Town Commons of New England, 1640-1840

By John D. Cushing

PERHAPS the most picturesque and best-known feature of most New England towns and villages is the town common, or green; yet there are few other aspects of New England culture and history about which so much misinformation prevails. The most widely circulated story holds that these plots were originally pasture for the local livestock, and adherents to this theory invariably cite the well-known story of the cows on Boston Common as irrefutable proof of their contention. Another point of view, propounded by an authority who should know better, states that commons were chiefly decorative features laid out by the earliest settlers in imitation of similar plots in England. Presumably to prove the point, this authority notes that many commons today are triangular in shape and assumes that they always were.

These and other theories that abound are weak in that they are neither logical nor supported by fact. For example, considering the relatively limited size of most commons, it is difficult to understand how any one of them could have provided adequate grazing for the combined heards of the town. Perhaps a dozen or more cows could have been supported on nearly any common, but certainly only for a very limited period of time. In contrast, Boston Common is and always has been a rather large field. It was intended for use as pasture land and was so used for many years. Other examples of this practice may also be found but they are rather rare.

As for the idea that any common laid out either in the seventeenth or early eighteenth centuries was designed as an ornamental center for the community, nothing could be more absurd. It is evident that the first settlers, laboring to hew a living from the wilderness and often in daily danger of death, had more pressing business than creating ornamental parks. Nor was the process of settlement much easier in towns founded in the eighteenth century. Where, then, and how did commons originate, and why are they almost without exception still found in the center of most New England communities? The answer is bound up in the history of each town, the manner in which it was originally laid out, and the developments that took place there over the centuries.

The very earliest settlements were small, compact, communities, usually built around a small, open plot, and protected against attack by a log palisade. These so-called nucleated towns, supposedly patterned after the fortified outposts of Ulster, contained most of the homes of the settlers, a meetinghouse, a storehouse, and very little else. Perhaps small patches of land were planted by an occasional thrifty housewife, but the agricultural effort upon which the community largely depended was conducted outside the town walls. It was usually the custom, particularly when Indian attacks were likely, for the entire population to remain within the walls at night, keeping

with them their cattle lest they stray or be taken by the natives. In this sense, the centers of some old towns did serve as pastures, but only for a limited time and as a common-sense expedient.[1] Furthermore, as the settlers became more accustomed to life in the wilderness, fewer and fewer new settlements bothered to erect palisades, for there was security in times of danger in the older fortified towns. Therefore, newer communities were planned on a more extensive scale, and it is in the manner of apportioning the lands in such places that most town commons had their origins.

In proprietary towns, where a tract of "common and undivided land" was given to a group of proprietors, a particular system was used in distributing the land. In some carefully selected section of the grant a series of lots, known as home lots, was laid out, each only large enough for a man to erect his house, a few outbuildings, and perhaps maintain a small garden. One of these tracts was assigned to each family, one invariably was reserved for the ecclesiastical society, another for the first minister, still another for subsequent ministers, and usually one for a school. These plots were not intended for general argricultural use and each family was assigned additional lands, known as farm lots, located outside the cluster of home lots. In assigning farm land, provisions were usually made for the support of the ministry and the schools. In addition, most proprietors' maps show that certain farm lots were set aside and designated as cow commons, sheep commons, ox commons, or simply commons.[2] Therefore, if provision was made for grazing livestock on special fields, located outside the town and adequate in size for their purpose, there seems to be no reason why

townsmen should have grazed their herds in the center of the community.

In the residential section, a meetinghouse was erected on the plot reserved for the ecclesiastical society, and almost automatically it became the focal center of all community activity, religious, social and political. Furthermore, investigation will usually prove that in the great majority of cases these meetinghouse lots became the town commons of later years.

Of course, not all New England towns were laid out in this manner and in some regions, such as the Kennebec Valley in Maine and parts of the Masonian grants in New Hampshire, each settler was granted only one plot of land. In these areas, lots were also reserved for the ministry, the church, the schools, and pasturage. If by some chance the church society was overlooked when the lands were being apportioned, as was the case in Sturbridge, Massachusetts, the settlers, most of them church members, purchased a tract for the meetinghouse. In other instances one or more grantees donated a parcel of land to the church society.[3]

The story of the transformation of the meetinghouse lot into a town common is part of the history of each community; but in general it may be said that the activity of the church society both directly and indirectly influenced the development of the common and often determined the appearance of the entire town center as well. First, the meetinghouse, as the center of local activity usually became the place where most public business, religious and civil, was conducted. Since the members of the society constituted a major portion of the town's population, the distinction between church and state at the municipal level was largely theoretical, and no one could object to the use of the

meetinghouse for town meetings. The thought of objecting to the practice probably never even crossed the minds of most individuals and thus, years later when town business required more elaborate quarters, townhouses were frequently erected on the common.

However, the meetinghouses of the earliest days were used most frequently for religious purposes, and every member of the society was required to attend weekly services under pain of a fine, reprimand or punishment by the civil authorities. Since inclement weather or living at a distance from the common were not acceptable excuses for absence, families trudged each week through the snow and cold of winter and the heat and dust of summer to attend meeting. Winter weather, of course, worked a great hardship on the worshippers, for meetinghouses were never heated and the sermons lasted from one to three hours. Once the morning services were concluded, a brief respite was allowed before an equally long and uncomfortable session got under way in the afternoon. Obviously some concession had to be made to the limits of human endurance. In most parishes, particularly in the earlier years, it was customary for families living near the meetinghouse to invite their distant neighbors into their homes for warmth and refreshments between church services. The system worked reasonably well while the population remained small, but as a town increased in size such hospitality was understandably curtailed and each worshipper was left to make himself comfortable.

In some parts of New England, particularly Connecticut, the hardships involved in attending divine worship, as well as attending other business at the center of town, caused the creation of villages,

where new church societies were created and meetinghouses erected. In other areas the problem was solved by creating another parish in the town or, in some instances, by carving another town out of the precincts of the older community. Thus, the religious society was partly responsible for changing the appearance and overall plan of many towns. In either case, the hardship involved in travel was drastically reduced, but the parishioners still faced the problem of shelter and warmth during their "nooning." The problem was solved either by partaking of the hospitality offered at the local tavern or by erecting odd little structures known as nooning houses, warming houses, or Sabbath Day houses.

These buildings, once a characteristic feature of many town commons, were simple and often crude shelters, built on the meetinghouse lot. Sometimes a schoolhouse was made available for "nooning," or the society erected a large shed equipped with a fireplace; but in most cases the matter was left up to the individual. No example of warming houses is known to have survived the ravages of time, nor is it possible to say that they existed in certain numbers at any given period of time. The situation varied from town to town. In Newton, Massachusetts, two buildings, each twenty-eight feet square, were erected shortly after 1730. In contrast, the common at Southington, Connecticut, was dotted with thirty Sabbath Day houses, the last of which was torn down in 1790. On the other hand, Sturbridge, Massachusetts, settled at a relatively late date, did not even authorize the erection of warming houses until 1791.[4] Whatever the case, it was as a direct result of religious activity that this long since vanished characteristic of many New England commons came into being.

In many towns and villages, the alternative to building nooning houses was to seek the comfort and warmth of the nearby tavern. The relative expense of such hospitality was often the reason compelling parishioners to build their own shelters, but in a great many communities the local innkeeper and the members of the church enjoyed cordial relations. In towns where a householder had opened a tavern before the erection of a meetinghouse the society often built close by; while in other communities prospective tavern keepers, with an eye to mutual convenience, built their hostels close to the meetinghouse, sometimes on the common itself. The importance of the tavern vis-à-vis the religious community is well illustrated by the relationship between the two in Jaffery, New Hampshire, where the landlord complained that the meetinghouse was so close that it obstructed easy access to his premises. The church obliged by moving the meetinghouse and, as nearly as can be determined, without any great objections.[5] Thus, it is evident that in some towns there was a direct relationship between the establishment of the principal tavern and the needs of the religious society. In a sense, some New England taverns may be considered creatures of the church, but in the overall view they played a much more comprehensive role.

In most communities, the tavern was the only public building other than the meetinghouse, and men found it a convenient place to transact business, exchange news, perhaps find an occasional copy of a newspaper, or simply drink a bowl of flip. Meetings of all kinds, religious and civil, were often held there, particularly in the winter months when the frigid meetinghouse presented a most forbidding prospect. In addition, many old taverns have been dignified by service as temporary courthouses, and in the earliest days courts of all kinds dispensed royal justice from the leading public houses in shire towns. The Courts of Quarter Session and General Session of the Peace, tribunals of primary jurisdiction before which a staggering amount of litigation was argued each quarter, held sessions in taverns well into the nineteenth century. These courts usually sat in several towns throughout each county in order to meet the demands and needs of a scattered population and thus they more often sat in taverns than in courthouses. Even in the shire towns where courthouses were available, the Courts of Common Pleas frequently sat in taverns long after the American Revolution. This was particularly true in winter when drafty court chambers defied all efforts to heat them, and in times of civil unrest when the judges appear to have preferred the safety of the local tavern to the courthouse. Also, the records show that nearly every courthouse in New England either burned down or was extensively damaged by fire at one time or another, and in most instances at least twice. Nevertheless, litigious New Englanders were ever determined to have their day in court and the judges, usually harried by overcrowded dockets, were often willing to oblige by opening court in the principal public house.[6]

In addition to serving as headquarters for bench and bar, many taverns served their communities in a more important manner. Weary wayfarers seeking food, warmth, and lodgings provided many towns with their chief link to the "outside world." Later, when regular stagecoach service was inaugurated, taverns were designated as stage stops and their importance was correspondingly in-

creased. Here travelers arrived, departed, or stopped for refreshments, mail and newspapers were delivered and received, news was transmitted from town to town and fresh horses provided for the speeding coach.[7] Therefore, in the overall picture, it is evident that taverns, located near and often on the common, were important institutions in most New England communities.

In both the figurative and literal sense, men beat a path to the doors of both meetinghouse and tavern; and in so doing they gave final definition to the physical form of the meetinghouse lot. In nearly every town paths and cart tracks crossed the common in every direction, according to the convenience of people approaching the tavern and the meetinghouse; and eventually one or two of these haphazard paths became established streets or roads, cutting the tract into odd shaped sections. One good example of such development is still to be seen at West Boylston, Massachusetts, where the meetinghouse was erected in the middle of the common and the road coming in from the south turned sharply west to skirt the plot. Worshippers coming in from the south wore a path across the green to the meetinghouse and to the tavern beyond. Eventually this simple path became the principal north-south highway running through the town.[8] It was simply more convenient to cross the meetinghouse lot than to skirt it and, as a result, the common today is divided into two irregular plots, one on either side of the road. Similar developments took place in other towns.

A very frequent sight in modern New England is a meetinghouse standing just across the street from the common. In most cases it will be found that the building originally stood near one side of the common, and that a path, crossing in front of the meetinghouse, has since become a street. Properly speaking, however, the church still stands on a portion of the common or original meetinghouse lot.[9] The exact process by which any given common became the center of its town is part of the history of that town, and since the habits of no two communities have ever been precisely the same, it follows that no two commons have developed in exactly the same manner. Nevertheless, certain general characteristics have marked the process in most places.

Just as the tavern served to attract many phases of community life, it was only natural that it should also attract business. Perhaps the first, most characteristic, and long-lasting enterprise attracted by the tavern was the blacksmith shop. In many localities the smith was the only really skilled craftsman, and his services were almost indispensable to an agrarian community where most farmers lacked the wherewithall to operate their own forges. A good blacksmith, skilled in his trade, was well patronized, and common sense often dictated that he locate close to the center of activity. As a result, most towns had a blacksmith shop near the tavern and, occasionally, on the common itself. If a tavern also happened to be a stage stop, there was even more reason for a blacksmith to be located close at hand.[10]

What held true for blacksmiths was also true for other businesses, for it was simply a matter of good sense to become established where people tended to congregate. Therefore, merchants often located their shops near the common and, as individual circumstances dictated, they were followed by craftsmen such as bootmakers, chandlers, hatters, cabinetmakers, tinsmiths or others. Depending upon the size of the community and the

demand for services, lawyers, physicians, printers, booksellers, paint makers, tailors, banks, and a variety of other enterprises might also be present and the commercial life of the town to a great extent grew up around the common. However, such developments usually took place independently of changes in the appearance of the common itself.

Improvement of the meetinghouse lot was invariably a very long process, and in some places it has never been completed. The first settlers usually did nothing consciously to improve the tract. Trees were cut for firewood, stones were taken for building purposes, and a large section of land cleared to permit erection of the meetinghouse, but little labor was expended beautifying an unproductive lot. The sole exception to this rule was the graveyard, usually located close to the meetinghouse or at least on some part of the common. There, trees were cut down, brush was cleared away, and surface stones rolled to the edge of the lot and used for a stone wall. If there were not enough stones to build a wall, some other kind of fencing was erected, for very few New England burial plots were not enclosed. The reason for fencing the graveyard was not, as is often supposed, to keep cattle from trampling the graves. Indeed, quite the opposite was true, and the residents of most communities, anxious to keep the burial ground free of undergrowth and briars, yet unable to afford the labor or money to provide regular upkeep, found it expedient to let cattle do the work for them. A standard arrangement was to allow the sexton to pasture his herd on the plot if he, in return, would build a fence, maintain it, and keep the gravestones in place. Incidentally, the sexton was also held responsible for keeping his livestock confined, for most towns

prohibited animals running free in the streets—including the common.[11]

The remainder of the meetinghouse lot usually was neglected and in many instances was downright unsightly until after 1835-1840. When the stumps began to rot away it was often customary for the local militia company to use the plot for its quarterly training. Otherwise it drilled in the roadways. In some towns, the militia actually cleared the common of trees, stumps, stones, and rocks in order to make it suitable for a drill field. On occasion, efforts were made to landscape the area and, as a result, the old meetinghouse lot became known as the parade. In some of the larger towns, where improvements were made in the commons before the Revolution, a conscious effort was sometimes made to provide a smooth field for the annual battalion or regimental musters; but in the great majority of cases musters were held on farm fields rented for the purpose.[12]

In any event, it was often the military community (whose membership was usually synonymous with that of the church) that made the first actual improvements in the common. In many towns the selectmen provided a magazine for the storage of powder and other military supplies. These structures were usually built of brick or stone and were often, but not always, located on the meetinghouse lot. If a town did not have a magazine, the powder was most frequently stored in the meetinghouse, thus presenting another example of the close ties between the church and civil community. Another feature of many commons was a gunhouse, also introduced by the military. These little buildings were rather drab wooden structures, not unlike early enginehouses or hearse houses, and were usually only large enough to shelter a

field piece. They were erected at state expense in towns where the militia was an artillery company, but often an old enginehouse was converted for the purpose.[13]

Other structures erected on or near the common reflect the various uses of the plot by the community. The church society often provided one or more rows of horse sheds to shelter the parishioners' horses during services. These sheds were also freely used during the week if they happened to be convenient for persons attending business in town, and very often travelers who were stopping at the tavern had their mounts sheltered there for the night. The society also was likely to maintain a hearse house close to the meetinghouse and graveyard. If there was no hearse in town the structure was often a simple shed in which a litter could be stored along with the few tools used by the sexton. If a town happened to own a fire engine, it was often stored with the hearse; otherwise it was housed in a simple shack located on or near the common.[14]

Sometimes a well had been dug in the early days, and continued use of it by the townspeople eventually saw it capped with a simple box cover, perhaps a pump and even a watering trough. In many communities a hay scale was located close to the tavern and, as late as the first decade of the nineteenth century, pillory, stocks, whipping post and bulletin board stood on the common near the meetinghouse door. Except for what was sometimes a rather large tavern sign, few other structures of any kind helped relieve the barren appearance of most meetinghouse lots.[15]

Occasionally more than one meetinghouse stood on the common, a product of the denominationalism that eventually broke the religious unanimity of most New England towns. When a schism occurred in the church, the "unorthodox" portion of the community usually took it for granted that it had a perfect right to erect its own meetinghouse on the common, and in many instances no one gave serious thought to contesting that right. However, if the schism was accompanied by intense feeling it was often necessary or expedient for the second society to erect its meetinghouse elsewhere. In any event, the point to be noted is that the common belonged to the members of the church society and each member considered that he had a collective vested right in it. This attitude was responsible not only for the erection of new meetinghouses on the green but, at a later date, townhouses, libraries, and academies as well. Nevertheless, regardless of what buildings were erected on the common proper, few if any improvements were made in the land itself other than what had been done by the militia.

Generally speaking, most commons were barren, unsightly plots from the earliest days until well after 1835. Brush, stumps, stones, rubbish, dead trees, and stagnant pools, swarming in summer with disease-carrying insects, typified a great many meetinghouse lots for centuries. A traveler in Litchfield, Connecticut, complained in 1803 that "there are fragments of old fences, boards, woodpiles, heaps of chips, old sleds bottom upward, carts, casks, weeds and loose stones lying along in wild confusion. . . . The road is scandalously bad . . . ruts and gutters with stones at every step . . . cut up by deep gullies in front of every house. . . . Droves of sheep and hogs infest the beautiful green and render it unsafe and disgusting to pass along the street."[16]

At the other end of New England, Fairhaven, Vermont, reported that until

1853 "great stumps were standing on the green [which] for many years . . . remained an uneven and barren sand waste, lying open to the public, traversed by vehicles in all directions, occupied here and there by piles of lumber and old iron, and diversified by a number of knolls and . . . water sinks. . . ." Even picturesque Middlebury maintained a similar morass in its center and the situation at nearby Hanover, New Hampshire, was no better.[17]

In central New England, Thompson, Connecticut, was graced in 1836 by a meetinghouse, "blindless and bare," standing on "the rough common, cut up by numerous wagon roads." In nearby Brimfield, Massachusetts, the old meetinghouse was torn down in 1805, the trees on the common were sold for firewood, and the lot, already cut in every direction by muddy cart ruts, remained a most unattractive place until improvements were begun in 1852.[18] In a few towns, the dismal scene was compounded when animals, contrary to law, ran loose in the streets until irate householders, annoyed by the damage to their property, had them confiscated in the local pound.

Of course some towns began to make improvements in their meetinghouse lots at a relatively early date, but such activity was usually at the initiative and expense of private individuals. In Canton, Massachusetts, for example, the first improvements were made in the common by two of the town's leading citizens who planted trees on the lot in 1794. The effect was so pleasing to the parishioners that the town took over the project eight years later. A similar situation prevailed in Haverhill, Massachusetts, where the Chief Justice of the Commonwealth set out trees in 1790, but it was another half century before the town followed his lead.[19] In Grafton, Massachusetts, a long-standing desire on the part of a few parishioners to improve the meetinghouse lot was repeatedly vetoed in town meeting. Finally, in 1840, a vote was grudgingly carried to allow the common to be graded and fenced, but at private expense.[20] The same situation prevailed in many other towns throughout the length and breadth of New England.

Generally speaking, the movement to improve the appearance of meetinghouse lots did not get under way until the middle 1830's when the boom that led to the Panic of 1837 provided sufficient capital for the undertaking. The Panic, however, put a damper on many such projects and it was not until the 1840's, and often much later, that improvements began. Improvements, when they were made, usually consisted of planting trees, erecting a fence, perhaps grading a large section of the lot, and even laying out cross paths. The result is that today in most New England towns, if the church stands on or near the site of the original meetinghouse, there will also be a piece of open land, perhaps fenced, a graveyard, the intersection of two or more roads or streets, and a small business center or the remains thereof. There is no indication that the center of town was ever used as a pasture.

NOTES

[1] See A. N. Garvan, *Architecture and Town Planning in Colonial Connecticut* (New Haven, 1951); and W. H. Wilcoxson, *History of Stratford, Connecticut* (Stratford, 1939), pp. 67 ff.

[2] See maps of Blandford, Mass., 1796 series, in Massachusetts Archives, and in S. G. Wood, *The Taverns and Turnpikes of Blandford* (n.p., 1908). Limitations of space prohibit listing extensive citation here. Therefore, in most cases the works cited may be considered only as samples of available sources. John Warner Barber's *Historical Sketches* of Massachusetts and Connecticut illustrate most points made in this article.

[3] "Kennebec Purchase Papers" in Maine and Massachusetts Historical Societies; plans of Goffstown, N. H., before and after settlement in George P. Hadley, *The History of ... Goffstown* (n.p., n.d.); plans of Waitsfield, Vt., 1816 & 1830, in Matt B. Jones, *History of the Town of Waitsfield, Vermont* (Boston, 1909); plan of Meredith, N. H. in *New Hampshire State Papers*, ed. A. S. Batchellor (Concord, N. H., 1896), XVII, 480; George H. Haynes, *Historical Sketch of the ... Congregational Church Sturbridge, Massachusetts* (Worcester, 1910), pp. 22-23 ff. It should be noted that many persons sold their home lots and moved to their farm lands.

[4] Francis Jackson, *History of the Early Settlement of Newton* (Boston, 1854), pp. 76-78; Heman R. Timlow, *... Sketches of Southington, Connecticut* (Hartford, 1875), pp. 72-75; Haynes, *op. cit.*

[5] See Wood, *op. cit.*; A. A. and A. E. Lehtinen, *History of Jaffery, New Hampshire* (Jaffery, 1937), pp. 101, 172.

[6] Rockingham County, N. H., Court of General Session of the Peace, "Sessions Book," 1810 & 1821; "Record of the Lincoln County [Maine] General Session of the Peace," 1768, 1791, 1831; Lincoln County Court of Common Pleas, "Record," 1806, 1827; Worcester County, Mass., Court of Common Pleas, "Record," 1786, 1787, 1813; miscellaneous papers in files of Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts.

[7] Elizabeth Ward, *Old Times in Shrewsbury* (n.p., 1892), p. 34; Wood, *op. cit., passim.*

[8] Cf. Maps of West Boylston, Mass., 1794 & 1830, in Massachusetts Archives. See also other examples below. In many towns, industry or other considerations caused the population and business center to move away from the meetinghouse. Particularly in Rhode Island, many towns grew up around business or commercial centers, while in all parts of New England it frequently happened that defunct church societies sold their lands and tore down their building. Such towns are outside the scope of this article.

[9] An example of such a stage of development may be seen at Old Sturbridge Village.

[10] See map of Lexington, Mass., 1775, in Massachusetts Archives; and map of Salem, N. H., in Edgar Gilbert, *History of Salem, New Hampshire* (Concord, 1907).

[11] Joseph Dow, *History of Hampton, New Hampshire* (Salem, 1890), I, 61-62; Howard Phalen, *History of the Town of Acton* (n.p., n.d.), p. 182.

[12] Warren E. Brown, *History of Hampton Falls, New Hampshire* (Manchester, N. H., 1900), 383 ff.; Charles N. Selleck, *Norwalk* (Norwalk, Conn., 1896), p. 39; J. Bailey Moore, *History of the Town of Candia, New Hampshire* (Manchester, N. H., 1893), pp. 139-158.

[13] Brown, *op. cit.*; Jackson, *op. cit.*; "Magazine Returns," and "Gun Houses," mss. in office of Massachusetts Adjutant General.

[14] See map and picture of Leominster, Mass., 1830, in Massachusetts Archives; Cyrus Eaton, *Annals of the Town of Warren, Maine ...* (Hallowell, 1877), p. 335.

[15] George W. Chase, *History of Haverhill, Massachusetts* (Haverhill, 1861), p. 69; Benjamin Chase, *History of Old Chester, N. H.* (Auburn, N. H., 1869), p. 105.

[16] *The Litchfield Monitor*, June 29, 1803.

[17] Andrew N. Adams, *History of the Town of Fairhaven, Vermont* (Fairhaven, 1870), pp. 192-193; Samuel Swift, *History of the Town of Middlebury, Vermont* (Middlebury, 1859), pp. 296 ff.; John K. Lord, *History of the Town of Hanover, New Hampshire* (Hanover, 1928), p. 23.

[18] Richard M. Bayles, *History of Windham County, Connecticut* (New York, 1889), p. 706; Charles M. Hyde, *Historical Celebration of the Town of Brimfield, Massachusetts* (Springfield, Mass., 1879), p. 72.

[19] Daniel T. V. Huntoon, *History of the Town of Canton* (Cambridge, 1873), p. 273; George W. Chase, *History of Haverhill, Massachusetts* (Haverhill, 1861), pp. 507-508.

[20] Grafton, Massachusetts, Town Records, Vol. VI, under dates March 7, 1836 and June 3, 1839.