

BURLINGTON HISTORICAL SKETCH

By Martha E. Sewall Curtis

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Burlington was originally included in the ample territory of the town of Woburn, incorporated in 1642. For nearly a hundred years, it was called Shawshin, from the Indian name of the river on its borders. The commissioners sent from Charlestown in 1640 to explore the country and fix a place for a church and a town in the limits of the land grant afterward incorporated as Woburn penetrated to the banks of the Shawshin and being overtaken by a snow storm, were forced as night approached "to lye under the Rockes, whilst the Rain and Snow did bedew their Rockye beds."

Very early in the history of Woburn it is probable that settlements were made in this part of the town. One of the first three highways laid out in Woburn in 1645 was named Upstreet and described as "leading to Shawshin." It appears to have been the principal one of the three, as the others are called "lanes" and both led into it. The hardy pioneers of the mother town were doubtless strongly attracted by the wood-crowned hills and broad-meadows of Shawshin.

Their descendants can hardly appreciate the difficulty and danger of their undertaking. The country was wild and unsettled. Wolves lurked in the forest. The old Records of Woburn show that a famous place for trapping them was "in a springe between Wood hill and Maple medow Playne." The arrow heads and other relics which our farmers find in their fields today give evidence that many Indians frequented this region. Immemorial tradition informs us that one of their wigwams was located in the new cemetery, on the Bedford road. In the face of these dangers, our fathers founded our town.

In fifty years, we are told, the appearance of the country had materially changed. Dreary waste and forest were brightened by cultivated fields and the humble homes of the first settlers; the wolves had been driven back into the wild lands and the Indians were kept in a state of semi-subordination. In the early days of New England, the interests of church and state were well nigh identical. To attend divine worship was not a matter of choice as it is today. Not to go to meeting was to be exposed to civil and social obloquy and even risk the penalties of the law.

It is recorded of the people of Shawshin that they *would go to meeting* [sic]. This was not an easy task for them as the meeting-house in Woburn, built probably in the original centre of population, was inconveniently distant from their homes. Still, every Sunday, they took their journey of three, four or five miles, some on foot, some on horseback some with ox teams, and some in winter traversing the drifts on "rackets" or "snowshoes." Despite their zealous piety, our fathers became dissatisfied with these hard conditions.

The question of separation from the mother church was agitated and as a result, the second parish of Woburn, or as it was quaintly named, Woburn Precinct, was incorporated September 27, 1730. Eighty-two of the three hundred and twelve persons taxed to pay Rev. Mr. Jackson's salary in Woburn in 1730 were included in the Precinct. The people of the parish very soon began to avail themselves of the privileges granted by General Court.

Among their proceedings at two general meetings in November 1730 they voted to build a meeting-house in the centre of the Precinct. In the meantime, public worship was held in the house of Simon Thompson, which was centrally located and is remembered by our older inhabitants as the home of the late Solomon Trull. The founders of the parish had considerable difficulty in fixing upon a site for the meeting-house but finally the matter was decided and Mr. Benjamin Johnson generously gave them half an acre of land in the place they had chosen. The meeting-house was raised, July 23, 1732, two years after the Old South in Boston.

The first four ministers of the Church were: Supply Clap, 1735-1748; Thomas Jones, 1751-1774; John Marrett, 1774-1813; Samuel Sewall, 1814-1842. All were graduates of Harvard University.¹ Supply Clap, Thomas Jones and John Marrett held their office for life. The ministry of "Father Sewall," as he was known among his people, extended over a period of twenty-eight years. He was afterward the first minister of the church in North Woburn. The limits of this sketch

¹ Harvard College was founded in 1636 and was the most common source of theological education for Congregational ministers; Yale College was the second most common source.

do not permit us to give a full account of the lives of these men, all worthy of our most grateful remembrance. "Their works do follow them."

In the dark days of the Revolution the men of Woburn Precinct did not fail in patriotism. The records show that ninety-seven men served in the war, 1775-1783. There were probably others whose names do not appear. The name of Rev. John Marrett, minister of the parish, heads the "Alarm List" of the Precinct. There is a family tradition that he was present at the Battle of Lexington, but this is not authenticated. He gives an account of the affair in his diary.² In the house of Captain James Reed, in the southerly part of the Precinct, the first British prisoners of the Revolution were confined, April 19, 1775. This is authenticated by the deposition of Capt. Reed, published in Phinney's "History of the Battle of Lexington."³ The house is still standing and has ever since been in the possession of the family. It is now owned by Mr. Edward Reed. The descendants of Capt. James Reed have always been well and worthily known in the town. During the perilous times of the Revolution, the library and public records of Harvard College were kept for safety in the house of Deacon Samuel Reed in the westerly part of the precinct. It is still standing, although not owned by the family.

The house of Madam Jones, now owned by Samuel Sewall, was the retreat of Hancock and Adams and the fair Dorothy Quincy, April 19, 1775. This story is preserved to us by the most authentic tradition and record. Driven hence by a false alarm, the noted patriots took refuge at the house of Amos Wyman, in an obscure place at the corner of three towns—Bedford, Billerica, and Woburn. This house is now standing. A narrow foot-path through the woods leads to its former site.

Woburn Precinct was incorporated as the town of Burlington February 28, 1799. The event was duly celebrated by an entertainment at Captain John Wood's Social Hall. This hall was in the house now owned by the heirs of the late Charles Caldwell. A copy of the toasts given at this entertainment is still extant. The population of Burlington at this time was 534. The town furnished eighty-two men for the late Civil War, a surplus of four over and above all demands.

At the time of the centennial celebration at Lexington, April 19, 1875, an invitation was given to the citizens of Burlington to join in the observance of the day. This invitation was accepted and a company of cavalry formed, numbering forty-six, with four honorary members. On the morning of the day, this company escorted the carriages containing the town officers and four aged citizens of the town of Lexington and there formed a creditable part of the procession.

Burlington is celebrated for its beauty of situation. The center is on high ground from which may be had a fine view of the surrounding country and distant mountains. Vine Brook, a branch of the Shawshin, flows through the southeasterly part of the town and sources of the Ipswich river originate in the easterly part. The soil is generally good for farming. Burlington is almost entirely an agricultural town, having very little mechanical or manufacturing business. Vine Brook furnishes water power for one saw and grist mill, owned by Mr. Edward Reed,. There are two shoe stock manufactories and shop for block printing in Burlington. In the north part of the town is the noted ham-curing establishment of Mr. T. I. Reed, where an extensive business is in progress. Burlington farmers have become noted as raisers of vegetables, small fruits, and milk. Their comfortable homesteads and well-tilled fields compare favorably with those of any country town in the vicinity.

² Fogelberg notes that Rev. John Marrett (d. 1813) kept a diary from 1767; the diary was lost in the Sewall house fire of 1897. Fogelberg notes that very little of the diary was reproduced but that a portion of it is located in Samuel Dunster's *Henry Dunster and His Descendents* (Central Falls, Rhode Island: E. L. Freeman and Co., 1876) and in part in Duane Hamilton Hurd's *History of Middlesex County, Massachusetts : With Biographical Sketches of Many of its Pioneers and Prominent Men* (Philadelphia: J. W. Lewis & co., 1890). Fogelberg reproduced the text in *Burlington: Part of a Greater Chronicle* (Burlington, Mass.: Burlington Historical Commission, c1976), pp. 484-501.

³ Phinney, Elias. *History of the Battle of Lexington, on the Morning of the 19th April, 1775*. [Lowell, Mass.]: Society for the Preservation of Colonial Culture, c1968. Reprint of the 1825 ed. Printed by Phelps and Farnham, Boston.