. Many tribes sold their land just to survive. Some lands formerly belonging to members of the Pennacook Confederacy (see below) became part of the area now known as Hawk Valley Farm.

## Pennacook Confederacy



PASSACONAWAY, THE BASHARA (From Potter's History of Manchester)

The **Pennacook Confederacy** (an alliance of tribes that set aside significant differences to respond to challenging times) was in the Merrimack River Valley when this area was first farmed.

The Confederacy was led by **Passaconaway**, a man famous throughout the New England area for his political influence, legendary supernatural powers, and physical might. Passaconaway

dealt peacefully with the colonists, and negotiated with the English to set aside some land along the Merrimack, called Pawtucketville, for his people to live.

## Changing Times

Colonists like Samuel Varnum worked farms to feed and clothe their families. But by the early 1900s, farming culture in New England was very different. Instead of growing crops to survive, **farmers grew market crops** to sell in surrounding towns and cities.



Thomas Varnum V (1837-1929) changed his family's traditional farming practices by planting **cabbage as a cash crop**, and he

remained wealthy while other farms in the area were failing. With Hawk Valley Farm's revenue, Thomas built a modern house along Varnum Avenue for him and his first wife, Sarah. The **old family homestead** (which still stands abutting Hawk Valley Farm, undated photo above) became a boarding-house for farm workers.

The last member of the Varnum family to actively farm the area was Thomas Varnum VI (1901-1992). Thomas was a young teacher and worked the farm with hired help while teaching in Connecticut. After his father, Thomas Varnum V, died from a heart attack.

But the Great Depression and a disastrous regional flood in 1936 made it impossible for him to make a living as a farmer. In 1941, he sold 36 acres of land and the dairy barn at auction, and sold several hundred acres of land to help establish the **Lowell-Dracut-Tyngsborough State Forest**. Parts of the core 36 acres became what are now known as Camelot Court and Regatta Field.



On site, you can see what remains of the old farm. Pictured here is a **cabin foundation wall** and old farm implements.

## Preserving Hawk Valley Farm for Future Generations

For nearly ten years, the Lowell Parks & Conservation Trust (LP&CT) worked closely with abutters and the **Pawtucketville Citizens Council** to protect Hawk Valley Farm. The man who purchased the farm from the Varnum family, put the property up for sale in the 1960s, the barn was torched by an arsonist, and a developer bought the 36 acres. Portions north of Clay Pit Brook were undevelopable and acquired by the city through tax title in 1991.

With knowledge of the property's history, the neighborhood had already documented the farm's **historic and conservation value** within the neighborhood's master plan, the City of Lowell's Open Space Plan, and the City of Lowell's Master Plan. Because of this effort, a compromise was struck to carve out one house lot on Varnum Avenue in exchange for **permanent protection** of the remaining five acres.

Hawk Valley Farm's natural resource value is as important as its history, which enabled a special conservation strategy. The farm contains prime agricultural soil, unique **nut trees** (hickory, **butternut**, and **walnut**), exceptional wildlife habitats, and provides a connection between the **Lowell Heritage State Park** with the much larger Lowell-Dracut-Tyngsborough State Forest. Additionally, Clay Pit Brook, which runs through the land, provides natural protection from flooding.



Hawk Valley Farm became LP&CT's **first Conservation Restriction (CR)**, which it co-holds with **The Trustees of Reservations**.

The CR ensures perpetual protection from development so that future generations can access and explore the property's history and its beauty. At the same time that the City of Lowell assigned the CR to LP&CT and TTOR, the city also sold the land back to Louisa Varnum, returning the farm to her family and enabling further farm production.

## Transportation

Roads, bridges, and ferries were major parts of early American farming because they allowed farmers to transport extra crops from their farms to sell in nearby towns and cities.

To bring their produce to markets across the **Merrimack River**, the Varnums sometimes crossed a bridge over **Clay Pit Brook**. (The stone abutments of this bridge are still visible today.) They would then travel to a **ferry** that carried their crops safely across the river.

In 1792, a bridge crossing the Merrimack at **Pawtucket Falls** was built, making it easier to transport goods across the river. Later, the railroads made it possible for cities to bring in greater amounts of food from large farms that were far away. With railroads, falling prices, and higher taxes local farms like Hawk Valley were no longer needed to feed large cities.

### Did You See?



**What to see when visiting Hawk Valley Farm:**

- Cabin foundation wall
- Old family homestead
- Red maple swamp
- Clay Pit Brook
- Walnut trees

### Directions

Hawk Valley Farm, 526 Varnum Avenue, is located near the intersection of West Meadow Road and Varnum Avenue in Lowell, MA. At the intersection look for two large boulders, where there is a sign on a trail heading into the property. Parking is available along Varnum Terrace, off Varnum Avenue.

## Slavery at Hawk Valley

No known slaves worked on the area of land called Hawk Valley Farm, but other branches of the Varnum family owned slaves.

In the late 1740s, Samuel Varnum (1714-1797) bought two African babies. One of them was a girl who died en route from Boston to Varnum's farm; the other, a boy named **Silas Royal**, was the family's **slave** until he became an adult and was freed by Samuel Varnum. After being **freed**, Royal stayed with the Varnums as a **servant**, a position that was very different from being a slave. As a servant, Royal was paid for his work, and could leave his position if he wished.



Source: "Privateers in the American Revolution," National Park Service ([www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov)).

Silas Royal did leave the Varnums during the **Revolutionary War**, when he served in the Continental Army and on two privateer raiding voyages. Authorized by the new American government, **privateers** sailed the eastern coast of the United States attacking British ships, taking their goods, and selling them for a profit. The work was dangerous, but paid well.

After his second voyage, Royal had trouble when Joshua Wyman, a fellow privateer, stole his wages, claimed to be his master, and sold him to a slave dealer. But before he could do so, the authorities of Woburn discovered the plot and freed Royal. The Varnums were furious, and helped Royal sue Wyman for the money he had stolen and for damages caused by imprisoning Royal. Royal won the first court case, but lost the second. He lived, a free man for the rest of his life, in Dracut with the Varnum family as their servant.