

A History of the Town Forest-The Early Years

The Walpole Town Forest will be celebrating its 100th Anniversary on May 1, 2016. This article is the second in what will be a monthly series describing various topics related to the Town Forest. This article describes the early history of the land that became the Town Forest, covering the period from 1659 to the early 1700's.

In preparing this article, there were a few opposing themes that I needed to balance. I wanted to provide interesting information but didn't want to go into too much detail, because space for this article is limited. In fact, an entire book has been written about the Town Forest and is available in the Library "Walpole's First Sawmill", by Karl West. It's a comprehensively researched book and I encourage anyone interested to ask the research librarian to retrieve a copy for you. I wanted to provide historical information and to try to relate it to features in both the Town Forest and the town that people can still see and identify with today. Historical narratives aren't everyone's cup of tea and the idea of these articles is to raise the profile of the Town Forest by getting people acquainted with the property and interested enough to come out and visit.

To me, the formation of the Town Forest didn't really begin with its founding in 1916; it began when our forefathers settled the area and recorded their activities. So, in writing the Town Forest history in periods, a bit of context will be provided as background for when I write later about its formation and founding in the 1900s.

The first recorded deed for the section of the Town Forest behind the high school is in 1659, some 65 years before the town of Walpole would be incorporated. It was assigned to a Major Eleazer Lusher and a Joshua Fisher for the purpose of constructing a sawmill. Though the exact location is unknown, a survey and soil sampling done by archeologists brought in by Mr. West found evidence that the mill was placed on the Neponset River near what is now White Bridge.

Lusher and Fisher were dispatched from Dedham and were what historians call "foragers". Basically these were people sent out into the countryside to see what was out there that may be of use. The deed given to Lusher and Fisher actually had a caveat requiring that their sawmill not interfere with the mining activities taking place in the area. The mining of bog iron in the Walpole area was at one point a major economic activity. Mining in Walpole! If that is not a surprise to you, you probably haven't read this deep into this article. Besides bog iron, sought after was marsh grass to be used as cattle feed, pasture land and wood.

One of Walpole's most valuable natural resources from this era is the Great Cedar Swamp. This area is still presented under that name on many maps of Walpole and is probably unknown to most residents. It represents the largest tract of undeveloped land in town and comprises several hundred acres. To locate this, follow the Neponset River south from the High School for about a mile. The red cedar in the swamp was much sought after for use in furniture and in roofing shingles. Early settlers used thatch roofs, a practice brought from England, but this method had many shortcomings. They leaked, they rotted and were subject to mold, and they attracted vermin. Most importantly, thatch was a fire hazard. Cedar shingles were not subject to most of these problems. In this period, cedar shingles were the cutting edge of building technology and Walpole was blessed with an abundant supply of red cedar.

In 1674 the sawmill changed hands. The new owners were names that are familiar around town today. Thomas Clap, for whose family Clapp St is named for. James Fales' descendants built the first factory at the location of the Foundry Building and initiated the Fales scholarships at Walpole High School. Joseph Kingsbury's family is known for the Grist Mill at Kingsbury Pond, on Rte 27 in Medfield.

So, the early history of Walpole and the land that we now know as the Town Forest is the story of a sawmill that turned the red cedar of the Town Forest and the Great Cedar Swamp into lumber, furniture and cedar shingles.

Town Forest Trail maps can be obtained at the Town clerk's office or downloaded from the Town Forest Committee website: www.walpole-ma.gov/town-forest-committee .

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.

Lastly, the Recreation Dept. has rescheduled the Town Forest Clean-up Day for Saturday, Nov 7, at 10:00 a.m. We'll meet at the Water Dept. lot at 1303 Washington St. For more information, go to the Rec. Dept. website. This is a great opportunity to explore the Town Forest with members of the Town Forest Committee and help us keep the forest and trails clear.

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