

A History of the Town Forest--Approaching Modern Times

The Walpole Town Forest will be celebrating its centennial on May 1, 2016. This article, the third in what will be a monthly series, describes the history of the land that became the Town Forest, covering the period from the early 1700s to the late 1800s, just before the Town Forest's formation. The author would like to thank Roger Turner and Barbara Bartholomew at the Walpole Historical Society for their assistance in preparing this article.

In the previous article, we learned that the first documented activity in the area that we now know as Walpole was the establishment of a sawmill on the Neponset River, near the present White Bridge, in 1659. By the early 1700s that sawmill had changed owners several times. In 1720, a deed was issued to Peter Lyons for the sawmill and 250 acres, comprising much of the present Town Forest property. The sawmills were constructed to mill the red cedar from Walpole's Great Cedar Swamp. Before the logs were hauled by oxen to the Lyons mill (and the other mills that would follow), the trees were cut into 8, 10 or 12 foot lengths and stripped of branches and bark in what is referred to as the "Great Shaving Place." The exact location of this spot is unknown, but it is believed to be close to the former Bird Machine property in South Walpole. The number of mills along the Neponset River in Walpole increased, but the supply of wood did not. Eventually the supply of red cedar began to deplete, and other woods were transported to the mills. Later records show that Joshua Clapp owned a sawmill and a "mill" (a grist mill) along the Neponset River. These are just a few of the several documented water-powered sawmills and grist mills in Walpole.

In 1742, a deed transferred one or two of Lyons' sawmills to the Fales family. A few years later, Lyons' son Lemuel transferred 5 acres, 2/3 of a house, 2/3 of a grist mill, and all of a sawmill to the Blake family. It was a customary then to sell portions of an estate as a way to provide money to heirs while retaining a portion as shelter and financial security to surviving spouses. The term for this is "Widow's Thirds". The Blake family took full ownership of the house and grist mill in 1756 and remained there until the early 1800s. (The Blake name should be familiar to people who have walked the Town Forest trail between White Bridge and the John Lee press box; the small cemetery along the trail is the Blake family plot. The original headstones are in the care of the Walpole Historical Society. Newer replica stones are in place, but all birth and death dates are from the 1700s to as late as 1839.)

The house that the Blake's owned remained standing until either 1972 or 1974. There are undoubtedly readers who remember the Blake house in the Town Forest. That house was almost 250 years old when it burned to the ground.

In 1811, John Blackburn purchased the property. His descendants owned it until the 1880s. It was the Blackburn family that erected the Blackburn Privilege, which is the dam over which White Bridge passes (a "privilege" was the term for receiving permission from town government to erect a dam). Some people today refer to White Bridge as the "First Blackburn Privilege."

The Blackburn family was in the textile business, specifically twine manufacturing. Like many small New England textile businesses in the early and mid-1800s, the business was at a disadvantage competing against the larger mills in Lowell and the Blackstone Valley. In an effort to stay afloat, the company expanded into the manufacture of textile machinery. Ultimately, however, the Blackburn family business went bankrupt, but before that, the family had quite an operation along the Neponset River between the White Bridge and the present hydroelectric

dam (also known as the "Second Blackburn Privilege"). An 1893 map of the area supplied by the Historical Society shows a working area that spans Duffy Point to the area behind the high school. This map is posted on the Town Forest Committee website (www.walpole-ma.gov/town-forest-committee). It shows both dams, a roadway between the two, the Blake House, a large barn, a shop, an "old mill," (actually a grist mill) and the Wrentham Branch of the Old Colony Railroad. Despite the fact that the Neponset River resembles nothing more than a brook at many points in the Town Forest, it comprised the backbone of many economic activities.

The next installment of this series will describe the new owners of the former Blackburn property, the planning and creation of the Town Forest and its dedication in 1916.

As part of the planning for the 100th Anniversary, we have created a website for your photos taken in the Town Forest and stories of your Town Forest memories. Please go to walpolematownforest@gmail.com. If you need help scanning your photos, contact Gary Riggott through the Town Forest website. Town Forest Trail maps can be obtained at the Town clerk's office or downloaded from the Town Forest Committee website.

I'd like to pass along a big "Thank You" to those who participated in the Town Forest Cleanup on Nov 14. It was a wonderful, productive day. Photos can be found at the Town Forest Committee website.