Old Braintree, A Parent Town

By H. Hobart Holly
Society Historian

From the time that our early colonial ancestors settled in New England's coastal towns, there began a migration away from the coast that continued until the early 1800s. Religious, social and political reasons have been given for these moves, but the predominant factor was land - the need for it, and the desire for it. No town better illustrates this than Old Braintree which comprised what is today most of the city of Quincy, and the towns of Braintree, Randolph and Holbrook. *

In colonial times, everyone including the ministers and the governor had a farm - a subsistence farm. There was not much farming for market. The settlers soon discovered that the soil of coastal Massachusetts was not conducive to production farming. So, although they were mostly non-seafaring people, they were forced to turn to the sea to survive. Nevertheless, as in any land-dependent economy even today, one farm will generally support only one family. Thus each new generation, and families were large in those days, had to find new land.

Beside this survival factor, there was a second impetus to migration. Virtually all who came to New England did so in the hope of improving their lot in life. They were people of ambition, and there were opportunities in the New World if they sought them. Yet there were basically just two opportunities for investing money and gaining wealth - in shipping and trading, and in land. And so it was as an investment also that people were constantly seeking new land. New land generally meant new settlements; and these were promoted by proprietors or agents whose major interest was in financial gain.

The settlement of Old Braintree started in 1634. Boston was only four years old and was already running out of land on the Shawmut Peninsula. So in that year, 1634, Boston annexed the uninhabited tract of land known as Mount Wollaston lying north of the Old Colony line between Weymouth on the east, Dorchester, now Milton, on the west, and Dorchester, now North Quincy, on the north. In 1640, this area was incorporated as the Town of Braintree, the Old Braintree defined above. It was named for Braintree, County Essex, England, for what reason nobody really knows.

Through the northern part of this area ran the Boston and Plymouth Highway, the mainstem of communication and activity on the South Shore.

"Migrations from Old Braintree started soon after the settlement and continued until after 1800."

In colonial days, it was mainly along this road that the settlement developed. A few large land grants were given out to prominent Bostonians like the Rev. John Wilson, William Coddington, Edmund Quincy, and William Hutchinson of wife Ann fame. Mostly, however, settlement was encouraged by grants to Boston residents on the basis of four acres per head in the family. (It paid to have a large family.) It is most important to note that Old Braintree was settled by families who moved there individually, not as an organized cohesive group as in some places. It was typical of the migrations that followed.

The center of the settlement was at a point where the old Highway came close to navigable salt water - the other line of communication and transportation in those days. This was in the Quincy Square area of today. Here was located the meeting house, the school, the Training Field (where the United First Parish Church stands today), the tavern, and the burial ground that is the Hancock Cemetery of today. Just to the west was the town grist mill, and just to the east the Town Landing. From here roads led to the other parts of the town, and here was a concentration of original homesteads. In the Hancock Cemetery lie the early settlers and other residents of all of Old Braintree for the first 75 years, and for present Quincy for years thereafter. All the old family names are here.

As the years went by, the settlement spread south within the town into what is today Braintree, Randolph and Holbrook; it was a mini-migration. Those who settled in these areas were mainly later generations of the old families, plus some newcomers. The trip to the old and only meeting house was long from these new communities of Monatiquot and Cochato respectively. Therefore in the early 1700s the residents of these areas petitioned to have their own parishes, over the usual objections of the old parish that did not like to see its flock depleted and its tax base reduced.

The Second Parish was established in present Braintree and the area it served became the Middle Precinct; the Third Parish was established in present Randolph and its area became the South Precinct; the old parish in present Quincy became the First Parish and its new reduced area the North Precinct. In 1792 and 1793 the old town was divided along the precinct lines; just as occurred in all

* The term Old Braintree will be used throughout when referring to the old town of Braintree. Today's Braintree will be referred to as present Braintree. Holbrook was part of Randolph until 1872.
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the large early towns except Weymouth which still has its original boundaries and is undivided.

Migrations from Old Braintree started soon after the settlement and continued until after 1800. Most important of the places where people from Old Braintree settled were Medfield, Mendon and Williamsburg in Massachusetts, and Braintree and Randolph in Vermont.

The migrations in general followed a pattern. First, the majority of those who moved were members of old Old Braintree families. The names that you will see in their old burial grounds are largely the same as those you find in the Hancock Cemetery in Quincy. Second, the emigrants were mostly young families. Third, the largest number of emigrants were from the South Precinct (Randolph), the most rural and land-dependent area; next was the number from the Middle Precinct (present Braintree) which was next most rural; few were from the North Precinct (Quincy) which, with its 20 miles of shoreline, granite, and other features, was the least land-dependent.

Medfield, originally part of Dedham, was incorporated and opened for settlement in 1651. Of the thirteen original proprietors, none was from Old Braintree. Nevertheless, within a few years, seven families from Old Braintree and three from Weymouth had purchased land and moved there. Why did they move when there was still much land available in the town they left? Undoubtedly for greater opportunities, probably for better farm lands. Most important were Henry, Edward, Peter and Jonathan Adams, sons of Henry Adams (1583-1646). Of his eight sons, only Joseph remained in Old Braintree. Henry, Jr. became Medfield's first Town Clerk, a job his father had filled in Old Braintree. The other three from Old Braintree were Benjamin Albee, John Bowers and Abraham Harding.

Old Braintree was truly the parent town of Mendon due to the part played by Messrs. Peter Brackett and Moses Paine. They were the gentlemen who petitioned the General Court in 1659 for authority to start a settlement. They were the developers who undertook the enterprise as a business venture. Neither of them removed to Mendon, but for his efforts Mr. Brackett received two hundred acres of land in Mendon. He was the recruiter, possibly operating from Mr. Mills tavern not far from his residence. It is therefore not surprising that so many of the early settlers of Mendon were from Old Braintree. Peter Brackett was an early settler of Old Braintree and a forebear of the prominent Brackett family of Quincy. Moses Paine was the son of early pioneer Moses Paine.

With some exceptions, those who removed from Old Braintree to Mendon were not members of the families that have come to be known as the old families of the town; those whose roots were in Old Braintree. They were early Old Braintree families but they moved, completely removing the family name with them. Some had been in Old Braintree for twenty years but still had not established deep roots there. Some were tenant farmers, some owned only their land grants, some rented farms, others may have had to pay off financial obligations before they were free to move, some may have lacked a market for their trade. In any case, they do not appear to have been as well established as some of their neighbors, and grasped at the opportunity to have some or more land of their own.

The early settlers of Mendon included the following:
Benjamin Albee - Old Braintree 1640, Medfield 1650, Mendon 1663.
George Aldrich - Old Braintree 1640, Mendon 1663. A tailor and tenant farmer.
Josiah Chapin - Old Braintree 1658, moved to Mendon 1678.
John Gurney - a short time in Old Braintree, proprietor of Mendon 1663, died while preparing to move.
John Harber, Jr. - son of a 1640 settler of Old Braintree, Mendon 1663 but moved back.
William Hayward, Jr. - son of prominent Old Braintree settler, Mendon about 1700.
William Holbrook - of prominent old family, Mendon after 1675.
Robert Lovell - 1640 land grant in Old Braintree but may never have lived there, Mendon 1663.
John Moore - tenant farmer at Moore’s Farm River in present Braintree, Mendon 1663, Roxbury 1679.
Jonathan and Joseph Penniman - 3rd generation of Old Braintree family, Mendon after 1700.
Mathias Puffer - son of 1640 Old Braintree grantee, Mendon 1666.
Abraham Staples - son of John of Dorchester and Old Braintree, Mendon 1663.
Robert Taft - tenant in present Braintree about 1675, Mendon about 1680.
Ferdinand Thayer - son of an early settler of Old Braintree, Mendon 1663, had 12 children.
Chelmsford, incorporated 1655, became the home of three of the Adams brothers - Samuel, Thomas and John - although they did not go directly there from Old Braintree. Other settlers from Old Braintree were - Thomas Barrett in 1662, and Francis Gould in 1660. Daniel Shed, a tenant farmer from whom Shed’s Neck, now Germantown took its name, migrated to nearby Billerica.

While the number of settlers involved was small, Old Braintree played a role in the settlement of Block Island. Thomas Faxon was an early settler in Old Braintree, first as a tenant farmer on Atherton Hough’s land grant. In 1656 he bought his farm from Mr. Hough’s heirs. In 1660 he was one of eight men who met in Roxbury to consider the purchase of Block Island. He went to the Island in 1661, but in 1662 he sold his one-eighth interest and returned to his farm here. The other settlers were three Niles brothers, sons of John Niles and early resident of Old Braintree. Nathaniel Niles was married in Block Island in 1671, shortly moved to Kingston, R.I., and then returned to Braintree where he died in 1721. He was the father of the Rev. Samuel Niles, prominent minister of the Second Parish Church, in present Braintree. His brothers John and Benjamin moved to Block Island about 1678.

Williamsburg, which had been part of Hatfield, became a town in 1771 with four families from Old Braintree prominent among the early settlers. All were members of prominent Old
Treasured items from the Society’s collection furnished this corner of a colonial kitchen, one of the “rooms” in the holiday exhibition at Adams Academy entitled “An Old Fashioned Christmas.” Note top of butter churn at left and apple-peeler on table edge at right. Kathleen Mackay, Corinne Waite and Robert Gardiner of the Academy Aides helped put this exhibit together.

(Oberg Photo)

Footnotes from the Academy

By Lawrence J. Yerdon
Executive Director

1. The Society received a grant of $7300 from the Institute for Museum Services for fiscal year 1981-82. A large portion of the grant has been used for salary support and in particular, the full-funding of the part-time position of Museum Technician, now held by William Twombly. He is directing his efforts to the development and planning of both the “Quincy Remembers” series and museum exhibits.

2. The “Quincy Remembers” series for 1982 began in February and will continue into June on the second Tuesday of every month at 1 p.m. in the Adams Academy. The March program is a film depicting the construction of the schooner “John F. Leavitt.” April’s topic will be “Witchcraft in New England.” May’s will be about the early black settlement in Plymouth, and June’s will focus on significant people in Quincy’s history.

3. Call the Society’s office (773-1144) for details on the Saturday Craft Series. The first session offered workshop instruction in the making of an old-fashioned velvet and straw wreath.

4. The staff continues to develop new skills. Technician Will Twombly recently attended a workshop in interpretation of exhibits sponsored by the Bay State Historical League, and Director Larry Yerdon participated in a seminar on grantsmanship.

5. Wanted: Temporary (about one year) use of garage or basement storage area for keeping low-monetary value items from the Society’s collection. Call the Director at the Society’s office, 773-1144.
Massasoit's Fateful Decision

By Dr. George A. Horner

(Editor's Note: Part I of Dr. Horner's realistic survey of the early attitudes and behavior of the Pilgrims and the Wampanoags discussed the origins of the English settlers' conception of the "Indians," and the characteristics of the Wampanoag Federation. This installment, Part II, tells how the conflicting meanings of "ownership" doomed the Indians.)

The great plague (most likely chicken-pox), brought to American shores by European fishing parties gives evidence of the early encounters between the two peoples, and the disastrous results that might ensue. First observed in 1615 by Richard Vine of Saco Bay, Maine, the pestilence spread slowly down the coast reaching Patuxet in 1617. Before that year, Massasoit could muster some 3,000 warriors, afterwards barely 300. Only the Narragansetts escaped unscathed an epidemic which never crossed the bay into their territory.

As a result of the great plague, the infrastructures of all the Federations except the Narragansetts were fractured. Systems of land "ownership" and transfer were weakened, although the principles of political leadership by the sachems and control of the land by the village elders continued until 1675, albeit with diminishing efficacy.

The Indians knew much more about their English visitors than the reverse. From December 21, 1620, until March 26, 1621, according to Mourt's account, the Pilgrims saw little of the natives. There was evidence of the ravages of the plague and occasional cries "of the savages" were heard. Twelve Indians were seen from a distance and some tools were stolen. It was not until March 26th that the Pilgrims confronted two Indians atop Watson's Hill; "we making overtures to them, were ... welcomed" in English by Samoset. As Mourt said, "he was the first savage we could meet withal."

Squanto, the only Patuxet survivor of the plague, did not greet the Pilgrims until the next month, April 1, 1621. He came to them in the company of the Chief Sachem, Massasoit, and sixty village sachems. They brought peace offerings, including the gift of Squanto's inheritance, the village of Patuxet (now Plymouth).

In contrast, the Indians' experience with the English was greater. Squanto had been abducted by Thomas Hunt in 1614 and sold into slavery in Spain. He escaped to England where he found shelter with John Slany, treasurer of the Newfoundland Company. In 1617, Squanto was sent to Newfoundland, but returned to England with Captain Thomas Dermer. In 1618-1619, returning to New England, he jumped ship at Cape Cod and found his way to Massasoit.

From its first sighting off Cape Cod, until the landing at Patuxet, the Mayflower's progress was avidly followed by Massasoit's scouts. That the ship carried women and children did not go unnoticed by the Indians at Nauset. Land explorations by the Mayflower parties were noted, and most likely the Nausets planned the "first encounter" at the beach that will ever carry that name. Finally, the Pilgrims were seen sailing into harbor at Patuxet, to land only one day's journey from Massasoit's "home" village of Pokanoket.

Crucial Concerns

For three months, and longer, before his meeting with the Pilgrims, Massasoit had been gathering evidence and weighing it. He was called to make a momentous decision affecting the survival of his people. There were four immediate and crucial concerns confronting him, three likely and one uncertain:

1) The threat of invasion by the Narragansetts from the south,
2) The threat of attack by the Tarrantines, by sea,
3) The threat of attack by the Nipmucks, from the west, and
4) The possible threat posed by the English now living in Patuxet.

His decision in 1622, ultimately spelled his people's doom in 1676. Massasoit reasoned that the English

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Murphy’s Law - In 1898 AD

The return of Company K, 5th Massachusetts Regiment, from its Spanish-American War service was a grand event in Quincy’s history. From April 3-7, 1899 there was a succession of banquets and other testimonials. The War had been one of great public emotion, and the Quincy-Braintree company commanded by the prominent Quincy businessman, Henry L. Kincaide, was the pride of the communities. The men of Co. K had served their country honorably although disappointed in their hope of going to Cuba and into combat.

Their departure, too, was a notable event to which the Quincy Patriot of May 9, 1898, devoted its entire front page including pictures of the officers and a list of the names of all the men. "Never since the departure of the ‘boys of 61’ for the front has there been so much excitement and so much enthusiasm . . . . If ever a militia company received a royal ‘send off’ that company was Co. K . . . and if there was anybody who was not present it was because he was unable to be."

It was a joyous occasion but some of the crowd had tears in their eyes not knowing how long it would be before they would see their loved ones again. The headline noted that the company went to Gloucester instead of New Bedford.

Planned was a grand parade to escort Co. K from its armory near Braintree Square to the South Braintree Railroad Station where the ceremonies would be climaxed by an address by Mr. Edward Porter, president of the affair, to which Capt. Kincaide would respond.

The parade started on schedule, promptly at 7:45 a.m., and proceeded to the cheers of large crowds, the peeling of church bells and the shrieks of factory whistles. From the grandstand at the railroad station:

Rev. C. H. Williams offered a fervent prayer.
Rev. Fr. J. P. Cuffe addressed the boys briefly.
Rev. C. H. Crathern also spoke briefly.
"America" was sung.

As President Porter rose to speak, the train pulled into the depot and Co. K was off to war.

"Arriving in Boston the company marched across the city to the wharf of the Gloucester boat, and embarked for Cape Ann. As a high wind had prevailed the sea is rough and if the boys are not homesick, they are most likely seasick."

On May 17th, eight days later, Co. K was back home.

When next called to report on June 29th, Capt. Kincaide announced that they would depart quietly and will "respond to duty’s call and will go forth to battle with Spain."

— H. Hobart Holly

( In the collection of the local John A. Boyd Post, United Spanish War Veterans and other material in our library, the Society has fine resources on the Spanish American War.)
Parent Town

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Braintree families. The Thayer brothers, Abel and Joshua, were fifth generation members of an old family; Jesse Wild was third generation; Josiah Hayden was fifth generation, and still has Haydenville there as his memorial.

The settlement of and migration to Braintree and Randolph, Vermont, came in the hard times that followed the Revolutionary War. Land and opportunities in the old towns were scarce. Even with new subsistence farms being established on marginal land, there was still a pressing need to look elsewhere for land and opportunity. This was true of many Massachusetts towns. As a result, the settlers of these Vermont towns came from many places in Massachusetts; but as the names indicate, the settlers from Old Braintree predominated. The settlers were a roster of old Old Braintree family names, and almost all were from the South Precinct, now Randolph, whence their ancestors had migrated from the North Precinct area generations before.

The principal emigrants and the date of their settlement in Vermont, Braintree unless otherwise noted, are given below; Samuel Bass 1785; Samuel Belcher later, Henry Brackett 1785, Royal Cleverly later, Isaac Allen, Randolph, later; Isaac Thayer, Randolph, 1790s; Simeon Curtis 1795; Elijah French 1786; Benjamin Linfield 1790s; Job Mann 1792; Matthew Pratt 1785; Nathaniel Spear 1790; Benjamin Vesey 1785; John Vinton 1805.

And in the years that followed, the migrations turned to the lands in the West.

Indians-

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buy land from the Indians, but only after he had petitioned the General Court to view the land, draw up a deed of ownership, and grant the individual the right to make the purchase. With a few exceptions among the "Old Comers", all land was acquired from the Wampanoags in this way through 1669.

That the sale of lands to other, post-Pilgrim settlers would open the flood gates to further migration and further loss of land, and that this would eventually prove more permanent than the Narragansett threat of March, 1621, never occurred to the Wampanoags until it was very much too late. Despite the reservations set aside for the Wampanoags by second-generation Pilgrims at Mt. Hope, Pocasset, Sowams, Betty's Neck and Mashpee, deeded to the Wampanoags unto perpetuity, the situation was everlastingly too late. It was already much too late in 1675 when Metacom (Philip) tried in one last desperate effort to regain lost Wampanoag lands.

(Dr. Horner, author of this series, is archaeologist for the Society, holds a master's degree in archaeology from Columbia and a doctoral degree in anthropology from the University of Paris, Sorbonne. He retired in 1978 as Professor Emeritus in Anthropology from Bridgewater State College. The third and final installment will be published in the Spring issue. All installments are reprinted with permission from "Pilgrim Society Noyes" No. 19, May 1981.)