

Life BAC (Before air conditioning)

By **Diana Muir**/ Special To The Tab

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Our air conditioning is on the blink. I am told that there was a time when people used to live without central air conditioning. Really. If you look closely as you walk around Newton, you can still see the physical indications of that long-ago era, like an archaeologist who discerns the lifestyle of an ancient civilization in the contour of a hill or the shape of a stone.

There is a house, just a block from ours, that still has its old sleeping porch. Sleeping porches, built upstairs, off a bedroom, used to be common. Screened from floor to ceiling on three sides, they cooled much faster than the house, letting you have a comfortable night's sleep even after the hottest days.

Awnings were another effective trick. Shading southern and western windows with custom-tailored canvas reduced the solar-heating effect of the afternoon sun. Only a handful of houses in Newton still have their awnings.

The windows themselves used to be left open on summer nights. This might have been a security issue since housebreaking, as a profession, is even older than air conditioning repair. Double-hung windows on the first floor were fitted with little brass knobs that slid into place to prevent the window from being open wider than about six inches. With the windows open on the first floor, and a whole house fan pulling hot air out through the attic, houses were kept reasonably comfortable in hot weather.

Now that houses have air conditioning, the old round of opening the windows wide in the early morning and rushing from room to room to close them quickly when a thunderstorm blows up is too much trouble. The little brass sliding knobs sit unused, as obsolete as the haylofts in Newton's old carriage houses now that only horseless carriages are parked downstairs.

Newton homes retain numerous vestigial elements, reminders of how life used to be. A few of them speak to ecological adaptations of an earlier generation that in some ways walked more lightly on the earth.

When we bought our house, outside the kitchen door there was what looked like a subterranean garbage can. Its lid was level with the ground and you stepped on a flange to lift the lid. This was the receptacle for a pig route.

Newton used to have a contract with a pig farmer. Housewives or maids would step on the flange and tip the day's potato peels and stale bread into the can, which was underground to retard spoilage by keeping the scraps cool. Collectors went from house to house, and drove the kitchen waste to a farm.

I once knew where the farm that turned Newton's leftover oatmeal into pork chops was located. I seem to recall that it was in Weston, the contrast between a commercial hog-raising outfit that must have been smelly and noisy, and the manicured million-dollar lawns of Weston today is rather funny. The pig farm needed to be reasonably close to the collection route, else the transportation costs would have exceeded the values of the potato peels.

Near the pig-route can there was a rotating clothesline held erect by a huge concrete pyramid. During one period of save-the-planet fervor I hung laundry outside. That, of course, takes time. Plus, sometimes it rains. I haven't hung laundry on a line in years.

It is hot in the house now, despite the fact that I have every window open. It would be cooler if I set up a few fans, just until the repairman gets here, but I don't own any fans. I sent them to college when our youngest moved into the freshman dorm at Barnard one hot September. Brooks Hall, a truly beautiful building, was built so long ago that the top floors were designed as maid's rooms. Young ladies took their maids to college in those days. The wiring was not designed to support air conditioning. It is now being renovated to accommodate a generation that arrives at college without personal ladies' maids, but with the expectation that air conditioning comes standard.

Which is pretty much true. And which is, of course, one of the reasons why our climate is changing and why our summers are hotter than the summers of our childhood were.



When I was a kid in Connecticut, it was common to hear people say that it was not really necessary to install air conditioning because it was only uncomfortably hot one, maybe two, weeks a year. This was not merely an excuse for not spending the money; it was actually true. Then we all got air conditioning. And now every summer it is so hot that we actually need it. We have met the enemy, and it is us.

Diana Muir is an award winning Newton author whose most celebrated works explore the landscape and history of New England. Her book 'Reflections in Bullough's Pond,' received the Massachusetts Book Award as the best non-fiction book of 2000.