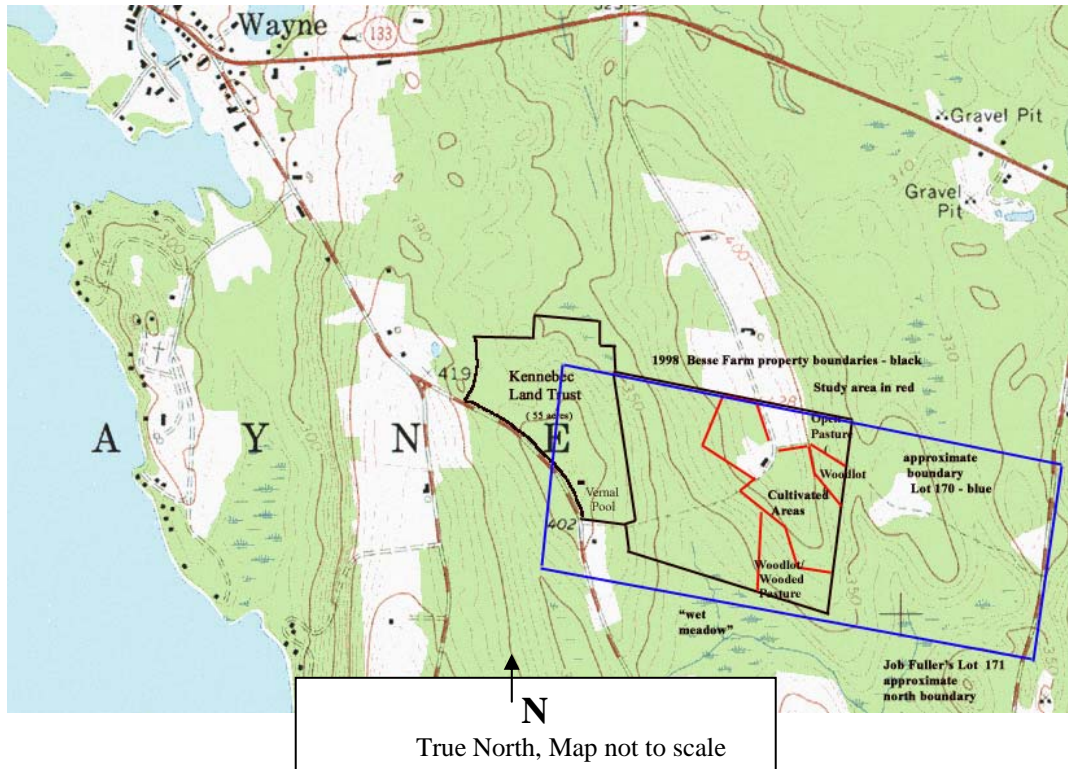




Kennebec Land Trust
Besse Historic Conservation Area
55 Acres Donated by Albion H. Besse, 1998



The Besse Historic Conservation Area is a fifty-five acre red oak-northern hardwoods - white pine forest preserve (elevation 400 - 410 feet) in Wayne, Maine. Portions of this KLT property were included in the 200 acre Kennebec Purchase proprietor Lot # 170 that was purchased by the Jabez Besse Jr. Family in 1798. Five generations of the Besse Family farmed this land from 1788 to 1913. In 1998, Albion Besse donated this preserve to the Kennebec Land Trust with the condition that the forest be allowed to “return to the way it was when my ancestors first settled.”

This KLT Conservation Area includes a .40 acre vernal pool. This irregular-shaped pool is approximately 18 meters (60 feet) wide and 90 meters long (297 feet). At spring maximum the water level at the pool monitoring location (rebar in pool known as “home base”) varies between 33 cm (13 in) and 37 cm (15 in). Since 2000, the pool dry down date has been between July 10 and August 23. Data collected during four seasons from 2000-2003 confirmed that two vernal pool indicator species - wood frogs and spotted salamanders are found at this site. In all four years the pool likely held water long enough for wood frogs to complete their juvenile stage. However, data from two of the past four years (2001, 2003) suggests that the pool may have dried up before the salamanders completed their juvenile stages. The KLT Besse Historic Conservation Area vernal pool is one of twenty-five that are included in the Maine “Very Important Pool” (VIP) monitoring program.

Background Settlement History - Jabez Besse Farm, the Improved Acre

The first deed for the Jabez Besse Jr. land in Wayne, Lot #170, was examined and entered in Lincoln County in 1798, ten years after Jabez Jr. first arrived and the same year that the Town of Wayne was incorporated. This land was originally identified as a proprietor lot and the family was seeking ownership at a time when conflict over payment to proprietors was a central issue in this region of the District of Maine. The backcountry resistance movement that was opposed to payment for proprietor holdings included neighbors of the Jabez Besse family and other settlers in Wayne. The timing of the signing of the deed suggests that after ten years of improvements to their land, the Besses, unlike a number of their Wayne neighbors, chose payment over continued negotiations with the Kennebec Proprietors. Jabez Jr. and Patience Besse paid \$2.75 per acre for 200 acres, a price far higher than the \$1.00 per acre many settlers believed was fair payment for unimproved lands. The price likely reflected the change in value of the farm after ten years of improvements.

In 1809, twenty-one years after Jabez Jr. and Patience Besse first settled on their land, the earliest “Inventory or Valuation of the Town of Wayne was taken by the Town’s Assessors of the Poor: Mark Stinchfield, Wooden Norris and Cyrus Foss. The inventory lists ninety-three Wayne farms, and includes the following information for the Besse farm:

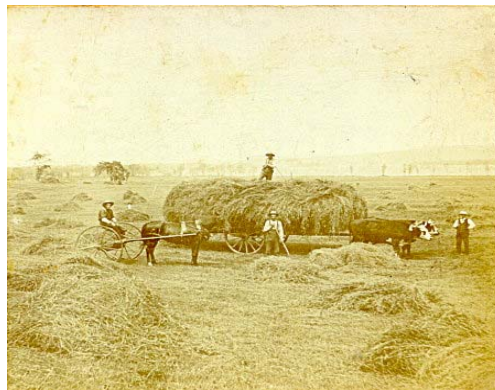
Number of polls:	2 [Woodin age: 23 & Jabez Jr. age: 44]	
Dwelling houses:	2	value: \$310
Barns:	2	value: \$200
Tilled land	5 acres	value: \$ 60
Mowing land	12 acres	value: \$156
Pasture land	12 acres	value: \$ 96
Unimproved land	60 acres	value: \$480
Horses	1	value: \$ 45
Oxen	2	value: \$ 40
Cows & three year olds	6	value: \$ 96
One & two year old cows	7	value: \$ 56
Swine	2	value: \$ 8

If the number of tilled acres is used as a measure of “improvement” since the time of settlement, the Besse farm, with five acres of tilled land, was twice as productive as the average farm in the Town of Wayne in 1809. In the Valuation were listed ninety-three farms with a total tilled acreage of 220 acres, and a range of one to eight acres per farm. By the time that the 1809 Census was taken, Patience and Jabez Jr. had eleven children, six sons and five daughters: Woodin, Edmond, David, Samuel, Mary, Wager Lee, Curtis, Eliza, Ruth, Patience and Catherine. Ten of these children had been born on the farm in Wayne since the family had first settled in 1788.

Use of Wetlands – Meadow Hay

“...He said he’d come to ditch the meadow...” (Robert Frost, 1914 *The Death of the Hired Man*)

Farm animals, especially oxen, were essential for the conversion of wooded acres to cultivated fields, mowing lands and pastures. Families who settled on forested interior lands, including the Besses, had an immediate need for food for these farm cattle. The Besses settled in an area in Wayne that bordered a meadowland. The meadow was likely a source of forage for their cattle at the time of settlement.

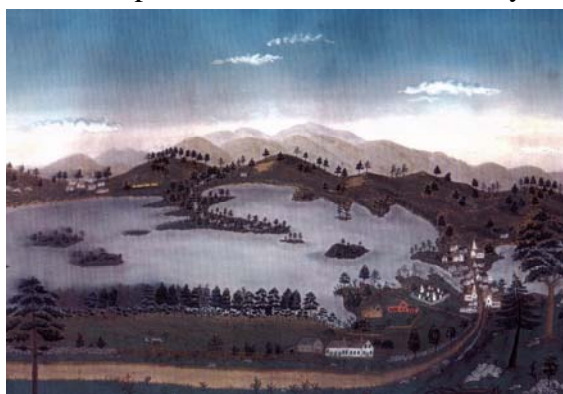


*Haying on the Meadows in Leeds.
Androscoggin Lake, Circa 1900*

Wayne and Kennebec County in the 19th Century

The history of the intensive farming era in Wayne is similar to that of many other Maine agricultural communities. Early settlement was followed by subsistence farming, a period of market farming, orcharding and dairying, and in many regions, an era of widespread farm abandonment in the late 19th and 20th centuries. The United States Agricultural Census data for the Besse Farm for the years 1850, 1860, 1870 and 1880 and the Besse Farm journals, document that the family practiced a pattern of mixed or diversified farming from 1850-1913.

In 1850, forty years after the first Wayne Valuation, Woodin Besse and his son William were farming one hundred acres, the average size of a Maine farm for that time period. Together on sixty-five improved acres, Woodin and William and their families were raising 80 bushels of Indian corn, 30 bushels of wheat, 20 bushels of barley, 275 bushels of potatoes, 17 bushels of peas and beans, 52 tons of hay and they made 600 pounds of butter and 150 pounds of cheese. Woodin and William Besse owned cattle valued at \$491 including one horse, four oxen, five milch cows, one horse and two pigs that were grazing on 35 acres of wooded and improved pastures (U.S. Agricultural Census, 1850).



By the mid-1800’s the landscape in rural interior Maine, including that of the Besse Farm, had shifted and was defined by the improved acre. This 1856 painting of Wayne and Leeds by Mary Stanton House (Original owned by Town of

Leeds) provides an exceptional representation of the Wayne region at mid-century).

In the later part of the 19th-century, however, many farming towns in Kennebec County, including Wayne, had passed their agricultural zenith. Population statistics for Wayne document this era of farm abandonment when extensive areas of the agricultural landscape reverted back to forestland. This trend was also documented in many bordering agricultural communities

including Greene, Leeds, Monmouth and Turner. The reasons for the decline in agriculture included external and internal factors: employment opportunities in rapidly growing New England mill towns, competition from mid-western farms, and limited pasture land and declining soil productivity. Although the Besse family was not part of this farm abandonment pattern, William Granville did offer the farm for use as a Town Farm in 1876 when he was fifty-six years old.

Official U.S. Census Data for Wayne, Maine 1800-1910

1800	1810	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910
500	819	1051	1153	1201	1367	1192	938	950	775	707	595

The Improved Acre, Botanical Imprint and Conservation

Cultivation of former forest lands in this region in Wayne has left a recognizable botanical imprint that followed an era of intensive farming. The vegetation patterns, stone walls and barbed wire at the Besse Farm are artifacts that reveal the practices and values of families whose lives were focused on the improved acre, independence and self-sufficiency. The donation of the Besse Historical Conservation Area, fifty-five acres of permanently protected forestlands, suggests that the relationship that the Besse family had with this land also shaped a family conservation ethic. After two hundred years of family ownership, the forest rather than the improved acre will define the permanently protected portion of this 19th century northern New England farm.

July 31, 2004 Kennebec Land Trust Field Trip
 Part of 2004 KLT Flora of Maine Lyceum
 Field Trip Leader and Text: Theresa Kerchner

For additional information about the KLT contact



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