

Then & Now - The Susan Minns & Her Princeton Properties

Who Was She?

Susanna "Susan" Minns (1839-1938), was born the third of three children on August 21, 1839, daughter of Constant Freeman Minns (1800-1841), a wealthy merchant, and Frances Ann Parker Minns (1804-1892), in Lincoln, Middlesex County, Massachusetts. Her two older siblings were her sister Frances (1837-1870), and her brother Thomas (1832-1913). Her grandfather Thomas Minns (1773-1836), was the publisher of the *Massachusetts Mercury*, the editor of the *Boston Palladium*, and the printer for the Massachusetts legislature. Her great-grandfather William Minns (1728-1816) fought in the American Revolution. She was named after her grandmother Susanna Mitchell Minns (1777-1865).

Miss Minns, who lived to be ninety-eight, was a remarkable woman. She was a philanthropist, art collector, biologist, and a member of King's Chapel in Boston. She lived at 14 Louisburg Square in Boston and maintained a country house and farm in Princeton, Massachusetts, and a summer home in Nahant.

Born in 1839 in Lincoln, Massachusetts, she was educated at private schools in Boston, a school in Cambridge conducted by Professor JLR Agassiz of Harvard, and another of the professor's schools on Pekinese Island in Buzzard's Bay. She was one of the first women to attend the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and studied botany with Professor Asa Gray of Harvard, contributing to his book, "Manual of the Botany of the Northern U.S." She was made a charter member of the Marine Biological Laboratory in Woods Hole, Massachusetts, and a member of the Board of Overseers of the Gray Herbarium of Harvard. In 1928 she wrote a small volume, illustrated by herself, on the silkworm and culture of silk in North America. She never married and, at the time of her death, she was the oldest living female graduate of M I T.

When she died in 1938, she left an unusual legacy in her brother Thomas's honor, to be jointly administered by King's Chapel and First Church. Thomas was an active member of First Church, and Susan was an equally ardent supporter of King's Chapel. Their legacy is known as the [Minns Lecture series](#). Its purpose is to sponsor an annual series of lectures by Unitarian Universalist ministers on religious topics of historical importance and contemporary relevance.

Additional Details:

- About 1853, at age 14, Susan Minns began to collect woodcuts and books illustrated with woodcuts. She even engaged herself in making woodcuts as a hobby.
- She graduated Wellesley College, Wellesley, Massachusetts, and was a member of Phi Beta Kappa.
- Between 1865 and 1915 she created a [number of watercolors of Bahamas plants and scenery](#) which are currently housed in the Harvard Library Archives.
- Her sister Frances Antoinette Minns died a week after her 33rd birthday in Naples, Campania, Italy, on February 18, 1870; which began Susan's interest in collecting items of the "Dance of Death" sparked by the sentiment of *memento mori*. She collected representations of death—particularly books and prints depicting the danse macabre—for about seventy years, and during the first two decades of the twentieth century she even converted a portion of her house into a death gallery. There she displayed poison cups, prints, prayers for and invitations to funeral services, death notices, bills of mortality, and illuminated texts. A portion of her notable and extensive collection of art and literature relating [Danse Macabre](#), is now held by the [University of Louvain](#).
- In 1881 she was one of the first women to study at and graduate from M.I.T.
- From 1890 to 1899 she played an active role in fund raising to support the Marine Biological Laboratory, funded by the Women's Education Association of Boston, where she served as a trustee. She was also a charter member of the Marine Biological Laboratory in Woods Hole on Cape Cod. Minns helped establish the [Marine Biological Laboratory](#) in Woods Hole and donated generously to numerous scientists, institutions and to her home state of [Massachusetts](#)
- In 1897, she was a member of the Advisory Board of the National Science Club of Women.

Her donations of money and artifacts to individuals and institutions were substantial during her lifetime.

- She donated to land to MIT to be used for a river flow hydraulics laboratory.^[5] She later donated to M.I.T 20,000 feet of land for the construction of a laboratory to study river flow hydraulics.
- She donated \$50,000 to Wellesley College as a memorial to [Professor Susan Maria Hallowell](#) in 1914.^[1]

- In 1927 Miss Minns donated land to the [Commonwealth of Massachusetts](#), including 127 acres on the Little Wachusett mountain, which was subsequently used to create the [Minns Wildlife Sanctuary](#).^{[1][5]}

Her Princeton Properties:

- In 1910, Bostonian Susan Minns bought about four acres of land located at the intersection of today's Radford and Brooks Station Roads. The land abutted the former Luther Crawford farm to the north at 28 Radford Road, which by then had been acquired for a summer home by Miss Minns' cousin, Dr. Charles Ware. In 1912, she constructed a "long, low, and rambling" stone and wood Shingle-Style summer house on the new property. Described in detail in *The Laborer's Friend* on August 16, 1912, the design of the house was the outcome of Miss Minns' ideas "after passing about in many lands," and was inspired in particular by an old publishing house in England. Water was piped to the house from an artesian well that also provided water to Dr. Ware's house. Miss Minns' longtime family home was in Louisburg Square in Boston, but like many regular visitors, she ultimately established year-round residency in Princeton.
- A 1926 article in the *Boston Globe* mentions an incident that occurred at the house during which Susan Minns received burns while trying to assist her cook whose clothes had caught on fire while trying to light a stove.



- Before Miss Minns death in the late 1930s she acquired large amounts of land in town - a collection of real estate that included her cousin's 24-acre farm at 28 Radford Road and 140 acres around Little Wachusett Mountain, the picturesque drumlin located just north of the West Village district. In 1926, Miss Minns gave the entire Little Wachusett property to the Commonwealth for a wildlife sanctuary, which is managed today by the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife



28 Radford Rd.

as the Minns Wildlife Sanctuary. Within a few years of constructing her stylish summer residence, Miss Minns also acquired the remainder of John Marcou's property on Hubbardston Road (Fieldstone Farm) from his heirs. She thus became, in her own right, the owner of a large country estate that included the two working farms at 110 and 73 Hubbardston Road, where there were two farmhouses



110 Hubbardston Rd.

and numerous outbuildings.

- Miss Minns had a strong liking for stone construction and kept a team of skilled masons busy for years building the long, flat-topped stone walls that line parts of the farm properties and portions of the roadsides of Hubbardston and Radford Roads. The massive rubble gateposts at 91 Hubbardston Road date to her era, as do the stone garage and stuccoed engine house/shed at 73 Hubbardston Road, as well as the circular well-house at 38 Radford Road (*image at bottom*).



73 Hubbardston Rd.

House & Property Description:



- This late Shingle Style building at 38 Radford Rd in the West Village Historic District of Princeton, MA dramatically illustrates the characteristics of the style that was so popular for summer houses throughout New England--low spreading building forms, the use of natural materials, and a wide variety of window shapes and sizes.
- The sprawling, high-style house is built of rubble on the first story and wood shingle on the upper sections. The 5,696 sq ft home currently sits on 8.4 acres. According to the Town Assessor, it has 8 bedrooms and 3.5 bathrooms. The building has a Y-plan, with the main entry in a rectangular, hip-roofed section, from which two 1½-story wings extend diagonally to the rear. The low asphalt-shingled roofs have what appears to be tile cresting at the ridges and are flared outward at the eaves. All are punctuated by a variety of dormers—shed-roofed, hip-roofed, and eyebrow—with multipane casements or broad 8/2 or 8/1 double-hung windows grouped in bands of two or three. The main roof extends forward onto stone porch posts. Above the porch roof is a balustraded balcony, set into the plane of the roof in front of a broad shed-roofed dormer. Toward the outer end of the north wing is an entry with a vertical-board door that opens onto

a stone terrace with stone steps. One of the most picturesque outbuildings in the district is a round well house of mortared stone, standing just south of the house. Originally one of two on the property, this little hip-roofed building was also built in 1912.



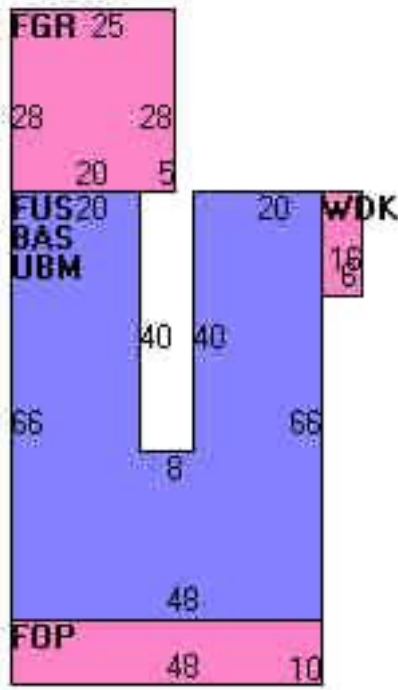
View of #38 from Radford Road



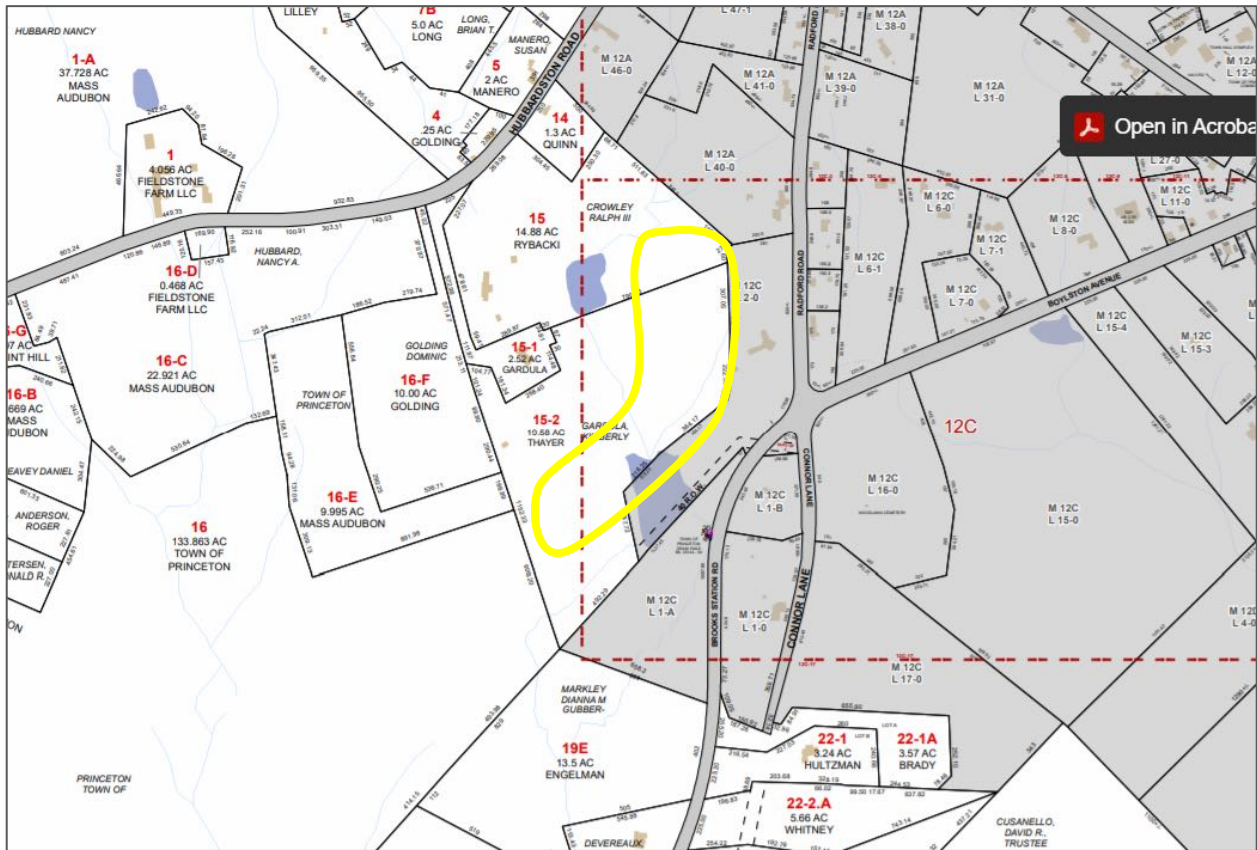
House entrance October 2021



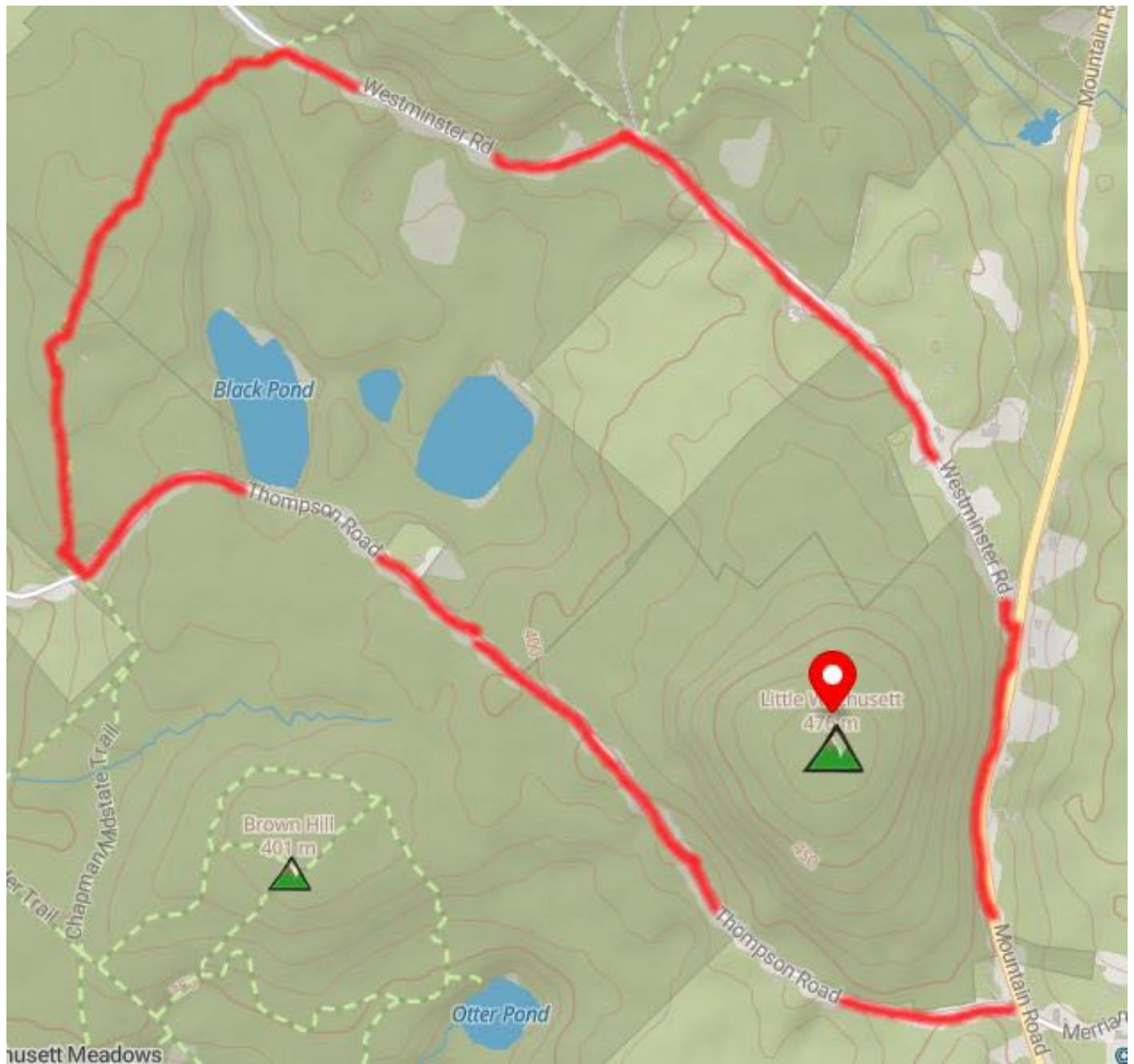
Front Gate, driveway, October 2021



Building Layout from [Town of Princeton Assessor's Records](#)



The property is very close to large Town and State owned conservation lands.



Minns Wildlife Sanctuary Map

Information above and additional information can be found at the sites below:

- Obituary in the NY Times:
<https://www.nytimes.com/1938/08/03/archives/miss-susan-minns-98-dies-in-boston-philanthropist-and-collector-of.html>
- <http://www.numismaticmall.com/numismaticmall-com/minns-susan?tmpl=%2Fsystem%2Fapp%2Ftemplates%2Fprint%2F&showPrintDialog=1>
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Susan_Minns

Information about the Speckmans:

The 1940 Census shows Erwin R Speckman (b1905 Germany), Marie Hoffman Speckman (b1905 Germany), Erwin Jr (b1936), Marie (b1939) living in a three-decker at 100 West Boylston St in Worcester. Specky was a machinist apparently working at Norton.

4/29/1942 – purchased by Marie Speckmann / Erwin Speckman Sr. (1905-1998)

The brother and sister spell the family name differently.

- Marie calls it Speckmann (as did her father)
- Erwin “Specky” spells it Speckman

Local Recollections:

“When we played hockey, you could hardly see Brooks Station Road, but it is pretty close. I asked Marie a few years back if I could use the pond and she did not want to take on the liability.”

“I worked with Specky at the dump; actually, he took over from me and my brother Chris, as we were "standing in" until a full time part timer was found! He saved all the old lawnmowers for me and my mother finally made me purge when I had 14 working mowers in the barn. They went to good homes, and most of them coming from the dump needed something simple like a spark plug or good cleaning! Specky also took home anything that was metal and you can see much of it in the backyard! There are still a couple of cars as well, including Marie's Chevy, and a couple of Saab 96s that were crushed by trees during the ice storm. A lot of it has been cleaned up.”

“Saturday was all about going to the dump.” Mason said over the years there were other dumps in town, Gleason Rd., then behind the Town Line Garage. “Mr. Speckman would repair bicycles and give them to kids. He would fix TVs and old lawnmowers. The kids thought of him as Santa Claus.”

<https://www.thelandmark.com/article/20160407/news/304079248>

Property Timeline:

- 1910 – Property purchased by Susan Minns of Boston

- 1912 – House at 38 Radford Rd. is built Miss Minns
- 1938 – Susan Minns dies
 - Interesting note: she is buried in Mt. Auburn cemetery, the same cemetery as The Trustees founder Charles Eliot
- 1942 – House is bought by Erwin Sr. and Marie Speckman
- 1992 – Marie Speckman dies
- 1998 – Erwin Speckman Sr. dies
- House passes to Marie and Erwin (brother & sister)
- 2022 – the house is currently waiting to be listed for sale by the son Specky



Minns Well House, 38 Radford Rd. (1912) - Photographed by Joyce Anderson