

**THE WILLOW POND KITCHEN:
On a Twentieth-Century Road to the Colonial Past¹**

by
Judith M. Adams

**“The American restaurant is never merely a place to eat;
it is a place to go, to see, to experience, to hang out in,
to seduce in, and to be seduced.”²**

In 1994 just a few years before its demolition, a National Park Service report described the Willow Pond Kitchen Restaurant in the following way. “The Willow Pond Restaurant sits on a 1.22-acre site (Parcel 4226) on the north side of Lexington Road, and east of the former East Quarter Schoolhouse. It is part of a 4-acre meadow that became part of the Meriam House farm in 1803.” “The Willow Pond Restaurant is an operational, informal eatery that serves lunches and dinners. It is a wood-frame, one-story structure, with a small attached wing on the back side, and is clad with clapboard siding painted a gray-blue color. An unpaved parking lot comprises the front part of the site, between the road and the building. Varnished knotty-pine paneling finishes the interior walls. The restaurant is a long, sprawling structure that appears to have been constructed in stages, as evidenced by the exterior siding and trim details. The east and west

¹ In 1999 Minute Man National Historical Park agreed to “research and write an article on the history of the Willow Pond Kitchen Restaurant as an early automobile-related tourist accommodation in the Concord area” as part of a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with the State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) of Massachusetts. The MOA was a result of the park’s intention to demolish the Willow Pond Kitchen, which was eligible for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places.

Fulfillment of the stipulation to write the article languished for many years until Judith M. Adams, a park volunteer from Groton, Massachusetts, became interested in the subject. She continued research that had begun earlier, sought new information, and undertook several oral history interviews for the preparation of the article. Paul Weinbaum, National Park Service (NPS) Historian, and Richard Crisson, NPS Historical Architect, reviewed and commented on the article as did Barbara Yocum, NPS Architectural Conservator, who in 1994 had written a historic structure report on the Meriam House, which included information on the Willow Pond Kitchen. Terrie Wallace, the park National Historic Preservation Act Coordinator, incorporated their comments into the final article.

² John Mariani, *America Eats Out: An Illustrated History of Restaurants and Other Establishments that Have Been with Us for 350 Years* (New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc., 1991) p. 13.

portions of the building, for example, were probably built at different times possibly 1934 and 1949.”³



Figure 1 Willow Pond Kitchen, Photo Courtesy of Concord Free Public Library

Though the Willow Pond Kitchen may be fondly remembered by some, many others may not be familiar with its history or realize that a roadside eatery operated on this spot continuously for seventy years.⁴ Of significance too is that by the time the restaurant closed in 1998 it was a rare survivor of a fairly common earlier roadside architectural building type.

The land on which the restaurant was eventually built belonged in the eighteenth century to the Meriam family, and the property was witness to the events of April 19, 1775, when Colonial militiamen began their relentless pursuit of retreating British troops. To this day the

³ Barbara Yocum, “The Meriam House Historic Structure Report”. Historic Architecture Program, Northeast Region, National Park Service, Lowell, MA, 2004, pp. 552 – 553.

⁴ In 2006, a Google search for the Willow Pond Kitchen revealed a number of entries, among them a poem, Remembering the Willow Pond Kitchen by Lynn Jones; artistic photography by Kim Mimnaugh, a “does anyone

area is still known as Meriam's Corner. One hundred fifty years later the property belonged to the Burke family. By 1928, tax records show that the Burke family had moved a farm stand from the front of the former East Quarter Schoolhouse, a building adjacent to their land and the current home of Joseph Palumbo, onto their property and began operating a summer "clam shack."⁵ By 1934 another building was added to the site. It was a year-round restaurant and ice cream parlor, one of a number run by James McManus, a successful restaurant entrepreneur. This structure was the core of the building that later was either enlarged or completely rebuilt to become the Willow Pond Kitchen.⁶

The story of the Willow Pond Kitchen began when Ross and Emily Ransom purchased the property in 1946.⁷ Ransom, a baker from Carlisle, turned the ice cream shop into a barroom/restaurant, and named it after a pond near his home on the Concord-Carlisle line. At some point after opening the Willow Pond Kitchen, Ross attended the Fanny Farmer Cooking School. On his return, recipes from the Fanny Farmer Cooking School began to appear on the kitchen walls, and "Fanny Farmer Chili," among other delicacies, was served at the Willow Pond Kitchen until the end. Ransom also cooked for his hunting friends at their camps, and their gifts of hunting trophies, such as antlers and stuffed animal heads, added to the rustic décor of the restaurant.⁸

In 1958 the Willow Pond Kitchen ownership passed to Peter Sowkow who, while employed there, had wooed and married Ransom's daughter, Mary. The ambiance created by Ross Ransom was continued with Peter's warm and friendly personality.

The 1960s growth of fast food restaurants did not seem to damage Peter's business, but a fire on June 30, 1964 was a definite setback. The Concord Fire Department responded to a phone call at 3:46 p.m. that a fire had started from a "fryolator." Peter Sowkow was determined to recreate as much of the old atmosphere as possible through the renovations undertaken after

remember" query; a nostalgic blurb in blog, [The Driver's Seat](#), by local aficionado, Jim Barisano; and a documentary film company, Willow Pond Films

⁵ See Tax Records information cited in "Meriam House HSR", pp. 66, 552; Joseph Palumbo, interview, Concord, MA, October 5, 2006.

⁶ See Tax Records information cited in "Meriam House HSR", pp. 66, 552; John A. Jakle and Keith A. Sculle, *Fast Food: Roadside Restaurants in the Automobile Age* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1999), pp. 181 – 182 and Peter S. Canellos, "The Second Battle of Concord", *The Boston Globe Magazine*, September 29, 1996, p. 32.

⁷ See Tax Records information cited in Meriam House HSR, pp. 67, 552.

⁸ Rita Cosgrove (Peter Sowkow's granddaughter) and Robin Tripi (Peter Sowkow's daughter), interview, Lexington, MA, November 6, 2006.

the fire. According to his daughter and granddaughter, many of his customers agreed that he was quite successful in that attempt.⁹

In 1959 the United States Congress created Minute Man National Historical Park. The National Park Service had to carve the park out of an area in three towns that already contained homes and businesses. The process was controversial. Eventually 200 homes and businesses were moved or demolished.¹⁰ The National Park Service purchased the Willow Pond Kitchen in 1979 with the intention to demolish it. Peter Sowkow, however, was allowed to continue running the restaurant via lease agreement for more than twenty years. Petitions from his devoted customers to continue even longer were unsuccessful. Before the restaurant was demolished in August 2000, its contents were auctioned. Peter's family relates that customers started lining up at 3:00 a.m. and some paid as much as \$2.00 for a paper plate or even a wooden rail from the bathroom with carved initials. Before the morning was over everything had been sold, and a restaurant, with its origins in the early decades of the automobile era, became only a memory.¹¹

The clam shack that the Burkes started in 1928 probably served automobile tourists to the nearby Revolutionary War sites, as well as locals. Since 1875, when President Grant visited Concord and Lexington for the centennial celebration of the Battle of April 19, 1775, interest in the country's beginnings had been growing. The first visitors to the Concord and Lexington sites came by train and carriage, but by 1906 - 1907, the Lexington and Concord Sightseeing Company operated two buses from Boston and by the early 1920s there were fleets of buses.¹²

The growth in production of cars also increased the number of visitors to the area. By 1902 the American Automobile Association (AAA) had been founded. By 1914 motor vehicle production exceeded the production of wagons and carriages.¹³ When Henry Ford made the automobile affordable for the average American family, tourism throughout America increased dramatically. The growth in production of cars heralded the American fascination with the automobile and the exploration of the country via highways. Americans were attracted not only

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Canellos, "The Second Battle of Concord", p. 32. Note: Peter Sowkow's name is misspelled as Socko throughout the article.

¹¹ Cosgrove and Tripi interview.

¹² Deborah Dietrich-Smith, "Cultural Landscape Report: Battle Road Unit", Olmsted Center for Landscape Preservation, 2005, p. 82.

¹³ John Bell Rae, *The Road and Car in American Life*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), p. 57.

by historic places but also by the beauty of national parks and the intrigue generated by dramatic road names, such as the Mohawk Trail.¹⁴

The Mohawk Trail, completed in 1914 and traversing Massachusetts from Boston westward, is an example of the development of a highway to accommodate the growth in automobiles and the desire of Americans to see their country from their cars.¹⁵ The following poem about the trail catches the feeling of the time about the new way to travel:

You may roam where fancy leads you
Over hill and dale,
But you haven't seen America
Til you've seen the Mohawk Trail¹⁶

Many family-owned businesses, including guest houses, tea rooms, diners, cabins, campgrounds, and ice cream and hot dog stands, grew up along the Mohawk Trail in response to the growing number of auto tourists. When the Burke family converted a farm stand into a clam shack along the Concord section of the Mohawk Trail, the family followed the trend and took advantage of the burgeoning popularity of automobile tourism and the nearness to an iconic site of the American Revolution to create a business that could provide additional income.

In 1925 landscape architect, Arthur Shurtleff, prepared a report for the Commission on the One Hundred Fiftieth Anniversary of the American Revolution concerning the Battle Road, the route along which the British troops and colonists skirmished on April 19, 1775. In the report Shurtleff discussed the significant increase in visitation to the sites associated with the battle and how the Battle Road had been modernized to accommodate automobiles and buses.

¹⁴ James Agee, "The Great American Roadside", *Fortune*, October 1934, pp. 58 – 59.

¹⁵ The Mohawk Trail currently consists of sixty-three miles of Route 2 beginning in western Massachusetts and extending to the border with New York. The Mohawk Trail, however, originated as a fifteen mile mountain road in western Massachusetts. It was expanded so that it stretched from Boston to the border of Massachusetts and New York, passing through numerous towns, including Concord. In 1926 the Mohawk Trail was designated as Route 2. Later, when Route 2 was improved, some stretches of the original highway became Route 2A. In the early 1930s a by-pass was constructed along Route 2A in Concord that diverted traffic away from Concord center to Route 2. The by-pass became part of Route 2A. The route to Concord center, that had been a part of Route 2A and locally designated as Lexington Road, continued to be designated as Lexington Road. Although the clam shack was located along the original Mohawk Trail/Route 2, it would have been identified locally with Lexington Road as the later restaurants were. See Dietrich-Smith page 81 for a description of the by-pass.

¹⁶ *The Mohawk Trail Historic Auto Trail Guide* (Brookline, MA: Muddy River Press, 2003)

Roadside restaurants, gas stations, booths and vending stands had developed along the Battle Road to cater to the needs of tourists.¹⁷ Located along the Battle Road, both the Burke clam shack and later the McManus restaurant contributed to the continuing commercialization of the Battle Road.

As with the Battle Road, roadside services for tourists sprouted rapidly throughout America during the 1920s. Eateries used familiar and nostalgic icons to generate interest and draw motorists' attention. The appearance and style of these restaurants varied greatly. Some had a garish or carnival image. Roadhouses with counters and stools suited males. Genteel tea rooms appealed to ladies, and roadside restaurants attracted families.

The success of roadside establishments led to a movement beginning in the 1920s to improve their sanitation and appearance. Many of the food stops along highways were shabby and unappealing. The trade journal, *Printer's Ink*, published an article called "The New Outlet - Roadside Refreshment Stands: Why They Should Be Taught to Improve Themselves and Their Structure".¹⁸ Private enterprise began to address the problem, and in 1925 the magazine, *House & Garden*, offered free plans for roadside refreshment booths. In 1928 Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. sponsored a competition with prizes for the best design of a roadside refreshment stand, and in 1932 *Ladies Home Journal* offered complete plans for the cost of \$1.00.¹⁹ Perhaps these private efforts spurred the government to its complementary action in the National Recovery Act of 1933 which stipulated that ½ of 1% of each state's apportionment should be devoted to "the conversion of unsightly roadside into attractive areas bordering roadways...."²⁰

Although there are no currently known images or descriptions of the clam shack, it probably was a simple structure since it originated as a relocated farm stand and was used only in the summer. It may have been one of the establishments whose appearance and sanitation could have been improved.

It is unknown if the design of the 1934 McManus ice cream restaurant was influenced by the trend to improve the appearance and sanitation of roadside restaurants. No known images of

¹⁷ Arthur A. Shurtleff, "Report of Arthur A. Shurtleff to Commission on the One Hundred Fiftieth Anniversary of the American Revolution," January 5, 1925.

¹⁸ "The New Outlet - Roadside Refreshment Stands: Why They Should be Taught to Improve Themselves and Their Structures", *Printer's Ink*, April 22, 1926, pp. 127 - 128.

¹⁹ William B. Rhodes, "Roadside Colonial: Early American Design for the Automobile Age, 1900 - 1940", *Winterthur Portfolio*, XXI, No. 2/3 (1986), p. 143.

²⁰ Albert C. Rose, *Historic American Roads: From Frontier Trails to Superhighways* (New York: Crown Publishers Inc., 1976), p. 103.

the restaurant exist. During the 1930s roadside eateries grew up in many forms and “this development led to a whole new culture reflected in novels, movies, plays and pop music of the times.”²¹ Unlike most roadside restaurants, the McManus restaurant was also part of a chain.

The success of roadside eateries also led to the expansion of standardization. The growth of franchises spurred the spread of standardization. Noted entrepreneur, Howard Johnson, expanded quickly from his first drugstore soda fountain in 1925, to thirty-five franchised restaurants ten years later. The first of the ubiquitous orange-roofed roadside restaurants was located in Dorchester, MA, not far from Concord.²² The Concord Howard Johnson, located at Route 2 and Elm Street, opened by 1938. People on-the-go now wanted to eat where they could rely on standards of hygiene, comfort, and quality. Restaurateurs like Johnson responded to the needs of the public and replicated these features by consistency and standardization. An innovation occurred with Howard Johnson “merging under one roof a full meal dining service and a quick-bite lunch counter with a fast food menu.”²³

The McManus ice cream restaurant along the Battle Road was one in a chain of restaurants that James McManus started in New England in 1927 and referred to as roadside fountains. By 1935 eighteen were in operation. The McManus restaurants were a lesser known rival to the Howard Johnson restaurants.²⁴ It is unknown whether the appearance of the roadside fountains was identical for easy customer recognition, as with the orange-roofed Howard Johnsons. Although the McManus restaurant in Concord predated the Concord Howard Johnson by four years, the name Howard Johnson became commonly known with restaurants throughout America, while hardly anyone now would associate the name McManus with a restaurant chain. Today the Howard Johnson restaurants too are almost extinct.

The Willow Pond Kitchen like Howard Johnson also offered dining tables, booths and counter service but in contrast to both the Howard Johnson and McManus chains provided meals in a unique family atmosphere that defied the deadly uniformity of franchised eateries. It is ironic that the Willow Pond Kitchen began in a building that originally was part of a chain. Architecturally the Willow Pond Kitchen was a typical roadside restaurant composed of one

²¹ Mariani, *America Eats Out*, p. 106.

²² Chester H. Liebs, *Main Street to Miracle Mile: American Roadside Architecture* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1985), p. 202.

²³ James J. Flink, *The Automobile Age* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1988), p. 187.

²⁴ Jakle, *Fast Food: Roadside Restaurants in the Automobile Age* pp. 181 – 182 and Cannellos, “The Second Battle of Concord”, p. 32.

story with a hip roof, a central entrance with a sign over the door, and a row of windows along the front. A photo postcard from Kearney, Nebraska shows a building called Bico's Cafe that is very similar to photographs of the Willow Pond Kitchen.²⁵ As is known from interviews and newspaper articles, it always had a devoted local following.

At a time when many restaurants invented gimmicks to attract patrons, the Willow Pond Kitchen naturally came by theirs. In *The Boston Globe*, on September 27, 1998, Alice Hinkle described visiting the Willow Pond as “like entering a time warp...no credit cards accepted, no air conditioning, no cable TV, virtually no advertising. The only phone is unlisted and tucked inside a wooden phone booth. Walls and counters hold a hodge-podge of artifacts: stuffed fish and animals including a possum caught behind the restaurant, crayon drawings, antique firearms. With a beer joint counter and stools, TV overhead, booths in the front windows with red and white checked curtains, large tables in the middle lighted by cockeyed lamps perched on wagon wheels suspended from the ceiling, the hospitality was unsurpassed and usually infected the atmosphere among the diners with warmth and friendliness. The food specialties were a holdover from a time before nutrition and health concerns, deep fried everything, though boiled lobster and steamed clams were calling card items. Another specialty was frog legs; the story is that the hapless amphibians were caught locally at the Concord River.”²⁶

The Willow Pond held onto this ambiance from the beginning, through the era of standardization, into a resurgence of nostalgia for the unique and the individual. By the end of the 1960s, “development of superhighways turned back road kitsch into camp” and by the mid-1970s had developed it into “a fashionable new vernacular” worthy of preservation.²⁷ In spite of several setbacks during its history, particularly a devastating fire, the Willow Pond Kitchen remained relatively successful until it closed its doors in 1998.

An appropriate epitaph was written by Willow Pond Films, named in memory of the Willow Pond Kitchen, in Concord, Massachusetts. The film company makes documentary films about “how history remains alive and is necessary for understanding and changing the world

²⁵ Jakle, *Fast Food: Roadside Restaurants in the Automobile Age*, p. 45, Fig. 2.4.

²⁶ Alice Hinkle, “Local Landmark Will Give Way to US History”, *The Boston Globe*, *Northwest Weekly*, September 27, 1998, p. 1.

²⁷ Phil Patten, *Open Road: A Celebration of the American Highway* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1986) p. 219.

today...The roadhouse with whom we share our name—is part of our world and nourishes us.”²⁸
It nourished many generations and, in memory, still nourishes those who remember the place.

²⁸ Willow Pond Films, www.willowpondfilms.com.

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