

## WATERFIELD

By Ellen Knight<sup>1</sup>

Plenteous fresh water in the territory which is now Winchester led to this area's early settlement, furnished it with much of its natural character, and also afforded an early, unofficial name for the area.

Much of Woburn and Winchester, both originally extensions of Charlestown, lie in an area which was designated in the first record of Colonial land grants as Waterfield. Though never an official name, the use of the term Waterfield, so apt for the area, survived for a time in local records and is remembered still.

Shortly after Charlestown was settled by Gov. Winthrop's party in 1630, the colonists found fault with it for not having enough land or water. A group moved to Shawmut (Boston). Others looked to the north, and the Massachusetts legislature granted Charlestown additional territory which extended eight miles northward into the country.

Here there was an abundance of water. Beyond the ponds and waterways still known in Winchester, there were marshes, swamps, and bogs, particularly next to the river, which followed more winding course. There were natural springs.

During the late 1630s, the territory was apportioned to prominent men of Charlestown, and those grants of land were recorded in 1638 in the Book of Possessions. According to George Cooke, who studied the book in the 1880s and made a map of the lots, the land "was designated by terms denoting some prominent natural feature, such as Waterfield, a section abounding in watercourses and ponds; Rockfield, in which rocks were the prominent features; Mystic fields, those which lay along the Mystic River; Linefield, lying along the Cambridge line, etc."<sup>2</sup>

The settlement that grew up in the location of the current Winchester center, around the house built by Edward Converse, was in a Waterfield which stretched from Horn Pond and its tributaries down to the Mystic Pond and also included the Aberjona River to the east.

All of what became Winchester was not confined to the Waterfield. As shown on Cooke's map, the territory extends beyond the Waterfield, including eastern and western Rockfields as well as the unsurveyed Commons. The Waterfield also extended beyond the bounds of Winchester, reaching into Woburn. (It might have extended further north into Woburn had the survey included additional lands granted to Charlestown, later Woburn, two years after the Book of Possessions was written.)



*Winchester's Town Seal bears two names, each with its own date – Waterfield, the designation for the area in the 1638 Book of Possessions, and Winchester, incorporated in 1850.*

According to town historian Henry Chapman,<sup>3</sup> the term “Waterfield” survived for a time, specifically in deeds dating into the late seventeenth century. But “Waterfield” was not officially adopted as a name for the settlements within the Waterfield, particularly as the area was soon divided among three different towns.



*MAP OF WATERFIELD, drawn by George Cooke to illustrate his article on Waterfield published in the January 1886 volume of The Winchester Record. A copy of this map redrawn by Town Engineer James Hinds is reproduced in the first volume of the town history. The river may not be accurately drawn since it is based on the 1854 Winchester map, made at a time when there were more mill ponds and the Middlesex Canal had drained some of the area.*

Before 1640, the territory of Woburn and Winchester was called Charlestown Village. In 1640, when Woburn was incorporated, it included about two-thirds of the present Winchester. Various sections of Woburn acquired regional designations, such as Shawshin (Burlington) and Goshen (Wilmington) in the north. The settlement around Mill Pond was known as South Woburn.

The incorporation of Woburn split the Waterfield at Church Street. The part that lay below Church Street remained in Charlestown. In the eighteenth century the eastern portion of it was annexed to Medford. Thus, the old Waterfield was divided among Woburn, Medford, and Charlestown before Winchester was incorporated. (The Charlestown section was annexed to Arlington for a few years before 1850.)

When the time came to give a name to the new town created in 1850, Waterville, not Waterfield, was one of the suggestions. It was second most popular suggestion, before the suggestion to name it Winchester was made.

Cooke's main purpose in making his map was to show the positions and boundaries of the original land owners. It was not meant to document all the waters of the Waterfield. In fact, he noted that the changes wrought in the river and ponds "by dams, canals, and sluiceways cannot easily be determined and the transfer of these natural features to our map...cannot claim the accuracy desired in such a case."

None of Winchester's maps show all the water, the marshes, swamps, and springs. But several maps, including those of 1854, 1886, 1898<sup>4</sup> show vividly how prominent a feature the water was, especially with several mill ponds, as well as Wedge Pond dominating the center of town.

Winchester's waterways have undergone three centuries of change as dams have been built, swamps drained, channels moved, ponds filled in, and reservoirs created. Whatever changes have and will occur, the character of the Winchester lowlands as a waterfield continues.

## **ORIGINAL LAND GRANTS**

The land grants were assigned in order of the importance of the recipient. The largest farms, some 300 acres each, were assigned to Increase Nowell, chief magistrate of the town of Charlestown, and to Zechariah Symmes, the minister of the church. Large lots were granted to Capt. Edward Johnson, Edward Converse, Rev. John Harvard, John Mousall, and other prominent men of the community.

Many of the grantees, including Nowell and Harvard, did not settle on their land since they had lots in Charlestown or other areas. Proceeds from the sale of the land were more valuable to them. Further, when it was decided to build a new church, the site chosen was to the north, leading to the birth of Woburn. Naturally that drew some early settlers, desirous of being close to the church, to land further north.

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<sup>1</sup> This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the Daily Times Chronicle on July 8, 1998. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

<sup>2</sup> George Cooke, "Waterfield," *The Winchester Record*, Vol. II, No. 1 (Jan. 1886), pp. 1-22.

<sup>3</sup> Henry S. Chapman, *History of Winchester*, p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> Reproductions of these three maps are available from the Winchester Historical Society.