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WOODSTOCK: AN
HISTORICAL SKETCH

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Clarence Winthrop Bowen

Woodstock: An historical sketch

As a full history of Woodstock has been in preparation for several years and will, it is hoped, be published in the course of another year, this brief sketch is issued as it was read at the Bi-Centennial Anniversary of the town.

I

The history of the town of Woodstock is associated with the beginnings of history in New England. The ideas of the first settlers of Woodstock were the ideas of the first settlers of the Colony of Plymouth and the Province of Massachusetts Bay. The planting of these colonies was one of the fruits of the Reformation. The antagonism between the Established Church of England and the Non-Conformists led to the settlement of New England. The Puritans of Massachusetts, at first Non-Conformists, became Separatists like the Pilgrims of Plymouth. Pilgrims and Puritans alike accepted persecution and surrendered the comforts of home to obtain religious liberty. They found it in New England; and here, more quickly than in the mother country, they developed also that civil liberty which is now the birthright of every Anglo-Saxon.

II

The settlement of Woodstock is intimately connected with the first organized settlement on Massachusetts Bay; and how our mother town of Roxbury was first established is best told in the words of Thomas Dudley in his letter to the Countess of Lincoln under date of Boston, March 12, 1630-1:

“About the year 1627 some friends, being together in Lincolnshire, fell into discourse about New England and the planting of the gospel there. In 1628 we procured a patent from his Majesty for our planting between the Massachusetts Bay and Charles River on the South and the River of Merrimack on the North and three miles on either side of those rivers and bay ... and the same year we sent Mr. John Endicott and some with him to begin a plantation. In 1629 we sent divers ships over with about three hundred people. Mr. Winthrop, of Suffolk (who was well known in his own country and well approved here for his piety, liberality, wisdom, and gravity), coming in to us we came to such resolution that in April, 1630, we set sail from Old England... We were forced to change counsel, and, for our present shelter, to plant dispersedly.”

Settlements were accordingly made at Salem, Charlestown, Boston, Medford, Watertown, and in several other localities. The sixth settlement was made, to quote further from the same letter to the Countess of Lincoln, by “others of us two miles from Boston, in a place we named Roxbury.”¹

The date of settlement was September 28, 1630, and just three weeks later the first General Court that ever sat in America was held in Boston. The same year the first church in Boston was organized.² Roxbury, like the other settlements of Massachusetts Bay, was a little republic in itself. The people chose the selectmen and governed themselves; and as early as 1634, like the seven other organized towns, they sent three deputies to Boston to attend the first representative Assembly at which important business was transacted. The government of Roxbury, like the other plantations, was founded on a theocratic basis. Church and state were inseparable. No one could be admitted as a citizen unless he was a member of the church. Many of the first settlers came from Nazing, a small village in England, about twenty miles from London, on the river Lee. Morris, Ruggles, Payson, and Peacock, names read in the earliest records of Woodstock, were old family names in Nazing. Other first inhabitants of Roxbury came from Wales and the west of England, or London and its vicinity. Among the founders were John Johnson, Richard Bugbee, and John Leavens, whose family names are well known as among the first settlers of Woodstock. All were men of property³; none were “of the poorer sort.” In 1631 the Rev. John Eliot, a native of the village of Nazing, arrived with a company of Nazing pilgrims. Eliot, though earnestly solicited to become pastor of the church in Boston,⁴ accepted the charge of the church in Roxbury, which was organized in 1632,⁵ and was the sixth church, in order of time, established in New England. Another name equally prominent in the earliest years of the history of Roxbury was that of William Pynchon, afterwards known as the founder of Springfield in Massachusetts. Only Boston excels Roxbury in the number of its citizens who have made illustrious the early history of the Massachusetts colony.⁶ Among the early settlers of Roxbury who themselves

¹ Also spelt Roxberry, Roxborough, Rocksborough.

² July 30, 1630.

³ Young's "Chronicles of Massachusetts," p. 396.

⁴ Winthrop's "Journal," by Savage, vol. i., p. 111.

⁵ "Ordnained over the First Church, Nov. 5, 1632." – Eliot's tomb in Roxbury.

⁶ "Memorial History of Boston," vol. i., p. 403.

became, or whose descendants became, the early settlers of Woodstock, were the Bartholomews, Bowens, Bugbees, Chandlers, Childs, Corbins, Crafts, Griggses, Gareys, Holmeses, Johnsons, Lyons, Levinses, Mays, Morrises, Paysons, Peacocks, Peakes, Perrins, Scarboroughs, and Williamses.⁷

In 1643 the towns within the jurisdiction of Massachusetts had grown to thirty, and Roxbury did more than her share towards the organization of the new towns. In fact, Roxbury has been called the mother of towns, no less than fifteen communities having been founded by her citizens.⁸ Among the most important of these settlements was the town of Woodstock, whose Bicentennial we this day celebrate.

⁷ Though the Williamses did not settle permanently in Woodstock till some years after the first settlement, the family was most prominent in Roxbury, and one of its representatives visited the grant officially in 1686.

⁸ Drake's "Town of Roxbury" and "Memorial History of Boston," vol. i., pp. 401-422.

III

A glance at the country about us previous to the settlement of the town, in 1686, shows us a land sparsely inhabited by small bands of peaceful Indians, without an independent chief of their own, but who paid tribute to the Sachem of the Mohegans, the warriors who had revolted from the Pequots. Woodstock was a portion of the Nipmuck⁹ country, so-called because it contained fresh ponds or lakes in contrast to other sections that bordered upon the sea or along running rivers. Wabbaquasset, or the mat-producing place, was the name of the principal Indian village, and that name still exists in the corrupted form of Quasset to designate a section of the town. Indians from the Nipmuck¹⁰ country took corn to Boston in 1630, soon after the arrival of the “Bay Colony”; and in 1633¹¹ John Oldman and his three Dorchester companions passed through this same section on their way to learn something of the Connecticut River country; and they

may have rested on yonder “Plaine Hill,” for history states that they “lodged at Indians towns all the way.”¹² The old “Connecticut Path” over which that distinguished band¹³ of colonists went in 1635 and 1636 to settle the towns of Windsor, Wethersfield, and Hartford, passed through the heart of what is now Woodstock.¹⁴ This path so famous in the early days of New England history, came out of Thompson Woods, a little north of Woodstock Lake, and proceeding across the Senexet meadow, ran west near Plaine Hill, Marcy’s Hill, and a little south of the base of Coatney Hill. For more than fifty years before the settlement of the town, this historic path near Woodstock Hill was the outlet for the surplus population of Massachusetts Bay and the line of communication between Massachusetts and the Connecticut and New Haven colonies. But the most noteworthy feature in the description of the Indians of the Nipmuck country is that as early as 1670 they were formed into Praying Villages. Evidently the instructions of Gov. Cradock in his letter of March, 1629, to John Endicott had not been forgotten. In that letter he said: “Be not unmindful of the main end of our plantation by endeavoring to bring the Indians to the knowledge of the gospel.” In the heart of one man at least that idea was paramount. John Eliot, the Apostle to the Indians, was not content to be simply the pastor of the church of Roxbury for nearly sixty years. Amid his countless other labors he preached the gospel to the Indians of the Nipmuck country. The first Indian church in America had been established by him at Natick in 1651; and, in 1674, he visited the Indian villages in the wild territory about these very hills. As he found it, to quote his own words,¹⁵ “absolutely necessary to carry on civility with religion,” he was accompanied by Major Daniel Gookin, who had been appointed, in

⁹ De Forest’s “Indians of Connecticut,” and Palfrey’s “History of New England,” and Miss Ellen D. Larned’s “History of Windham County.”

¹⁰ Also “called the Wabbaquasset and Whetstone country; and sometimes the Mohegan conquered country, as Uncas had conquered and added it to his sachemdom.” Trumbull’s “History of Connecticut,” vol. i., 31.

¹¹ September.

¹² Winthrop’s “Journal,” by Savage, vol. i, 132. Palfrey’s “Hist. of New England,” vol. i., 369. The same year (Nov. 1633), “Samuel Hall and two other persons travelled westward into the country as far as this [Connecticut] river.” Holmes’ “Annals,” vol. i., 220.

¹³ Winthrop’s “Journal,” vol. i., 171.

¹⁴ Possibly some of the Dorchester emigrants, including Henry Wolcott, William Phelps, and others, may have passed a little south of this line. Dr. McClure’s MSS., in the possession of the Connecticut Historical Society: “In a conversation with the late aged and respectable Capt. Sabin of Pomfret, Ct., he related to me the following discovery, viz.: About forty years ago he felled a large and ancient yoke about the north line of Pomfret adjoining Woodstock. On cutting within some inches of the heart of the tree it was seen to have been cut and chipped with some short tool like an axe. Rightly judging that at the time when it must have been done the Indians so far inland were destitute and ignorant of the use of iron tools, he counted the number of the annual circular rings from the said marks to the bark of the tree, and found that there were as many rings as the years which had intervened from the migration of the Dorchester party to that time. Hence ‘the probability that they had journeyed along the north border of Pomfret, and as they traveled by a compass, the conjecture is corroborated by that course being nearly in a direct line from Boston to the place of their settlement on the Connecticut River.’” – Stiles’ “History of Ancient Windsor,” p. 26.

¹⁵ “Memorial Hist. of Boston,” vol. i., 263.

1656, magistrate of all the Indian towns. Maanexit was first visited on the Mohegan or Quinebaug River, near what is now New Boston, where Eliot preached to the natives, using as his text the seventh verse of the twenty-fourth Psalm: “Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors; and the king of glory shall come in.”

Quinnatisset, on what is now Thompson Hill, was the name of another Praying Town. But a quotation¹⁶ from the homely narrative of Major Gookin is the best description of Eliot’s memorable visit to Woodstock:

“We went not to it [Quinnatisset], being straitened for time, but we spake with some of the principal people at Wabquissit.¹⁷ ... Wabquissit ... lieth about nine or ten miles from Maanexit, upon the west side, six miles of Mohegan River, and is distant from Boston west and by south, about seventy-two miles. It lieth about four miles within the Massachusetts south line. It hath about thirty families, and one hundred and fifty souls. It is situated in a very rich soil, manifested by the goodly crop of Indian corn then newly ingathered, not less than forty bushels upon an acre. We came thither late in the evening upon the 15th of September, and took up our quarters at the sagamore’s wigwam, who was not at home: but his squaw courteously admitted us, and provided liberally, in their way, for the Indians that accompanied us. This sagamore inclines to religion, and keeps the meeting on sabbath days at his house, which is spacious, about sixty feet in length and twenty feet in width. The teacher of this place is named Sampson; an active and ingenious person. He speaks good English and reads well. He is brother unto Joseph, before named, teacher at Chabanakoungkomun¹⁸ ... being both hopeful, pious, and active men; especially the younger before-named Sampson, teacher at Wabquissit, who was, a few years since, a dissolute person, and I have been forced to be severe in punishing him for his misdemeanors formerly. But now he is, through grace, changed and become sober and pious; and he is now very thankful to me for the discipline formerly exercised towards him. And besides his flagitious life heretofore, he lived very uncomfortably with his wife; but now they live very well together, I confess this story is a digression. But because it tendeth to magnify grace, and that to a prodigal, and to declare how God remembers his covenant unto the children of such as are faithful and zealous for him in their time and generation, I have mentioned it.

“We being at Wabquissit, at the sagamore’s wigwam, divers of the principal people that were at home came to us, with whom we spent a good part of the night in prayer, singing psalms, and exhortations. There was a person among them, who, sitting mute a great space, at last spake to this effect: That he was agent for Unkas, Sachem of Mohegan, who challenged right to, and dominion over, this people of Wabquissit. And said he, Unkas is not well pleased that the English should pass over Mohegan River to call his Indians to pray to God. Upon which speech Mr. Eliot first answered, that it was his work to call upon all men everywhere, as he had opportunity, especially the Indians, to repent and embrace the gospel; but he did not meddle with civil right or jurisdiction. When he had done speaking, then I declared to him, and desired him to inform Unkas what I said, that Wabquissit was within the jurisdiction of Massachusetts, and that the government of that people did belong to them; and that they do look upon themselves concerned to promote the good of all

¹⁶ “Historical Collections of the Indians in New England. By Daniel Gookin, Gentleman, Printed from the original manuscript, 1792.” See “Collections Mass. Hist. Soc.,” vol. i., First Series, pp. 190-192.

¹⁷ Wabbaquasset, or Woodstock.

¹⁸ Dudley.

people within their limits, especially if they embraced Christianity. Yet it was not hereby intended to abridge the Indian sachems of their just and ancient right over the Indians, in respect of paying tribute or any other dues. But the main design of the English was to bring them to the good knowledge of God in Christ Jesus; and to suppress among them those sins of drunkenness, idolatry, powowing or witchcraft, whoredom, murder, and like sins. As for the English, they had taken no tribute from them, nor taxed them with any thing of the kind.

“Upon the 16th day of September¹⁹ being at Wabquissit, as soon as the people were come together, Mr. Eliot first prayed, and then preached to them, in their own language, out of Mat. vi., 33: *First seek the kingdom of heaven and the righteousness thereof, and all these things shall be added unto you.* Their teacher, Sampson, first reading and setting the cxix. Ps., 1st part, which was sung. The exercise was concluded with prayer.

“Then I began a Court among the Indians, and first I approved their teacher, Sampson, and their constable, Black James,²⁰ giving each of them a charge to be diligent and faithful in their places. Also I exhorted the people to yield obedience to the gospel of Christ and to those set in order there. Then published a warrant or order, that I had prepared, empowering the constable to suppress drunkenness, Sabbath breaking, especially powowing and idolatry. And, after warning given, to apprehend all delinquents and bring them before authority to answer for their misdoings; the smaller faults to bring before Watasacompamun, ruler of the Nipmuck country; for idolatry and powowing to bring them before me: So we took leave of this people of Wabquissit, and about eleven o’clock returned back to Maanexit and Chabanakougkomun, where we lodged this night.”

History fails to locate the spot where John Eliot’s sermon to the Indians of Woodstock was delivered, but tradition points to “Pulpit Rock,” so-called, under the aged chestnut trees of the McClellan farm near the “Old Hall”²¹ road.

But Eliot’s good work in the Nipmuck country was destroyed when King Philip’s war broke out in 1675. In August of that year a company of Providence men journeyed as far as Wabbaquasset, thinking that possibly King Philip himself had escaped thither.²² They found an Indian fort a mile or two west of Woodstock Hill, but no Indians. A party from Norwich in June of the following year also found deserted Wabbaquasset and the other Praying Villages. Desolation and devastation followed the disappearance of the Red Man. The Nipmuck country became more a wilderness than ever, forsaken of its aboriginal inhabitants whose barbaric tenure could not stand against a superior civilization.

“Forgotten race, farewell! Your haunts we tread,
Our mighty rivers speak your words of yore,
Our mountains wear them on their misty head,
Our sounding cataracts hurl them to the shore;
But on the lake your flashing oar is still,
Hush’d is your hunter’s cry on dale and hill,
Your arrow stays the eagle’s flight no more,

¹⁹ 1674.

²⁰ Black James was a distinguished Indian. He met Eliot again in Cambridge in June of 1681, where a meeting of the claimants of the Nipmuck country was held. The village and much of the land of the town of Dudley was known years after the settlement of Woodstock as “The Land of Black James and Company.” – Ammidown’s “Historical Collections,” vol. i., 406, 461.

²¹ Named after “Wabbaquasset Hall,” built in the spring or summer of 1686.

²² Palfrey’s “History of New England,” vol. iii., 159.

And ye, like troubled shadows, sink to rest
In unremember'd tombs, unpitied and unblest'd."²³

²³ Mrs. L. H. Sigourney's "Pocahontas."

IV

The time had now arrived for the white man to make a settlement at Wabbaquasset. In May, of 1681, the General Court of Massachusetts Bay had given to William Stoughton and Joseph Dudley the care of the Nipmuck country, with power to ascertain the titles belonging to the Indians and others, and a meeting of the claimants was held the following month at Cambridge, at which John Eliot rendered much assistance as interpreter. Dudley and Stoughton purchased all the claims, and the following year,²⁴ the whole Nipmuck country became the property of Massachusetts Bay. Jurisdiction over the country had already been claimed, under the terms of the Massachusetts charter. Many of the inhabitants of the town of Roxbury now felt that they could improve their condition and increase their usefulness by forming a settlement in some desirable portion of the new country. Undoubtedly their pastor, John Eliot, had told them of the beauty and fertility of the country about the Praying Villages of Maanexit, Quinnatisset, and Wabbaquasset.²⁵ Town meetings to arrange for a new settlement, were held in Roxbury in October of 1683.²⁶ A petition was signed, by a number of representative citizens of the town, asking that the General Court might grant to them a tract seven miles square about Quinnatisset, in the Nipmuck country. All save six of the thirty-six who signed this petition, afterwards became settlers of the new town, and of the five selectmen of Roxbury who presented the petition to the General Court, three²⁷ represented families prominent in the early history of Woodstock. The General Court at once granted²⁸ the petition provided the grant should not fall within a section to be reserved for Messrs Stoughton and Dudley, and Major Thompson, and provided also that thirty families should be settled on the plantation within three years from the following June, “and mainteyne amongst them an able, orthodox, godly minister.”²⁹ In 1684 Roxbury accepted the terms of the General Court, and sent Samuel and John Ruggles, John Curtis, and Edward Morris, as a committee of four, to “view the wilderness and find a convenient place.”

As Quinnatisset had been in part already granted, the committee reported³⁰ a territory “commodiose” for settlement at “Seneksuk and Wapagusset and the lands ajasiant.” A committee was therefore appointed to draw up an agreement for the “goers,” as they were called, to sign. In 1685,³¹ in answer to the petition of Edward Morris, deputy in behalf of the town of Roxbury, the General Court extended the limit of the time of settlement from June 10, 1687, to Jan. 31, 1688, and granted freedom from rates up to that time.³² At town meetings held in Roxbury, during the same year, it was arranged that one half of the grant should belong to the new settlers and one hundred pounds in money be given to them in instalments of twenty pounds a year, and the other half of the grant should belong to “the stayers” in consideration of the aid given “the goers.” The southern half of the grant was the portion subsequently occupied by “the goers.” Actual possession, however, was not taken until April of the following year. On the second page of the cover of the old and musty first volume of records of the proprietors of New Roxbury, afterwards called Woodstock, are these words:

²⁴ Feb. 10, 1682.

²⁵ Ellis' "History of Roxbury Town": "When the people of Roxbury came to take up lands, they selected their locations amongst the praying Indians or where Indians had been converted to Christianity... This certainly is a sure indication of the steady adherence of his [John Eliot's] fellow-townsmen and their belief in the actual benefits of his missionary labors."

²⁶ Oct. 6, 10, and 17.

²⁷ Joseph Griggs, John Ruggles, and Edward Morris.

²⁸ Dec. 5, 1683.

²⁹ "Records of the Governor and Company of Massachusetts Bay in New England," vol. v., 426.

³⁰ Oct. 27, 1684.

³¹ Jan. 28th.

³² "Records of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay in New England," vol. v., 468.

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