Blue Hill: The Wolcott Family Home 1851-2018

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The house located at 1726 Canton Avenue in Milton, MA was constructed as the summer home of Joshua Huntington Wolcott in 1851, though it has undergone several substantial alterations and renovations most notably in 1889, after the house had suffered major damage due to a fire, and 1934 when the house was winterized and its land footprint reduced in size. The Wolcott family, who owned the property from 1851 until 1987 (with the exception of a few years of Lowell family ownership between 1900 and 1906), left few personal narratives about life on the property.

My research regarding the house has primarily consisted of transcribing the letters sent by Huntington F. Wolcott to his family during his service as a cavalry officer with the Union Army in the Civil War. I have also compiled secondary sources of Roger Wolcott, a former Massachusetts governor who, despite being known to have not kept a personal diary, had been spoken of sufficiently at-length so as to provide some insight into his character and how he spent his life at the home that his family called Blue Hill. I have also reviewed the journal of Roger Wolcott Jr, a former state legislator who lived most of his life in the house and whose personal papers are archived in both the Massachusetts Historical Society and at the Boston Athenaeum.

1851-1888 House

Joshua Huntington Wolcott, a well-to-do Beacon Hill merchant descended from a prosperous and influential English-colonist family from Connecticut, purchased a large tract of land on what is now known as Canton Avenue in Milton in April, 1851 and constructed a palatial colonial-style summer home of red-painted clapboard siding that he would later name Blue Hill (Wolcott, 1939).

The land on which the home sat stretched over a mile-and-a-quarter through the Blue Hills as far to the southeast as Hillside Street, though never reaching more than a quarter-mile wide, and eventually totaling over 178 acres (Wolcott, 1875). There, Joshua and his wife Harriet (nicknamed Hatty) would raise their two sons, Roger and Huntington, in warmer months as they wintered in their house on Boylston Street in Boston. The home in Milton was the one with which the family shared a strong emotional attachment, according to Roger's biographer, William Lawrence:

"The house in Boston where they passed the winters was on Boylston Street facing the Common. The home which parents and children most enjoyed was, however, upon the slope of Blue Hill about eight miles from Boston.

The house stands upon the edge of the woods which cover the hill; from the lawn the land slopes down to the valley and to the plain of Readville through which the Neponset River winds, and in the distance are spread in rich damp green of the Canton meadows."

- (Lawrence, 1901)

ROGER AND HUNTINGTON WOLCOTT

Roger Wolcott Jr. would later write that "life was simple at Blue Hill in those days" for his father and his uncle. As the two boys spent their days outdoors and "explored the country with a single pony using the old 'ride and tie' method" by trading which of the two would ride and who would walk, they would search for types of birds and plants they had previously not discovered and record their findings. Joshua Wolcott planted pines, hemlocks, rhododendrons and copper beech trees near the house on what had been otherwise cleared land. The boys would live surrounded by several heads of cattle, fields of vegetables and apple orchards, with fresh water supplied to the kitchen and laundry room through pumps from wells on their property.

The farm was maintained by a foreman who lived on the property with his family in a farmhouse, along with several day laborers who would walk from one of the four two-family homes the Wolcott family had constructed to house their workers on Wolcott Street in Readville to tend the fields and animals. Maids, a nanny and a butler would serve the Wolcotts as live-in staff.

"The three maids slept in the two rooms behind the kitchen, [the butler] and his brother… slept in a damp little room in the basement, where another was occupied by the coachman. Under the kitchen was the laundry, presided over by our good friend, appropriately named Maggie Tubman"

- *(Wolcott., 1939)*

The pastoral setting of their stately manor house would soon feel the impact of the Civil War. Joshua Wolcott, a vocal abolitionist with strong political ties, would play an active role in the establishment of the US Sanitary Commission to support sick and wounded Union soldiers, and Huntington would lead classmates from Beacon Hill in mock military drills on Boston Common. The proximity of the house to Readville, which by the 1860s would transform into a massive Army training ground and transit camp, would be all too tempting for Huntington who would urge his family to allow him to join the 5th Regiment Massachusetts Cavalry as an officer in the otherwise entirely African-American regiment.

"Dear mother" Huntington wrote from the house when Hatty was away visiting New York, "I shall feel dishonored all my life, you must let me go." In a following letter, he wrote "I think it would be sweet to die for my country." His mother responded to his pleas with her objection, that "after the war is over, we shall need wise men who are pure patriots in the councils of the country and high minded statesmen… more than the soldier" (Lawrence, 1901). Despite the support of his father and Governor John A. Andrew, a family friend, his mother would only agree to his service were he to first complete his education. Though it would be too late for him to join the 5th Massachusetts Cavalry, a position was later offered to serve as an officer in the 2nd Massachusetts Cavalry. He entered the Union Army in October 1864.

Huntington would mail home nearly thirty letters during his time in the 2nd Massachusetts Cavalry, all of which currently reside in the archives of the Massachusetts Historical Society. He served in the Union Army of the Shenandoah under Generals Sheridan, Gibbs, and Torbert and fought in the Battle of Five Forks in April of 1865 leading to Robert E. Lee's final withdrawal and retreat in the waning days of the Confederacy. His letters home would reflect his nostalgia and homesickness, as well as his difficulty adjusting to Army life:

> *"We met with no adventures, with the exception of seeing at about half a mile six Rebel Guerillas, who immediately fled upon our approach… please inform me when you intend to make your departure for Blue Hill; I hope you will move out early, for it will be very pleasant for me to think of you as there."*
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> *-Huntington F. Wolcott, March 5, 1865*
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> *"I have passed through a very severe experience during the last two and a half weeks…how pleasant it would be to be present with you, at the Home fireside, if only for a moment, and look once more, on all your familiar faces. However I anticipate that pleasure, next Autumn, at the beautiful Blue Hill.*

Won't it be jolly."

-Huntington F. Wolcott, March 19, 1865

"My fingers can scarcely hold the Pen, on account of the cold (it is blowing a gale of wind, a few flakes of snow are falling) and I am very busy arranging my effects…written under great disadvantages. Best love to Dear Father, Mother, Roger, and Grandfather, please remember me to the household."

-Huntington F. Wolcott, March 24, 1865

Huntington's account of the one major battle in which he played a role is jarring in its description of how terrible the experience was in actuality. In his letter home, he describes in a short, hastily written note in chaotic script his experience losing a comrade on the battlefield, of having been sick to his stomach in the nervous moments before battle that nearly kept him out of the fight, and an emotional memory of when he last saw his father which "nearly unmanned me."

"Dear Father, Mother, and Roger,

I cannot express my feelings as I write this to you; it seems almost miraculous that I am once more permitted to inform you that I am safe and well, and I am truly thankful that I have escaped and remain unhurt after the terrible experience of the last 3 days. Our Brigade, numbering day before yesterday 500 men, now

cannot muster half that number. We went into battle yesterday having literally worked night and day, since Wednesday morning, with nothing whatever to eat but hardtack & coffee, and for the last 24 hours not enough of that.

We first struck the enemy's Cavalry on Thursday, and had some pretty hard skirmishing. The enemy, with overwhelming force, driving our boys, who nevertheless fought with great spirit. On Friday, having had no sleep during that night, we were again attacked by the enemy near Dinwiddle Court House and after fighting all day were obliged to fall back several miles, this day we contended against overwhelming numbers of Infantry and dismounted Cavalry, our Battery and that of the enemy shelling each other... a shell passed so near to me that I felt the wind it caused by its rapid motion, and buried itself in the ground only 20 feet beyond me.

My little Horse never winced. Just before evening Lieut' Thompson A D. C. to Gen' Gibbs, was wounded, probably mortally. He was a fine young fellow, only 23 years old and was a native of England. Yesterday we gained a glorious victory. After having marched from 4 o'clock AM til 12 AM, we were pushed forward, to the skirmish line, and commenced fighting at 2 PM holding our own against Infantry and Cavalry, until 5, when we joined our right, to the left of Grants Infantry, when we made a grand and simultaneous charge, driving the enemy before us, killing a great many and capturing over 6,000 prisoners, and 9 pieces of cannon.

At about 3 o'clock I was sent forward by Gen' Gibbs, to advance the skirmish line and finding many of the men destitute of Ammunition, [illegible] getting demoralized and rushing to the rear, I despatched [sic] 4 Orderlies back for Ammunition, and assisted to drive the men up with our Sabres, and by riding up against them with our Horses, under a fearful fire of musketry, although the bullets seemed to strike everywhere, one actually grazed my boots, I remained unhurt. I cannot sufficiently praise the conduct of my little Horse, who behaved admirably and appeared perfectly at home, under fire.

I was at the front when the last assault was made with 4 men, brought in the 11th Virginia Regiment of 185 men, commanded by a Major. I am at present rather played out being very tired and very hoarse from shouting and cheering on the men.

I write no details, on account of the improbability of this ever reaching you. Yesterday morning just before the fight commenced, I was seized with a terrible

cramp in the stomach. Bilious colic or some such thing, which doubled me completely over, lasted for an hour, and from which I suffered great pain.

We probably know less about the details of the battle than you will ere this reaches you, but Gen' Gibbs said that it was one of the most terrific fires of musketry, if not the greatest that he had ever experienced. Last Wednesday morning until Saturday morning it rained incessantly, consequently the wagons were stuck in the mud, and over H' Qr's having all our Baggage in them, fared much worse than the common Troopers, who carry their shelter tents with them on Pack Mules.

We have had no shelter during the night, and my Poncho served me very well. We expect our wagons up today, and our Staff Officers are really in need of food. Last evening just before the firing stopped, we received our mail, and read my letters some of them on the very battlefield. 2 from Father, 1 from Mother, 2 from Roger, one from Rev. Thayer, 1 from Louie Robbins, and you may imagine my delight. During one of our night marches, my Horse floundered in a mud hole, turning almost a complete somersault, throwing my Sabre, which I valued so much, but of the Scabbard, which instantly sinking in the mud, I lost.

How lovely was it to see dear Father at Hancock's Station. It nearly unmanned me. I hope you are all well, and please do not feel too anxious about me, you must thank all my dear friends for their kind letters and messages to me. Best love to dear Grandfather. Gen' Gibbs wishes to be very kindly remembered to you all and will write as soon as possible.

Your affc' Son H. W. Wolcott

April 2, 1865"

Not long after the battle Huntington's health began to decline. On April 23, 1865, he wrote home first reflecting on his desire to return to Milton, followed by an optimistic prediction regarding his health:

"Dear Father, Mother and Roger,

I address the whole family, because on this beautiful Sunday morning I have been thinking of you, as being altogether at Blue Hill, either seated on the Piazza sunning yourselves, or riding to Church, through that beautiful Road overspread with Elms.

What do you think we had for breakfast this morning? Real old fashioned Fish Balls; to be sure not quite so delicious as those which Bessie sends up once a week to the breakfast table; but still very well cooked, and very nice in comparison with our usual diet. It is my turn now to be caterer to our mess, and the Fish Balls were the result of my genius, or rather of my desire to have something that would remind me of home.

I am sorry to inform you that I have been quite unwell during the last few days, but owing to fasting and some Pills prescribed by Dr. Johnson, I am fortunately improving rapidly, and shall probably be entirely recovered by tomorrow or the day after."

Huntington again wrote to his brother, Roger, on May 7, 1865:

"I am so glad that you are at last settled at dear old Blue Hill, it does me good to think of you as there, and the vision of cool breezes, fresh green Trees, and Orchards in full bloom, is very refreshing down here in this hot Camp. What fun you, and Ned must have had during those two days of vacation, are you adding any new specimens to your collection of Birds?"

The May 7th letter to his brother would be Huntington's last. The illness to which he had earlier referred would ultimately be diagnosed as typhoid fever. According to the Boston *Evening Traveller* he was taken to the house in Milton, about which he had so often written on the battlefield, so "that he might be saved by breathing again his native air." He passed away on June 9th, 1865.

Henry Cabot Lodge, a childhood friend and classmate of both Roger and Huntington who would go on to become a highly-influential senator, recalled thirty-five years later:

"There is in memory no space between the elder brother at school and the next scene. In reality there was an interval of brave, active service, even while we boys at home played on as before. All this vanishes in recollection. He had gone to the front, he had come home wasted with fever, he was dead, that was all we knew."

(Lodge, 1901)

In an obituary that appeared in the Boston *Evening Transcript* on June 12, 1865, he was memorialized in a deeply personal, emotional letter:

> *"Lieutenant Huntington Frothingham Wolcott, died at the country seat of his father, J. Huntington Wolcott, Blue Hill, Milton, on the 9th instance [of June]. There is something unusually mournful in the death of this young officer. He had, as it were, but just left school, and it was not easy to realize, when he girded on the sword, that he was not still the beautiful boy, fondly cherished by all who knew him.*
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> *The hope that he might be saved by breathing again his native air, was not fulfilled. He lingered for a few days and then fell asleep. So an agonizing bereavement has visited a loyal circle of kindred amidst the general rejoicing for the return of peace. So one of the costliest sacrifices was demanded just when it seemed the call for sacrifices might cease. So short and brilliant career has given to this community the proud but inexpressibly sad duty of adding to its list of heroes the name of one in whose childlike and gentle heart beat the manliest pulsations, in whose artless bearing could be traced the inspiration of noble desires, seeking to express themselves in noble deeds...*
>
> *The wandering thoughts of his illness were thoughts of duty in his new, and for one nurtured and tenderly cared for as he had been, strange vocation. This unconscious fidelity to the very last, this truthful testimony of partial delirium tells of the conscientiousness, single-mindedness, and heaven-hallowed ambition of that inner being which will be ever unfolding in a brighter sphere. Brief as a bright, quickly passing vision the term assigned him here; and yet how blameless and how complete the career that is measured by days – not years!"*

The 1889-1934 House

As an adult, Roger Wolcott would bring his wife, Edith, his sons Roger Jr. and Oliver, as well as his daughter, Cornelia, to live in his childhood home at Blue Hill from June to September with his parents, Hatty and Joshua Wolcott. The family would also visit on weekends through the spring and fall as Joshua and Hatty would live at Blue Hill from April to November. Their home would have to undergo a substantial renovation after, in 1888, barely a week after the family had returned to Boston from their summer in Milton, the home that Joshua had constructed four decades prior suffered a major fire. The fire is believed to have been spread through the careless placement of oiled rags in the basement that had been used to clean the house's water pump.

> *"The fire gained great headway before it was discovered, and only a few books and some furniture were saved from the first floor by the fire department, aided by all the neighbors, who wasted a great deal of time chopping a hole in the library wall through which they saved the old square piano that had belonged to Great-grandmother…"*
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> - *(Wolcott, 1939)*

The heavy damage from the fire that year provided and opportunity to rebuild and modernize the home, and its 1889 reconstruction resembles the house of today. Modern plumbing brought water through a series of pipes from Blue Hill Avenue to a full bathroom on the first floor and another on the second. A third floor was eventually added for servants' quarters, and dormer windows now peaked above the house's slate roof. In prior summers on Blue Hill, several days worth of meat would be supplied by a horse-drawn covered wagon from West Roxbury. By the late nineteenth century, orders for food were filled from the Faneuil Hall Marketplace and could sent immediately by train to Readville to be picked up by domestic staff.

Joshua and Hatty Wolcott spent their later years advancing access to educational opportunities among former slaves in the south and donated generously to what would become Hampton University. Reflecting on their philanthropy and activism in the advancement of civil

rights, Roger Jr. would recall Booker T Washington as having been "a frequent caller at the house" in Milton.

The family would stable several horses on the property in a purpose-built carriage house adjacent to the house, with names like Dandy Jim, Ladybird, Hudson, Baffin, Fundy and Nolan, along with a two-wheeled buggy for transportation through Milton and to the railroad station in Readville. At Blue Hill, Roger and Edith's children would be looked after by Mary Crowd, a local woman of Ponkapoag and African-American heritage known to have also cared for orphaned children from her home at 970 Canton Avenue, who would teach the Wolcott children folk songs while under her charge. In the evenings, Roger Sr. was known to sit on the piazza off of the kitchen and smoke a cigar while watching summer thunderstorms roll in, and in good weather his children would explore the property:

> *"One of our favorite playgrounds was the brook in back of the stable, now confined in a ditch, but in those days open, with cardinal flowers, frogs and endless opportunities for hydraulic opportunities in the shape of dams. [We] smeared our faces and bodies with mud and rushed into the house with terrifying war whoops… after which each of us was locked into a separate bathroom until he announced that he was clean."*
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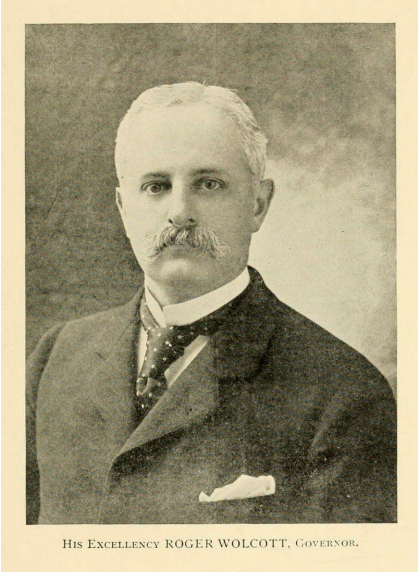
> - *(Wolcott,1939)*


His Excellency ROGER WOLCOTT, Governor.

Roger Wolcott entered politics in 1877 with his election the Boston Common Council (today's City Council). A progressive reformer from a tradition of pro-Reconstruction Republicans, Wolcott would lead the many members of the party in Massachusetts known as "mugwumps" who would side with the Democrats in 1884 to support Grover Cleveland. His reputation as an anti-corruption reformer would lead to his election as Lieutenant Governor of Massachusetts in 1892 and would be governor by 1897.

Events in and outside of Massachusetts would come to define the political life of Roger Wolcott. His robust support for the entry of the United States into the Spanish-American War would help build his national profile, though his accomplishments in the Commonwealth would also set him apart from prior governors. In 1897 he would open America's first subway line; plaques above the entrances of Boylston and Park Street Stations still bear his name. He would also steward the state through the end of a severe recession, end talk of relocating the state capital to either Worcester or Springfield, and dedicate the memorial

to Robert Gould Shaw and the Massachusetts 54th Regiment immediately opposite the State House.

The electorate came to associate Roger Wolcott with personal integrity in an era of widespread corruption, and his having run counter to a political culture that would soon give rise to politicians such as James Michael Curley, along with other political machines and party bosses. On April 9, 1891, the Boston *Globe* quoted Roger as having claimed in a speech that "no word of mine shall ever be uttered to depreciate that robust and virile indepence in politics which holds country and honor above party." He went on to say that party affiliation should be used "as a weapon, but never as a yoke."

Senator Henry Cabot Lodge would describe Wolcott's political ideology as "not turned aside either by the pressure of great corporations" or driven "by anxiety as to the effect of his action upon his own fortunes."

> *"Every time I saw him rise and address an audience, I felt a fresh glow of delight as I looked at him and thought how completely the stately figure, the clear and dignified speech, the honesty of purpose and high-minded devotion to duty which could be read in his face and heard in his words befitted the great office which he held."*
>
> - *(Lodge, 1901)*

In January, 1900, Roger Wolcott would complete his tenure as governor, after having been elected by the widest margin in Massachusetts history. He took his family to Europe for an extended vacation, during which time he was offered by President William McKinley to be Governor-General of the Philippines (a post that would eventually go to the president's second choice, future president Taft) which he would turn down citing his desire to spend time with his children. While visiting Europe McKinley would again offer Roger a foreign post, ambassador to Italy, which he would turn down citing the need to attend to his personal life.

Roger returned from Europe in November, 1900, and with great fanfare cast his vote for the reelection of William McKinley. He was then seen attending a Harvard football game, and there was much public speculation as to what the fifty-three-year-old former governor had planned for his political future. Within two weeks of his return he fell ill. His doctor, C. P. Putnam, diagnosed his ailment as typhoid which he had contracted through "some article of food or drink," as he would later tell the Boston *Globe*.

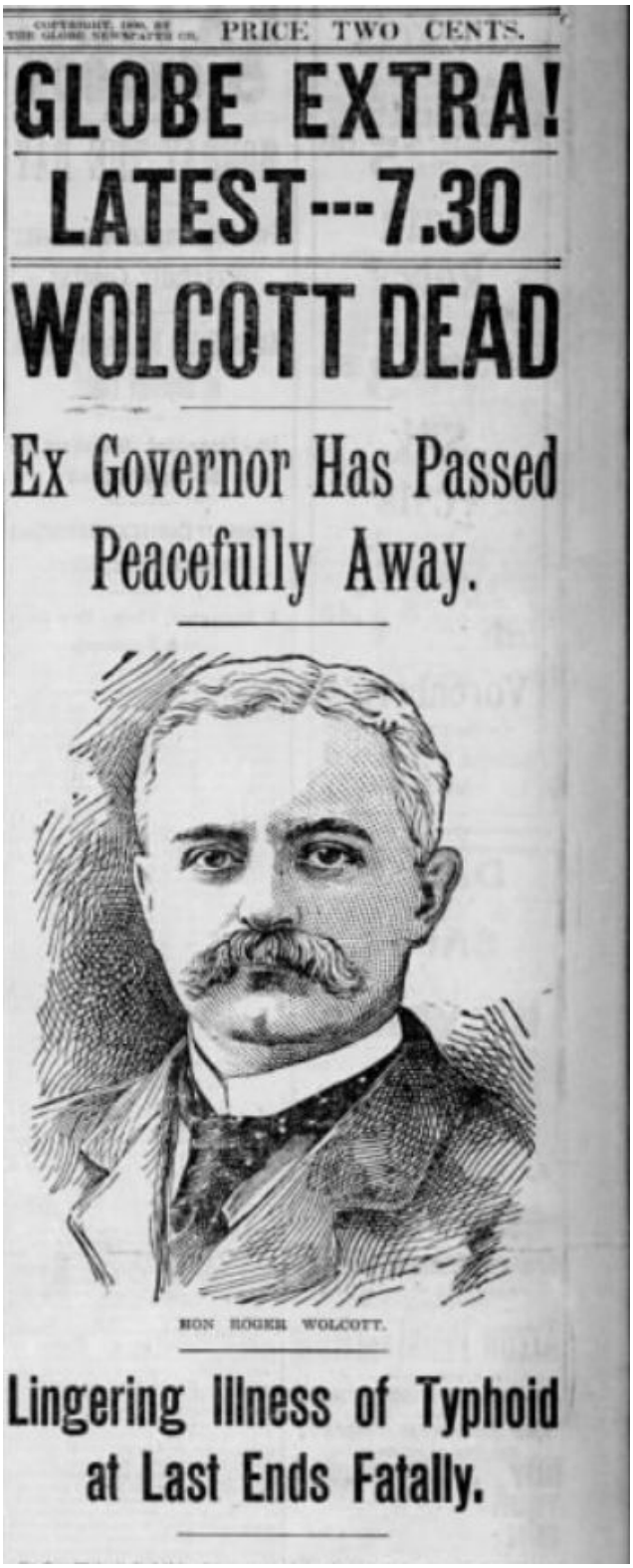
Typhoid, a bacterial infection, is today easily treated with antibiotics, though in Roger Wolcott's era a diagnosis could lead to a lengthy and excruciating death as the patient slowly starved and dehydrated. His doctor noted that "as the disease developed the effect on his mind became more marked, as is quite a natural symptom" and despite several occasions during

which the former governor appeared to improve, his health declined rapidly by mid-December. He died in his family's winter apartment at 173 Commonwealth Avenue in Boston on December 21, 1900.

"The news of his death, which was given to the public in an extra Globe, soon became known throughout the city and suburbs, and expressions of sympathy for the family, as well as sorrow for the great loss to the community in which he lived and to the state as large were heard on all sides"

-(Boston Globe, 1900)

Roger Wolcott's funeral was held on January 7, 1901 at Trinity Church in Copley Square. A crowd gathered in the cold outside, and all streetcars in Copley Square came to a halt in deference to the former governor as his remains were carried from the church and loaded into a Mt. Auburn-bound hearse. On April 18, 1901, a public memorial service was held for the former governor at Symphony Hall in Boston, the city's grandest venue hall and, having been opened only in October of 1900, almost certainly its newest. Nearly the entire first floor, and all of the first balcony seats were filled by nearly every elected official in Massachusetts. The public were allowed in any available seats on the second floor balcony, all of which were claimed within five minutes. The hall was filled to its over 2,600 person capacity.



PRICE TWO CENTS.

GLOBE EXTRA!

LATEST---7.30

WOLCOTT DEAD

Ex Governor Has Passed Peacefully Away.

HON ROGER WOLCOTT.

Lingering Illness of Typhoid at Last Ends Fatally.

Reverend Edward Everett Hale presided over the service, leading with a prayer. The governor was then eulogized by his friend since childhood, Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, who shared heartfelt memories of a life spent with the Wolcott family, and Roger's near-universal popularity in Massachusetts.

> *"When he died there came a hush over the old Commonwealth. Among the distant hills in crowded city streets and by the sounding sea, men and women paused. Grief was in their hearts and words of sorrow on their lips…It was no formal sorrow, no official grief which thus found expression. It came from the heart, from the heart of a great people who had known and loved him."*
>
> - *(Lodge, 1901)*

On December 31, 1906, hundreds of admirers of Roger Wolcott gathered in the Massachusetts State House for the unveiling of a larger-than-life bronze statue of their former governor, seated in a chair alongside a memorial to veterans of the Spanish-American War. The statue and memorial had been funded by the contributions of more than 10,000 people from Massachusetts and twenty-two other states, who in only three months raised an astonishing $40,000, or $1.12 million in 2018 dollars. Above the governor's statue reads an inscription:

> *"Erected with offerings from thousands of Massachusetts people to express their love and admiration for Governor Wolcott. To keep before future generations his high example of civic virtue."*

The 1934 - 2018 House

The Wolcott family rented and, later, sold Blue Hill to the Lowell family who would make several renovations and modernizations around the year of the family's European trip in 1900. After only a few years of outside ownership, the house was sold back to the Wolcott family with Roger Wolcott Jr. taking ownership in 1906.

A substantial change took place in 1934 under the direction of Roger Jr., when the house was converted from a summer house to a year-round home. Stucco and concrete covered the clapboard siding, at the cost of much of the ornamentation and the porte-cochère from the 1889 reconstruction. The house would pass from Roger Jr. to Sam Wolcott, who in 1987 sold the property to my grandfather, Ken Carberry.

Though the house has been added to and modified several times through its history, with each generation altering it so as to meet the modern needs of the home's residents, evidence from the original house and its inhabitants can still be found. Architectural features such as the massive living room fireplace and the grand brick structural support arches in the basement speak not only to the building's age, but to the quality of its original construction persisting to this day despite fire and substantial structural transformation. Other reminders of the property's past arise with the occasional 19th century glass bottle or errant tin soldier dug up from the backyard. It is my hope that with the home's next transformation soon to take place, more clues as to the house's past will be uncovered and shared as to provide more information and to better understand the lives of those who have previously lived in the house called Blue Hill.

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