

# Benjamin Bussey, Woodland Hill, and the Creation of the Arnold Arboretum

Mary Jane Wilson

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The Arnold Arboretum was officially established in March 1872, when an indenture was signed by which trustees of a bequest of James Arnold agreed to turn the fund over to Harvard College, provided the college would use it to develop an arboretum on land bequeathed earlier by Benjamin Bussey . . . An intense regard for the land and for agricultural endeavor led Bussey to leave a large portion of his fortune and all of his property in West Roxbury to Harvard College for the creation of an institution for instruction in farming, horticulture, botany, and related fields. —Ida Hay, *Science in the Pleasure Ground*

The following is adapted from the first full-length life of Bussey, soon to be published in its entirety.

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I first met Benjamin Bussey when I opened an old family box labeled “Important Papers—Save.” Inside I found more than two hundred documents, primarily letters written in the early 1800s, addressed to a Benjamin Bussey of Boston. It appeared that Bussey was a man of importance in Federalist New England and that here was a story to be told. My research confirmed that, indeed, Bussey was an outstanding New Englander. The letters found in that box have allowed me to piece together Benjamin Bussey’s life and encouraged the telling of his story. May history better remember and recognize this extraordinary man who bettered the world in which he lived and whose legacy remains today in a most special way, enhancing the lives of untold others, through the Arnold Arboretum.

Benjamin Bussey (1757–1842) played an important role in the growth of commerce, manufacturing, and agriculture in New England. After a childhood of frugal living and hard work and a soldier’s travails in the American Revolution, he became a merchant, eventually amassing a great fortune from European trade. He was also on the cutting edge of New England’s manufacturing industry, with woolen mills in Dedham,

Massachusetts, that introduced the water-driven Broad Power Loom to America. Throughout his life he was a benefactor to many individuals as well as to religious and civic organizations.

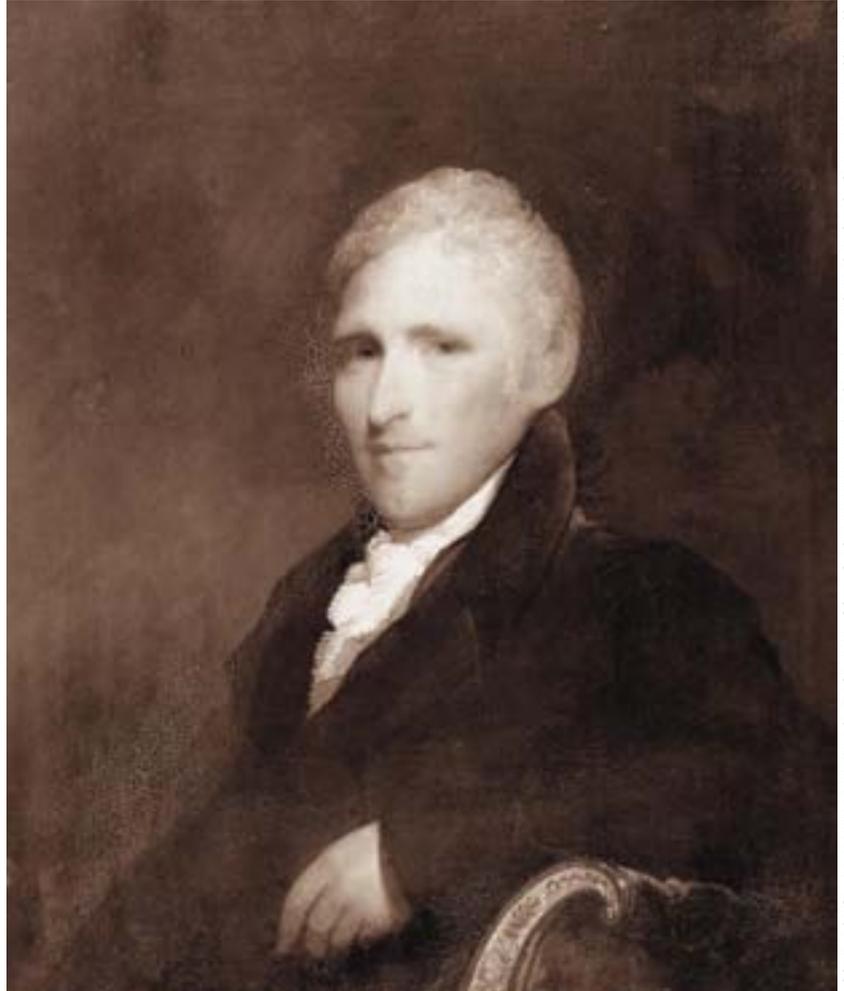
As a farmer Bussey acquired vast tracts of land from Boston, Massachusetts, to Bangor, Maine. At his country estate, Woodland Hill, he demonstrated his support for the new movement called “scientific farming.” His sponsorship of agricultural education, “remarkable in its foresight,”<sup>1</sup> led to his bequest to Harvard College of Woodland Hill for a school of agriculture and horticulture. Harvard honored his bequest in 1869 with the creation of the Bussey Institution.

The years have obscured his name. His mills in Dedham are gone, his properties in Maine in great part absorbed by the city of Bangor. Only traces of his life remain in the landscape: a street bearing the Bussey name in Dedham and a hilltop and a brook named for him at the Arnold Arboretum.

Bussey had accumulated a great fortune by the early 1800s. Around the same time, a combination of embargos, falling markets, and failing enterprises made the shipping business

less attractive, and he retired from the merchant life. Five Summer Street in Boston had been his home since 1798. The property included a mansion with grounds and gardens and a carriage house for the family's horses and vehicles. In 1806 he purchased the farm of Eleazer Weld, located in what was then known as West Roxbury, now the Jamaica Plain/Forest Hills section of Boston, an area popular for country seats and summer relaxation. Several of Bussey's friends had already established country estates. Joseph Barrell built Pleasant Hill in Charlestown in 1791; Theodore Lyman, The Vale in 1793 in Waltham; and John Codman renovated the Russell estate in Lincoln in 1797. These gentlemen farmers used new experimental methods to develop their lands. In 1792, twenty-one lawyers, doctors, politicians, and merchants chartered the Massachusetts Society for Promoting Agriculture (MSPA). The Society acquired and disbursed information on crop rotation, reforestation, and the use of cattle to provide natural fertilizer. Bussey joined the Society in 1803.

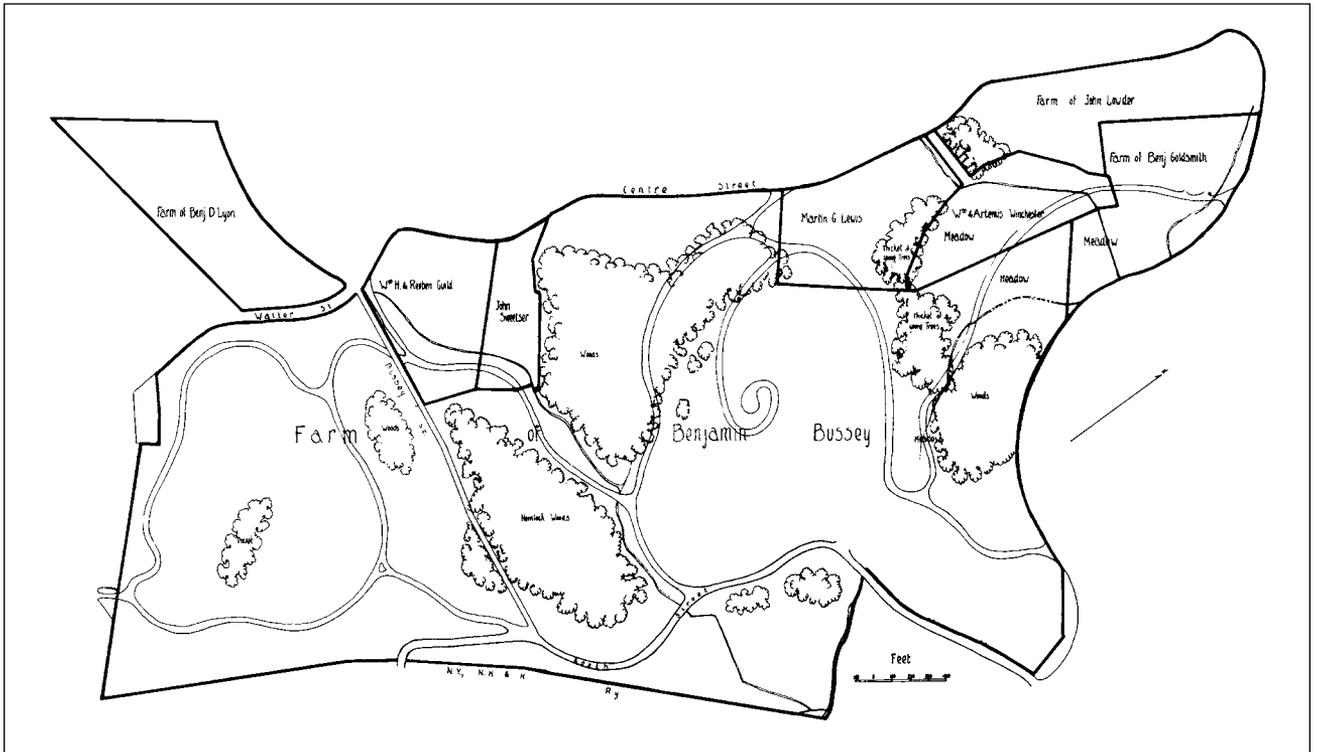
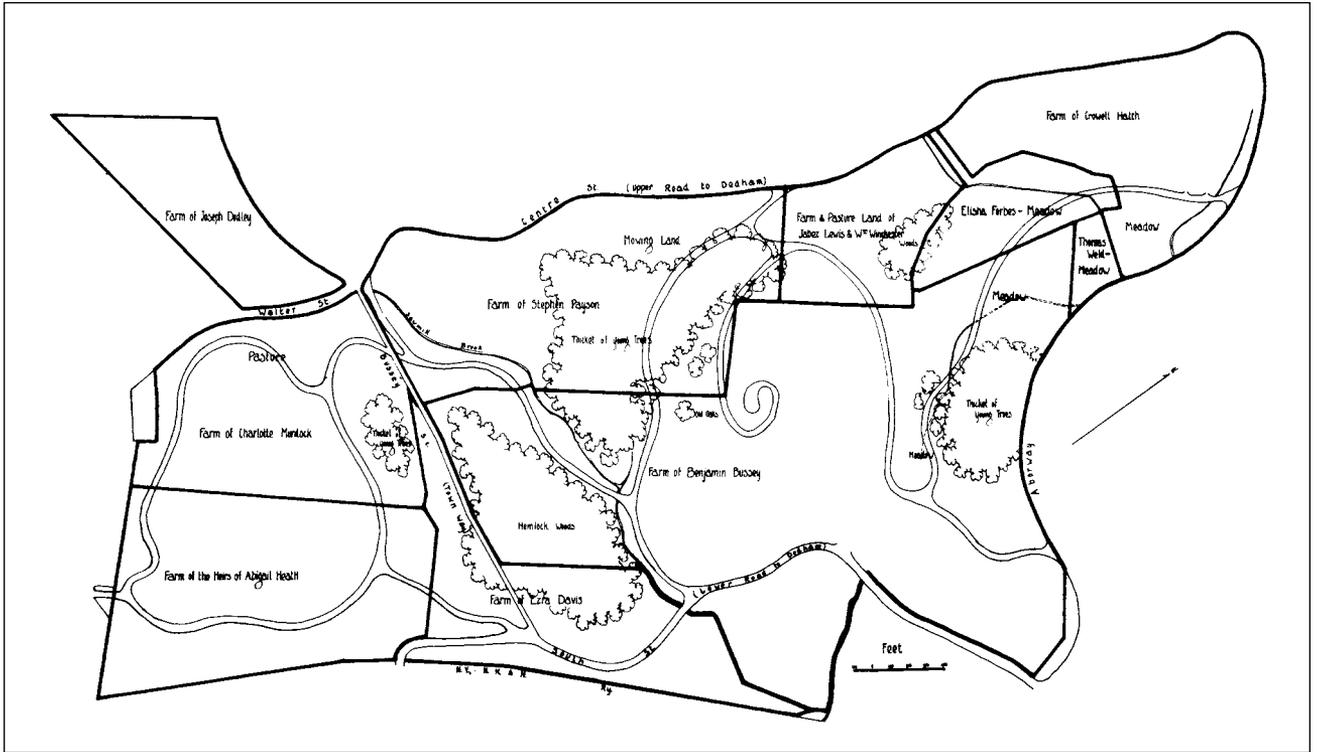
At this point in his life Bussey was virtually free to devote his time to managing his investments and his real estate. His son and daughter were grown and on their own: Benjamin III had graduated from Harvard and Eliza had married. Developing his estate was now the major focus of his life, becoming both an experiment in developing his interest in scientific farming and an outlet for the attachment to the land that had formed in his childhood and progressed to ornamental gardening at the Summer Street residence. The spacious meadows, hills, and brooks, and the excellence and variety of the Jamaica Plain landscape spoke to his agrarian nature. Wood-



*In 1808 Bussey made arrangements with the famed portraitist Gilbert Stuart to paint the family's portraits. Bussey's own was the last to be finished. Reporting on its progress after a visit to Stuart's studio, daughter Eliza wrote to her mother, who was with Benjamin in Bangor, "It is the very image of himself and the pleasure I have in viewing it lessens the pain of our separation for I feel as tho' in his presence when I look at the portrait."*

land Hill would eventually grow to encompass more than three hundred acres.

Bussey immediately assumed management of the farm operations. Farmhands were hired and a woman, Anna Sherman, was employed to watch over the farmhouse needs. The land was plowed and planted with new products such as Liberian wheat, and outbuildings were erected, including a barn to house the livestock, cattle, swine, and the newly introduced merino sheep. He also targeted reforestation for an important role in his farming activities. Except for one stand of trees (later known as Hemlock Hill)



Maps of land that now comprises the Arnold Arboretum. Benjamin Bussey greatly expanded his holdings between 1810 (above) and 1840 (below).



COURTESY OF MRS. GEORGE SKINNER, ARCHIVES OF THE ARNOLD ARBORETUM

*The mansion on Bussey Hill photographed in the 1930s.*

and a hillside oak that had escaped cutting, the land was treeless, having been cleared to supply the city with firewood, to raise hay, and to graze animals. Shortly after the purchase of the farm Bussey established the first of his woodlots, and by 1810 several areas of young woods were growing. He added numerous species of trees and shrubs to the estate, including European larch, catalpa, honey locust, and silver fir.

Bussey chose to site his mansion on the south side of Weld Hill (now known as Bussey Hill), a commanding location that overlooked the great variety in his landscape: woods, brooks, fields, and meadows. While supervising the farm operations, he watched his new home rise. If he was away, his daughter Eliza and her husband Charles followed the progress of the building. In July of 1816, when Bussey and his wife Judith were enjoying a visit to Saratoga Springs, Eliza sent word that the new house was beginning to look finished, with windows set in the upper stories and the tops of the piazzas shingled.<sup>2</sup> Charles reported a few days later on both farm and house.

[T]he hay of all sorts and the barley are now under cover . . . and the fields are seldom so verdant as the rain Sunday was a constant pour. Joe came very near losing his chickens, many apparently dead after the flood. We brought them into the house and by the application of flannel and by the children's hands all but three were restored to their anxious mothers. The work at the new house proceeds with regularity. About two thirds of the plastering is Finished . . . that in the attic and in the entry leading to it has many small cracks in it owing to its drying too fast, occasioned by its proximity to the roof . . . I have cut the dead limbs from the trees in the woods near the walk and the stone wall is finished to the bottom of the summer house. I have also taken the dead wood from the honeysuckles. We have had some days past the company of Miss Ely and her sister from Hartford . . . have taken tea with Aunt Lowder and have had Mr. and Mrs. Parsons with us at dinner yesterday.<sup>3</sup>

The finished mansion was a model of stately neoclassical elegance. It was approached by a gravel carriage road lined with gutters of granite sea pebbles and bordered with white pines

and horsechestnuts. At the top of the steep incline the road ended in a turnaround at the mansion entrance, where granite steps led to a front porch floored with white marble tiles. The interior of the house reflected the popularity of French decor at the time. The dining room wallpaper was of Paris views and monuments. The drawing room and parlor floors were covered with Brussels carpets. Damask draperies hung at the windows and throughout the house were costly French furnishings, such as the settee and set of chairs with needlework upholstery that Bussey had acquired at the close of the French Revolution.

Other accoutrements were added over the years. In 1818 Bussey purchased a copy of the Declaration of Independence for ten dollars, and in 1832, five copies of old masters painted by Rembrandt Peale. Peale sent a note with them expressing his gratitude "that five of his best copies of the masters would reside together in Bussey's hospitable mansion where they would be appreciated properly."<sup>4</sup>

Plantings around the mansion included a wide-spreading American elm, a weeping beech, and a black oak that in time would offer cooling shade. Nearby were cherry and mulberry trees. A few yards from the house, a crescent-shaped pond was fed by an underground reservoir that piped water down to the house. Stone steps and a cobblestone path wound up the hill behind the house, bordered with lilacs and white pines that screened the distant working farm. Myrtle and lilies-of-the-valley covered the ground beneath the trees. At the crest of the hill was the stone-based summerhouse where Bussey and his friends viewed the distant Great Blue Hill and the town of Boston. Looking upward observers could see the heavens, and looking downward on a clear night, the stars were reflected in the crescent pool. The summerhouse later became an observatory.

Friends and neighbors came to Woodland Hill to stroll through the ornamental plantings or to climb the hill to the summerhouse, passing by the sweet-smelling lilacs. Some came for tea, others for dinner. The mansion's spacious rooms and many chairs (the west drawing room alone

held forty-two) allowed the Busseys to entertain large groups. French china, silver pitchers, and crystal goblets made for elegant serving. Much of the food grew on Bussey's land: the cherries came from the orchards, the rhubarb from the garden, and his livestock provided the popular roasted veal and calves-head soup.

His neighbors included Enoch Bartlett of Bartlett pear fame; John Warren, a distinguished physician, known for his Roxbury russet apple; and Joseph Story, associate justice of the United States Supreme Court and a Harvard law professor. One frequent visitor, Dr. Thomas Gray, minister of the Third Parish in Roxbury, often came for dinner following the Sunday worship service. The short distance between the church and Woodland Hill made it very convenient for Gray to visit Bussey as well as for Bussey to attend the meetinghouse.

Relatives and their families also spent many hours at Woodland Hill. They came, mostly from Boston, either by personal coach or by the public stage that had begun hourly service to Roxbury for twelve-and-a-half cents per passage. Eliza and Charles, living at 7 Summer Street, Boston, brought their daughters Judith, Eleanor, Eliza, and Maria to play in the woods and meadows.

Bussey participated in local activities and hosted visiting dignitaries when they came to town. In 1824, when the Revolutionary War hero Lafayette visited Roxbury, he joined the prominent politician H. A. S. Dearborn and Governor William Eustis in paying homage to this well-loved personage. Later, when President Andrew Jackson came to Boston, he joined in another grand procession: Vice President Martin Van Buren rode in Bussey's yellow coach drawn by a team of "six horses, richly caparisoned, and attended by liveried servants."<sup>5</sup>

In his seventies, Bussey placed the farming operations under the direction of his grandson-in-law, Francis Head. Comfortably settled in their mansion, the Busseys enjoyed their Peale paintings along with Gilbert Stuart's portraits of the family, the busts of John Adams, General Henry Jackson, George Washington, and one of Benjamin himself. Outdoor sculptures, Ital-



PHOTOGRAPH BY KENNETH R. ROBERTSON, ARCHIVES OF THE ARNOLD ARBORETUM

*Benjamin Bussey planted this American elm (Ulmus americana) in front of his mansion, where it remained for a century and a half, until the mid 1970s, when it became one of the last of its kind in the Arnold Arboretum to succumb to Dutch elm disease.*

ian marble statues and vases, were set along the carriage turnaround and at the mansion's entrance.

The orchards produced acceptable apricots and juicy plums and massard cherries that Bussey said were "for the birds because they took their full share." He added to the beauty of the rhododendrons, tulip trees, and lilacs with trails that wound through the woods, rude

bridges that crossed Bussey Brook, and gold and silver fish that swam in a willow-bordered pond.<sup>6</sup> He continued building a fence of giant ashlar to encompass the entire estate. Some stones were two to three feet in length.

By 1841, when Woodland Hill had reached a pleasing maturity and had grown in size through the purchase of several additional farms, Bussey opened the gates to the public so that others

might share in the beauty of the land. In May of that year, the final codicil of his will was signed. After generously providing for his family, for three good friends, and for the Boston Female Asylum, Bussey set forth a plan to benefit his fellow man through Harvard University.

First, he directed a large portion of his estate to Harvard's schools of law and theology, the two branches of education he considered most important in advancing "the prosperity and happiness of our common country." Second, he provided for a school of agriculture and horticulture. Following the deaths of any heirs and their families, Woodland Hill and his Boston real estate were to be conveyed to the President and Fellows of Harvard College. He ordered the trustees to retain the estate and with the monies and other properties he conveyed to them

to establish "a course of instruction in practical agriculture, ornamental gardening, botany, and other branches of natural science . . . to be called the Bussey Institution . . ." One-half of the income from his estates and property was to be used to support the institution; the other half was for the endowment of professorships or scholarships in the law and divinity schools.

On the evening of January 13, 1842, Benjamin Bussey Esq. died at his seat in Jamaica Plain, aged eighty-five years, a distinguished merchant of Boston, manufacturer of Dedham, benefactor of New England, and master of Woodland Hill.

The deed for the Woodland Hill estate was conveyed to Harvard College by the trustees of the Bussey estate on August 28, 1861. The Bussey Institution's School of Agriculture offered a



*This Gothic Revival building housed the Bussey Institution of Harvard University beginning in 1871, as directed by Bussey's will. It was demolished after a destructive fire in 1971.*

three-year program in farming, horticulture, agricultural chemistry, economic zoology, and entomology. Students were taken into the fields as an introduction to practical farming and later to the Arboretum to study and collect plant specimens. The enrollment was small and decreased even more after land-grant colleges were established. In 1908 the Bussey was reorganized as a research institution with graduate instruction only, and in 1936 its activities were integrated with the biology laboratories of Harvard and the Institution itself was closed.

In the 1870s, just after the Bussey Institution's inception, a portion of Woodland Hill was incorporated by Harvard as part of a new venture, the creation of an arboretum. The nation's first public arboretum was named, not for Bussey but for James Arnold, the New Bedford merchant who donated the funds for its development. Although Bussey's connection to the land was obscured, the Arnold Arboretum offered in great measure what he had desired—education and recreation to untold numbers of citizens who daily walk the grounds and know its beauty. Benjamin Bussey's name lives on through the remaining professorships endowed by his will, through the learning passed on by the hundreds of students of the Bussey Institution, and through the work of Harvard's Biological Laboratories.

#### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> "The Bussey Institution 1871–1929," William Morton Wheeler, in *The Development of Harvard University Since the Inauguration of President Eliot 1869–1929*, ed. Samuel Eliot Morison (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1930), p. 508.
- <sup>2</sup> Bussey letter, Jul. 1816, Bussey Papers, Dedham Historical Society.



*Remnants of Bussey's outbuildings stood on Bussey Hill into the 1990s.*

- <sup>3</sup> Letters #46, Aug. 2, 1813, and #45, Aug. 13, 1816, Bussey Collection, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.
- <sup>4</sup> Peale letter to Bussey, Nov. 3, 1832, Special Collections, Getty Center Institution for History of Art and the Humanities, Los Angeles, California.
- <sup>5</sup> *Annals and Reminiscences of Jamaica Plain*, Harriet Manning Whitcomb (Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press, 1897), p. 54.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.
- <sup>7</sup> Will of Benjamin Bussey, Norfolk County, Massachusetts, Probate Court.

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Mary Jane Wilson is a Michigan native with a lifelong interest in Michigan history. Her local and state involvement includes the establishment of the Friends of the Capitol, Inc., and the Docent Guild of the Michigan Historical Center. Her writings include "The Watch of the Capitol," "Lansing, A Look to the Past," and "The Junior League of Lansing 1948–2003."