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## Belmont's oldest home predates the town

By ADAM DRAPCHO, THE LACONIA DAILY SUN  
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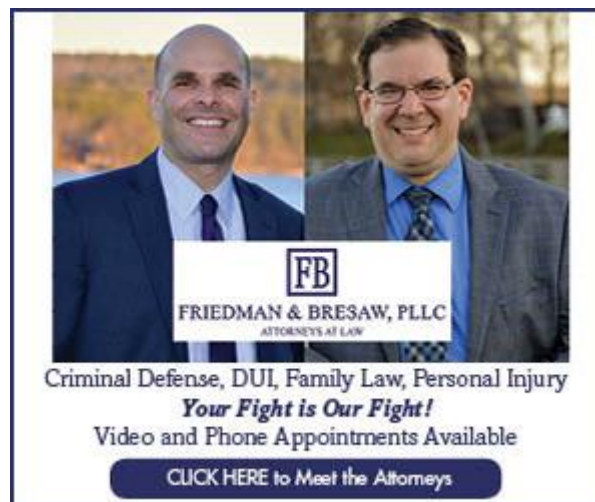


Known as the Governor Badger Home, this circa 1784 structure is thought to be the oldest in Belmont. (Adam Drapcho/The

BELMONT — In “Reminiscences of a New Hampshire Town,” published in 1969 to celebrate Belmont’s centennial, Wallace P. Rhodes noted that early settlers of New England’s towns likely experienced great adventures and overcame equally great challenges. It is unfortunate for us that they were too preoccupied with the arduous tasks before them to record the vast majority of those stories. In fact, if it weren’t for the roads, bridges, geographic features or cemeteries bearing their names, they might have been lost to history entirely.

Fortunately, that’s not the case for the oldest house in Belmont, the Governor Badger Home, due to the prominence of one of its residents.

## Governor Badger



William Badger, born to a farming family, is credited for helping to bring his corner of what was then Gilmanton into an industrial era.

“Perhaps the most important event in the town’s history was the purchase by William Badger in 1832 of the Fellows Mills, which included the water rights to the ‘Great Brook.’ These original mills were rebuilt and operated by Governor Badger until his death in 1852,” Rhodes wrote in “Reminiscences.”

Joseph Fellows built a water-powered saw and grist mill at the rapids of “Great Brook,” as the Tioga River was then known. An early example of hydropower, the facility was used by local farmers to grind grain and to cut raw lumber into shingles or boards. That mill created a “nucleus,” as Rhodes wrote, around which the current village of Belmont arose.

That development was significant in the town's history, but it was Badger who brought the village into the industrial age. In the same year that he purchased the mill, Badger, along with some business partners, formed the Gilmanton Village Manufacturing Company, and constructed a building to spin cotton and weave the threads into sheets. It required a change to the landscape of the village, including a relocation of Main Street and constructing a second dam and pond within "Great Brook."

"Construction of the cotton mill immediately stimulated the construction a much enlarged village," Rhodes wrote. Indeed, the change was such that the village assumed a new identity. When Badger first bought the mill, the village was known as "Fellows Mill;" by the time of Badger's death, it was called "Factory Village."

Badger's economic fortunes were swamped in 1852 when an upstream reservoir, 50 acres in size and built to provide steady water flow to the factories, gave way. A clever blacksmith saved his shop by chaining the building to nearby trees, but Badger's mills were ruined. He died a few months later at the age of 73.

Badger was twice married. He first wed Martha Smith in 1803, she died of consumption, as tuberculosis was widely known, in 1810. Four years later, he married Hannah Atkinson, with whom he had two sons, Joseph and William.

Badger was active in civil life. He served as trustee and president of Gilmanton Academy, his alma mater, and became involved in politics as an aide to Governor John Langdon. Badger served in the state house as a representative from 1810 to 1812, and in the NH Senate from 1814 to 1817, including a term as Senate President. He served as High Sheriff for Strafford County from 1820 to 1830, and was elected governor for two terms beginning in 1834.

As a political leader, Badger was ahead of his time on a few issues. He promoted community resistance to epidemics by promoting smallpox prevention in the state's small towns, and he advocated against the death penalty, a fight that New Hampshire capital punishment abolitionists didn't win until 2019.

## **The Badger Home**

The homestead, found at 87 Hackett Hill Road, dates back to 1784, when Belmont was part of Gilmanton. William Badger was alive when the home was built, but he didn't likely have much of a hand in its construction, as he was only five at the time.



There are some discrepancies in the historical records pertaining to the age of the home. Some put it at 1784, while the town's tax map say that the main farmhouse was constructed in 1810. A caption with a photo in Rhodes's book says that the home was rebuilt in 1824.

Roy Roberts, who grew up in the house, said the truth is probably more complicated. Like nearly all New England farmhouses of that era, there are probably a half-dozen different construction periods, either to expand, renovate or repair.

"There's an ell on the back, a smaller piece, I'm not sure it was all built at the same time," Roy said. However, he said that some of the architectural details, such as what he called "Indian shutters," are consistent with other 18th century residences.

The home is still in the Roberts family, as Roy's brother and sister-in-law are its current occupants.

While it was once the stately home of the state's top executive, it was a definite fixer-upper in 1950, nearly a century after Badger's death, when it was purchased by Leslie and Sue Roberts, Roy's parents.

"It was in relative disrepair when they moved into it, it was empty," Roy said. "That's where we grew up."

The farmhouse has nearly 4,000 square feet of living space spread across two main floors, as well as a full basement and attic. Leslie and Sue needed that space, as they raised five boys in the house, which sits on a hill surrounded by open fields.

He said his memories of growing up there are quintessential New England: helping to bale hay in the warm weather, and waking up on winter mornings to find that snow had blown in through the windows and walls and piled up under his bed.

“There was no central heat in the house when I was young,” Roy said. “There was always a breeze, which was great in June and not so great in January.”

One of Roy’s more vivid memories of living there was a cold afternoon when he came home from school and decided to start a fire in the fireplace.

“In those days there were no flues on the chimneys, so my parents would stuff stuff up the chimneys to keep the cold air out.” Roy hadn’t thought to pull the newspaper and cardboard out before lighting the kindling, which of course ignited the material stuffed above. When he heard the combustion in the chimney and went outside to see flames exiting out the top, he ran inside to call the Fire Department. Knowing the age and history of the structure they were responding to, the reaction was vigorous and hurried, Roy said – but the chimney fire had put itself out before the chief arrived.

For the most part, though, his memories are fonder and more peaceful, such as playing in the snowy fields, or snowshoeing through the woods beyond.

In 1997, Roy got to reprise his youthful experience. He and his wife had five children of their own by then, and had sold their home in Belmont village. They spent a summer living in the old farmhouse while their new home was being constructed.

“It’s a great, grand building,” Roy said. “It’s quite a place.”



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