

Dover Neighbor's Fantasy Land

In the late 18th century, there was an 800 acre fantasy land which included a 225 room luxury hotel in addition to a number of truly bizarre and fascinating features. Known today as the Ridge Hill Reservation, only a fraction of this great estate remains. It is the subject of a program sponsored by the Dover Historical Society on Wednesday, November 15 at 7:30 p.m. at the Dover Library, Lower Level. The public is welcome free of charge and refreshments will be served.

The presenter of this talk is Gloria Greis, Ph.D. Executive Director of the Needham History Center & Museum. It is entitled "Mr. Baker's Fairyland of the Beautiful and Bizarre". Educated at both Yale and Harvard, she has devoted her career to museums, historical collections and the stories they reveal. She is involved in a large number of local and state Boards and historical organizations in addition to her professional work at the Needham Historical Society (recently renamed the Needham History Center & Museum), Dr. Greis says she grew up with stories of Mr. Baker's exploits, but when she found the vast treasure-trove of information in the archives of the Needham Museum, including letters, photographs and other memorabilia, those stories really came to life.

Located on 800 acres in the southwest corner of Needham and including land along Grove Street in present day Wellesley, this property was acquired and developed by William Emerson Baker "a 19th century eccentric as rich and willful as any Roman emperor" according to an article published in *The Boston Globe* in 2010. "There were monkey cages, bear pits, buffaloes, and a 'Sanitary Piggery' in which pigs slept in linen sheets. There were stables with animated stuffed horses... elaborate mechanical jokes" and a vast array of other fantastical features which today are buried and mostly forgotten in the back yards of large, new developments along both Charles River Road and Grove Street in Wellesley, including Sabrina Lake which was one of Baker's creations.

Who knew? Dick Vara in his book *Dover Days Gone By* alluded to the hotel to which summer visitors escaped the city and often travelled from there to Ben Sawin's Picnic Grove on Claybrook Road. But his focus is on Sawin rather than Baker, so he neglects to elaborate further. Do plan to come learn about the eccentric, but also serious, Mr. Baker: his background, creations, aspirations and the separation movement he launched which eventually led to the succession from Needham of Wellesley not long after his death in 1888 at age 59. His widow sold the land which has been divided and subdivided over the years until only a small portion is visible today in the Ridge Hill Reservation.