

The Robert Coles Homestead (1668)

The last remaining homestead built by the founders of Glen Cove still stands on The Place, the oldest residential street in the community.

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The oldest house in Glen Cove, surviving from the earliest settlement of the community in 1668, still stands at 34 The Place. Built by Robert Coles, one of the original “Five Proprietors of Musketa Cove Patent,” it is the last house constructed by the original homes constructed by the five founding families.

Robert Coles was born about 1648, in Providence, Rhode Island. His father, Robert Senior, had emigrated from County Suffolk, England in 1630 as a member of the “Winthrop Fleet.” Initially settling in Massachusetts Bay Colony, the elder Coles apparently did not see eye-to-eye with the colony’s religious authorities’ views on the consumption of alcoholic beverages, and soon left the colony to join Roger Williams in founding

Providence, Rhode Island. When he died in 1654, at Warwick, Rhode Island, he left an estate of more than £500 pounds – an appreciable sum of money at that time – to be divided between his wife, four sons and three daughters. Born about 1648, Robert Coles Junior was the youngest of these four sons, and by 1662 was residing at Oyster Bay with his older brothers Daniel and Nathaniel. Within a few years Joseph Carpenter, also from the same Rhode Island community, was negotiating for the purchase of several hundred acres of land on either side of the stream which formerly flowed along Glen Street, intent to construct both a saw mill and a grist mill at the site. On May 24, 1668, Carpenter finally secured a deed to the land from the leaders of the local Matinecock Indians. He took in as co-partners in the new venture his former neighbors Daniel, Nathaniel, and Robert Coles, and Nicholas Simkins, also of Oyster Bay.

These five men, who became known as the “Five Proprietors of Musketa Cove Patent”, built their homes along a narrow dirt road on a hill overlooking their saw mill. The street would become known as “The Place”. The western-most home lot was that of Daniel Coles; the eastern-most of the five original “home lotts” was assigned to Robert Coles, at 34 The Place. (Within a few years, home lots would be allocated to Moses



The Robert Coles Homestead at 34 The Place - The oldest house in Glen Cove



The eastern wing of the Coles homestead (on the right) is the oldest part of the house.

Mudge and Ephraim Carpenter still further east of the Robert Coles homestead).

Looking at the house today, the original dwelling constructed by Coles comprises only the eastern-most wing of the structure. Measuring only about 20 by 30 feet, one might consider life there rather cramped, since Coles and his wife, Mercy Wright of Oyster Bay, eventually had nine children (Nathan, Tamar, Dorcas, Robert, John, Charles, Freegift, Mercy and Mary) during their first 15 years of marriage.

A surviving sketch of the Joseph Carpenter house, made in the mid-19th century by William M. Valentine, compares closely with the Robert Coles house in both design and size; it is probable that all five of the first houses, and those built by the many other families that followed them in settling Musketa Cove during the second half of the 17th century, were relatively identical.

Robert Coles served as informal “keeper” of the “Musketa Cove Proprietors’ Book”, a large, vellum-covered record book containing manuscript copies of the land transfers and legal agreements of the “Five Proprietors.” In addition to these official documents, Coles used the book to record his personal household accounts as well as the accounts pertaining to his one-fifth interest in the saw mill. These accounts have shed considerable light on the day-to-day life in Glen Cove in the 1670’s and 1680’s. Thousands of feet of boards and planks were exported to New York City by sloop for use in new construction as well as export to lumber-hungry colonies (like the sugar plantations of the Barbados) elsewhere. In addition, wainscoting, tile laths, roofing tile laths, ship timbers, “feather-edged boards” and custom-cutting of walnut and cedar were available from the Musketa Cove saw mill.

The coastal trading ships which carried Musketa Cove’s lumber to market in Manhattan gave local residents ready access to consumer goods from one of the largest cities in North America. If one needed a new hat, “Christian the boatman” would procure one and deliver it on his return trip to Musketa Cove. In this era, 7 shillings would buy a pair of good quality shoes, or a pair of men’s stockings, or two and a half bushels of corn. A pound of tobacco cost a mere 6 pence, and clay pipes

were a penny a piece. Rum appears regularly in the accounts.

Robert Coles served in a variety of public offices in the town of Oyster Bay. In 1683, he was elected a lieutenant in the Oyster Bay militia; in 1690, he was promoted to Captain, a rank which he still retained in 1700. He served as Overseer of Highways for the Town of Oyster Bay as well as Assessor and Commissioner. In 1683, he was elected as one of four representatives from Oyster Bay to attend the meeting to elect the first delegates from Queens County to the General Assembly of the colony.

About 1700, Captain John Sands (of Sands Point) returned to Long Island from Virginia, bringing with him seedlings of black locust trees – which were then unknown to Long Island. Robert Coles was given at least one of these trees, which he planted near the front door of his home. The tree was a prominent

“landmark” on The Place. Severely damaged by lightning, the locust was cut down in 1945.

Robert Coles died in 1715, seven years after his wife. He was buried in a small plot of ground which he had previously set aside as a family burial ground in 1708. His grave was marked by a field stone, crudely carved with his initials and the date of his death. The cemetery itself, one of the oldest in Glen Cove, was bulldozed over in the early 1950’s to create a parking lot for a local factory. (Former City Historian Robert R. Coles was able to salvage Coles’ primitive gravestone, which is eventually donated to the Glen Cove Public Library.)

In the years that followed after Coles’ death, various additions were made to the tiny dwelling. The first addition appears to date from about 1730, and doubled the area of the house. About 1780 a major addition was made on the western end of the structure. This part of the building has an interesting feature. In the attic, the chimney has 180-degree twist. While some claim that the “corkscrew chimney” came from the belief on the part of its builder that it would prevent witches and evil spirits from flying down the chimney, in reality the reason for the twist appears to have been an attempt to create a better draft for the fireplace.

At the turn of this century, the old Coles homestead was the residence of George W. Cocks. Robert R Coles, who resided at 7 The Place in a Victorian house constructed by his grandfather, Isaac Coles circa 1860, recalls having met Cocks in his boyhood days. Coles described Cocks as “the most knowledgeable local historian and genealogist of his day.” After his death, the house reverted to his daughter, Fannie, wife of Isaac Coles (son of Isaac Coles and uncle of Robert Reed Coles). She maintained “the finest rose garden anywhere in Glen Cove,” according to her nephew. In the 1960’s, the house was owned by the Tausch family. In the mid 1970’s, the house was purchased by Dorothy Watson, and her sister Joan Sutera. Watson resided in the house with dozens of stray cats and dogs for more than a decade. In the late 1980’s the building was purchased by Glen Cove architect James O’Grady who restored the building.