

Written Profile

Farm: Ridge Hill Farm

Location: Boxborough, MA

Date of Origination: 1682

Industry Sector(s): hay, Angus cattle



Their family story is one that reads like the gripping pages of a historical novel. Established nearly 100 years prior to the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Ridge Hill Farm holds within its soil the stories of hard-working immigrants, the trials of establishing a new country, and a multi-generational love for working the land. We are proud to share the story of Ridge Hill Farm and celebrate their contribution to **Agriculture's Lasting Heritage**.

In the 1600's, as entrepreneurial immigrants made their way to the New World, the foundation of Ridge Hill Farm was laid. In 1629 Zebdiah Wheeler came to Watertown, Massachusetts from his native England. In 1635 he moved to Lancaster, Massachusetts where he lived in a Garrison house with many families. Zebdiah found a piece of land he wanted to purchase, and believing it was in Concord, Zebdiah bought the 300+ acre property for 20 bushels of maize (corn) from the Nipmuk Indians. It was only after he made his purchase that he realized the land was in present day Boxborough. Zebdiah ultimately took the town to court to determine where his land was!

While the family farm can trace back to this purchase from the Nipmuk Indians, the relationship between Native Americans and settlers was not always cordial. In fact, Zebdiah Wheeler's mother was one of the settlers captured and held hostage by the Nipmuk Indians. The release of the hostages was negotiated by family member John Hoar, a militia leader and Indian liaison during King Phillip's War. Their release in 1676 is commemorated at Redemption Rock in Princeton, Massachusetts.

Today the land originally purchased by Wheeler is owned and operated by grandson Donald Morse. Donald and his wife, with the help and support of their five children and nine grandchildren, farm 80 acres of hay and beef cattle. Maintaining a sustainable farm has involved strategic business decisions and a commitment to the land. "When they first came here they raised hops for beer," tells Donald Morse when speaking of his ancestors. "Then they had apples, but I cut down the apple trees," he continues. Donald explained that, in order to have a successful apple farming operation, you had to have your own cold storage. Without a cold storage, Donald knew the farm would not be able to efficiently produce apples and made the proactive decision to adjust the direction of the farm. Today hay is cut two to three times a year, and Donald's daughter sells beef cattle to local buyers using the online marketplace Craigslist.com. Donald still has ten apple trees and a few pear trees around his home. His wife loves tending to her flower garden and they both work in the family vegetable garden. Those things though, are, "just a hobby," says Morse, "I like fresh vegetables!"

How Donald Morse has time for hobbies is hard to tell. He has worn many hats in the town of Boxborough, including 25 years of service on the Board of Assessors. Morse went to school at the University of Massachusetts at Stockbridge before serving in the Presidential Honor Guard with President Eisenhower. "It was great duty, I'll tell you that," shares Morse, when reflecting on his time with the President.

Today Donald and his family work hard to keep the farm a family way of life. Dramatic inflation has led to an increase in property value that could make farming impossible if it weren't for state tax laws that protect agricultural land. Donald is concerned about the challenge young people face coming in to the industry because of the high cost of land. "The only way I got started is because we always owned the farm," he explains. The need for careful planning when preparing for farm succession through generations is clear.

Donald Morse is a man who clearly loves the land and works hard to provide for others. "The good Lord was looking after us," he shares. "I'm glad it's been kept for all this time," he says when asked about his feelings toward the family farm. We congratulate Ridge Hill Farm on their commitment to **Agriculture's Lasting Heritage**.