

White Cliffs & Daniel Wesson

Overview November 23, 2014

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Let me start by welcoming everyone to this special event. It's a rare opportunity we have today, to explore the public areas of this grand mansion. I'd like to thank my partners in pulling together information on the White Cliffs and Daniel Wesson. Both are experts in this area. Bob Ellis, the Society Historian. Brian Smith, who created the White Cliffs video some 20 years ago. The first 20 minutes of this video are being shown in the bar area. The entire 90 minute video is available to purchase for a small donation.

1. This mansion was originally built by Daniel B. Wesson (of Smith & Wesson fame) when he was 61 years old in the late 1880's. It was built as a summer home. This was only one of the ten mansions he built during his lifetime and the last one standing.
2. As you can tell, Mr. Wesson was a very wealthy man. This is a result of his successful firearms business in Springfield, Massachusetts.
3. The estate originally contained some 100 acres with stables for expensive horses, carriage roads, ponds, bridges, fountains, a large greenhouse, housing for employees and a sophisticated water system that pumped water from Bartlett pond to the Mansion grounds.
4. The mansion contained elaborate carvings, stained glass windows, gas lit chandeliers, 17 fireplaces and 32 rooms. European craftsmen were brought in for the construction. It was said that each room was made of wood from a different part of the world with furniture to match.

1. The story of the White Cliffs began in March of 1840, when Captain Cyrus Gale agreed to rent a shop near the Assabet River in Northborough to a gunsmith who had been working in Grafton. This gunsmith was Daniel Wesson's older brother Edwin.

Edwin was already known as the best maker of rifles and pistols for target practice.

2. In 1843, eighteen-year-old Daniel became his apprentice. While learning the trade, Daniel fell in love with Cynthia Hawes, who lived a bit further east on Main Street.
3. We know that her father did not believe that Daniel had much of a future. He is quoted to have said that “Daniel was a mere gunsmith with no future.” As a result, Cynthia and Daniel eloped to Connecticut in 1847 where Edwin had moved his business.
4. After Edwin's early death at the age of 37 in 1850, Daniel stayed in the firearms industry. The same year, while working as sub-contractor in Vermont he met Horace Smith. They decided to set up their own business but it failed a few years later . They sold their technology to Oliver Winchester and their technology became the basic design for the famous Winchester Repeating Rifle.
5. In 1856 Smith & Wesson started their second company based on a newly designed small revolver that used their patented cartridge. They built their manufacturing facility in Springfield Ma. With the onset of the Civil War, their business grew rapidly. By 1865 they each had reported incomes of \$160,000 per year making them the wealthiest men in Springfield MA.

1. In the early 1880s, after the deaths of his wife's parents, Daniel agreed to his wife's request that they build a summer home near her childhood address. After the death of the Wessons it was noted that the Hawes “lived upon a part of the premises of the present Wesson mansion, their old well now beneath the rustic pagoda-like structure near the street.” Many of you will remember this structure, removed at the time of the construction of Stratton Way in 1993.

2. After the completion of the mansion in 1886, they came to Northborough every summer until about 1901, when their health began to fail.

We have some information regarding Mr. Wesson from locals interviewed shortly after his death in 1906.

1. Mr. Charles Anson Rice noted that Daniel Wesson and his brothers “*were quiet, sober and industrious.*”
2. He also commented about the lion fountain that Daniel Wesson gave to the town. It appears there was a dispute over its location. “*This caused the placement of the lion fountain a rupture within the community. The Wesson fountain had a sort of cold reception. What would have become of the thing, the Lord only knows, if certain enterprising citizens had not assembled one night when the greater part of Northboro was sound asleep and firmly planted that fountain where it has since remained, directly in front of the town hall.*”
3. A Mr. Henry Leonard, who was the superintendent of Daniel Wesson's property, mentioned “*I have never met a more kindly man, He was just in all his dealings with his fellows and his death was a great loss to his family and friends, He took a great interest in his conservatory, said to be one of the finest buildings of the kind in the state, while his power house for the water supply was also a favorite structure.*”

After the death of Daniel and Cynthia Wesson,

1. A newspaper article in 1910 reported that Alfred Thomas, born in England and settled in Worcester, had bought the property for somewhat less than the million dollars that it had reportedly cost to construct it.
2. Thomas retained “everything but the water rights at Bartlett Pond,” for by this time

town water was available.

3. He was quoted as saying that “the place appealed to me because of its English style. The mansion looks like English, and the surroundings are decidedly English. I have a fancy for that kind of style. An Englishman is brought up to like trees and flowers about him, and that's just what appeals to me most on this property.” HILLARY is that true??
4. Mr. Thomas was a manufacturer and vice president of a street railway in Worcester, summered in the White Cliffs as the Wessons had done and used it until 1926.
5. The greenhouse was then sold and removed from its site.
6. Thereafter the White Cliffs had other owners, but since the World War II era it has served as a site for social functions, weddings, and as a restaurant. The large function room and kitchen were added in 1969.
7. After World War II, Warren Drive and St. James Drive were built and developed just outside the beautiful east and west stone walls of the principal lot. Wesson buildings across Main Street and on Maple Street served as homes or for businesses.
8. The outer ring of the White Cliffs gave way to a new street, Stratton Way, in 1993. At that time some of the remaining features—such as the enclosed well near Main Street and the well-defined pool bed near the Assabet—have all disappeared.
9. Now we must look at old photographs and at Brian Smith's tape to see them.
10. So on that note: I'll leave you to look at the old photographs we've collected, Brian's video and the craftsmanship so we can all appreciate the summer home of Daniel & Cynthia Wesson.

Thank You