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Found: A Glimpse of Past

Mystery of photo album discovered in woods leads to family of famous Lincoln scholar

What was the photo album doing in the woods near Lakeview? Who were these people, and what was their link to Foxboro?

By Jack Athlet

It was "about 30 years ago" when a young couple, walking through the woods in the Lakeview area, saw something partially covered by leaves that looked out of place there in the woods. They had no idea what it was, but clearly it didn't belong there, so they took a closer look.

Brushing aside the leaves, they picked up what they then realized was a family photograph album, a little damp from exposure to the elements, but obviously it had not been there too long as it was in relatively good condition, all the photos still securely in place.

There was no identification in the album as to who it belonged to and the only names were in short news clippings under three photos of young women holding infants.

The first woman was a Mrs. Stillwell of the Chicago area. The second, a Mrs. Barton from the same general area and the clippings were birth notices from the local newspapers. The third photo, very similar to the second, was also Mrs. Barton and the clipping made note of the death of the child.

The mystery deepened. What was the photo album doing in the woods near Lakeview? Who were these people, and what was their link to Foxboro?

The couple was curious and took the photo album with them. Curious, but also busy with their own lives, and the photo album was set aside, its mysteries to be unraveled at a later time.

All but forgotten, the photo album remained there on a shelf in the garage for three decades, only recently rediscovered and the couple who had first found it in the woods realized they were right back where they started, wondering who the people were and how the photo album came to be in the woods near Lakeview. But this time, they invited historical scrutiny of their discovery and the "who" was quickly determined: the "how" a little more problematic.

The Barton and Stillwell names are quite familiar in local history, with many members of the Barton family having summer homes here many years ago and one of the Barton daughters marrying into the Stillwell family. The late Bill Stillwell served on the committee to build Boyden Library and his late wife Joan was active on the Council on Aging and at the Foxborough Senior Center for many years and their children still reside on Granite Street.

A quick review of the photos places the album squarely in the midst of the family of Rev. Dr. William E. Barton and his home at 85 Granite St. on the shore of Sunset Lake. Dr. Barton and his wife Esther spent summers here

for many years with their sons Bruce, Charles, Fred and Robert and their daughter Mary, who later married Clyde Stillwell.

Many photos, all black and white of that time period, depict quiet summers on the lake and show the Barton home located right at the dam along the edge of Granite Street.

Dr. Barton, a clergyman and spiritual scholar of national reputation, spent his early years as a circuit rider in Tennessee but later served churches in Ohio before coming to the Shawmut Congregational Church in Boston where he remained until 1899.

Throughout his ministry, he remained an active teacher and lecturer, edited many religious publications and authored books on life in the hills of Tennessee and Kentucky and a variety of religious topics.

Much of Dr. Barton's writing was done at his summer home here in Foxboro, where he had the luxury of building a separate building called the Wigwam where he could spend countless uninterrupted hours alone with his thoughts and research.

Rev. Barton's extensive writings include: "The Early Ecclesiastical History of the Western Reserve"; "What Has Brought Us Out of Egypt"; "When Boston Braved the King"; "Jesus of Nazareth, His Life"; and the "Scenes of His Ministry."

It was from here in the Wigwam he also authored his first two books on another subject dear to his heart, Abraham Lincoln, writing "The Soul of Abraham Lincoln" (1920), and "The Paternity of Abraham Lincoln" (1920).

Following his years in Boston, Dr. Barton's ministry then took him to Oak Park, Illinois, where he served the First Congregational Church for 25 years. Retiring in 1924, the couple made a journey around the world before taking up permanent residence here in Foxboro in 1925.

In his retirement years, Dr. Barton was also to focus more of his attention on Abraham Lincoln. Since much of his time would now be devoted to writing, he expanded the Wigwam by adding a Lincoln Room, which was opened in 1925, the event being fully documented in the family photo album.

The formal dedication of the Lincoln Room attracted scholars and local dignitaries. Letters of regret were received from President and Mrs. Coolidge, Hon. Robert T. Lincoln, Herbert W. Fay, custodian of the Lincoln Memorial of Troy, Indiana, and many Lincoln scholars.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Barton did not get to enjoy the quiet years here in Foxboro, passing away in November of that year.

Dr. William Barton went on to become one of America's foremost Lincoln scholars as author of "The Life of Abraham Lincoln" (1925), "The Women Lincoln Loved" (1927), "The Great and Good Man" (1927) and "The Lincoln of the Biographers" (1930) published just a few months before Dr. Barton's death in December of 1930.

How?

So the photographs themselves identify the original owner of the album. But how did it end up in the woods of Lakeview some 30 years ago?

Summer property, standing vacant for long periods of time, draws the attention of thieves and vandals and the Barton property was no exception. Several breaks into the Barton properties are easily documented, and the Wigwam, being set further back into the woods from the main house, was particularly vulnerable.

There is every reason to believe the Barton property at 85 Granite St. was entered about 30 years ago and numerous items taken. Once they had the opportunity to examine the items taken from the home the photo album was most probably discarded in the woods and never thought of again.

Once the photo album was identified, there never was any question: it belonged back in the family. Contacted in Minnesota, Barney Barton, grandson of William and Esther Barton, was not aware a photo album had been taken and was quite pleased to know it had survived its 30-year absence in good condition.

Some of the family scenes described to him sounded familiar, and the album itself is now on its way back into the family circle and he will share it with other relatives.

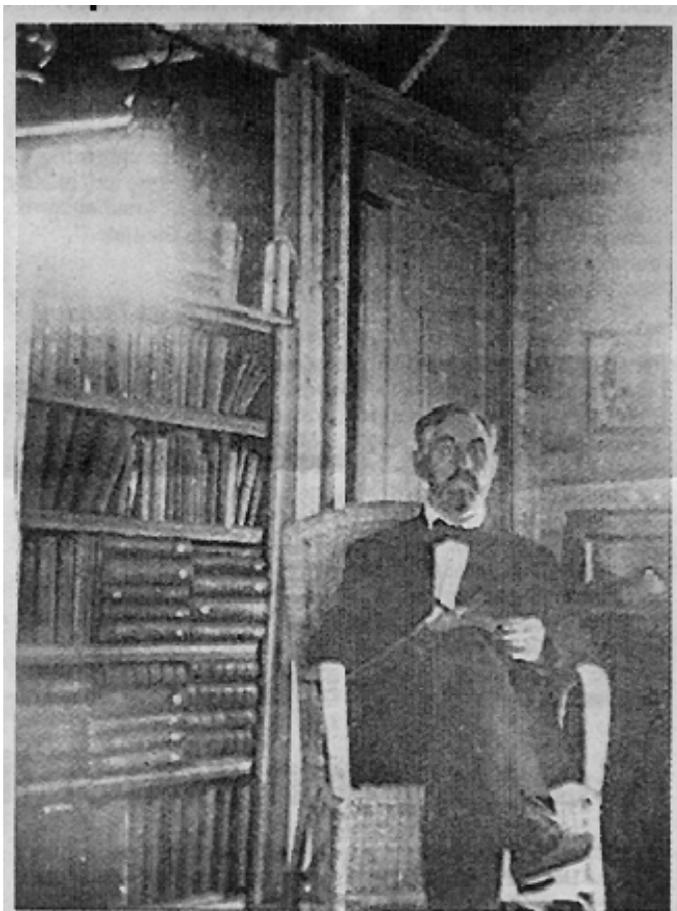
The Barton family has been very generous to Berea College, where William Barton received his B.S. in 1885, M.S. in 1888, A.M. in 1890 and Doctor of Divinity in 1896. It is possible the family photo album may be donated to the library there. His collection of books and manuscripts on Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War was acquired by the University of Chicago Library and the photos may also find a home there.

Barney did not rule out returning the photo album to Foxboro once family members had seen it, knowing it would be a treasured addition to the town archives.

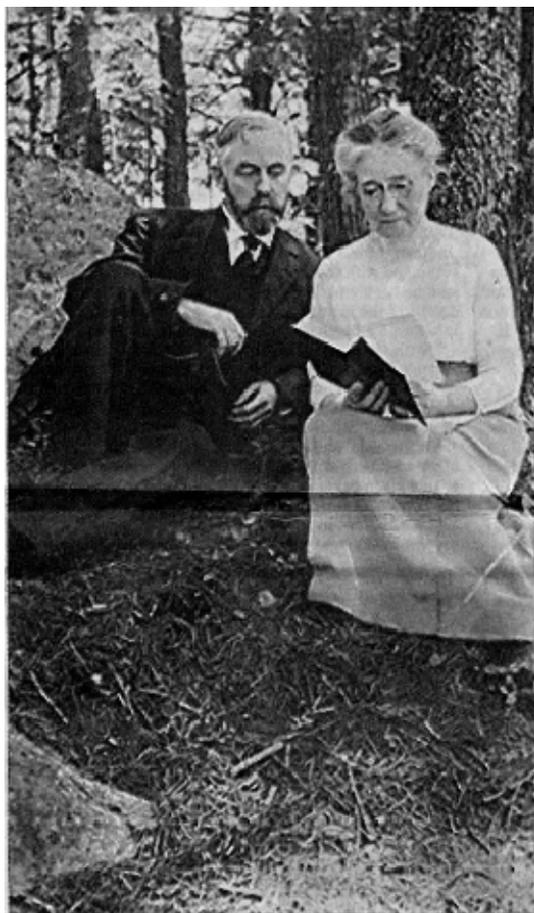
The Wigwam is gone, severely damaged when last hit by vandals. The Barton legacy lives on in the published works of Rev. William E. Barton and in the Barton State Park which encompasses his former homestead and adjacent woodland and in the lovely Barton Chapel built by other family members at Bethany Church.

As for the family photo album, the 30-year mystery has been solved and it is back in good hands, never to leave again.





Rev. William Barton, noted Lincoln scholar, is photographed in the new Lincoln Room added to his Wigwam study in 1925 on the shore of Sunset Lake off Granite Street.



ANOTHER CENTURY — Rev. William Barton and his wife Esther enjoying the solitude of a quiet afternoon of reading, one of the photos from their album that will finally be back in the family circle after an absence of 30 years.