
Hawk Valley Farm



Varnum House and the Surrounding Hawk Valley Farm, ca. 1932, (photograph by Harriette Merrifield Forbes, American Antiquarian Society)

Gregory Gray Fitzsimons
Historian and Scholar-in-Residence
Lowell Parks & Conservation Trust
Lowell, Massachusetts
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INTRODUCTION

A number of New England farms, including the celebrated Tuttle Farm in Dover, New Hampshire have remained in the hands of the same family since the Colonial Era. In Lowell, the Hawk Valley Farm has been connected to the Varnum family since the 1660s. The Varnums were among the earliest English settlers in the area that became Dracut in 1701 and more than eight generations of family members have witnessed innumerable changes to the land and environs. Perhaps most dramatically, this included the area's transformation from a largely agrarian and rural community, to one that was increasingly enveloped by a massive industrial and urban environment with the growth of Lowell and its textile manufacturing. Yet the Hawk Valley Farm, as well as a number of other farms in the vicinity of Lowell, continued in operation and even prospered throughout much of the 19th century.

But many struggled mightily, especially during the Great Depression, and by the 1950s the region's family farms were in decline. As the economic reward for the arduous work of family farming dwindled and the pressure for suburban housing development grew, most of the remaining farms ceased production. Some of these former agricultural lands gave way to new residential neighborhoods. Part of the Hawk Valley Farm, however, retained its woods and meadows and is now part of an urban land trust. Home to various flora and fauna, the Hawk Valley Farm also features the 18th century Varnum House along with various ruins and foundations of farm structures. These serve as important reminders not only of the Varnum family's farming history, but also of the region's agricultural past.

This study examines the Hawk Valley Farm and the Varnum family in relation to the major physical changes to the farm

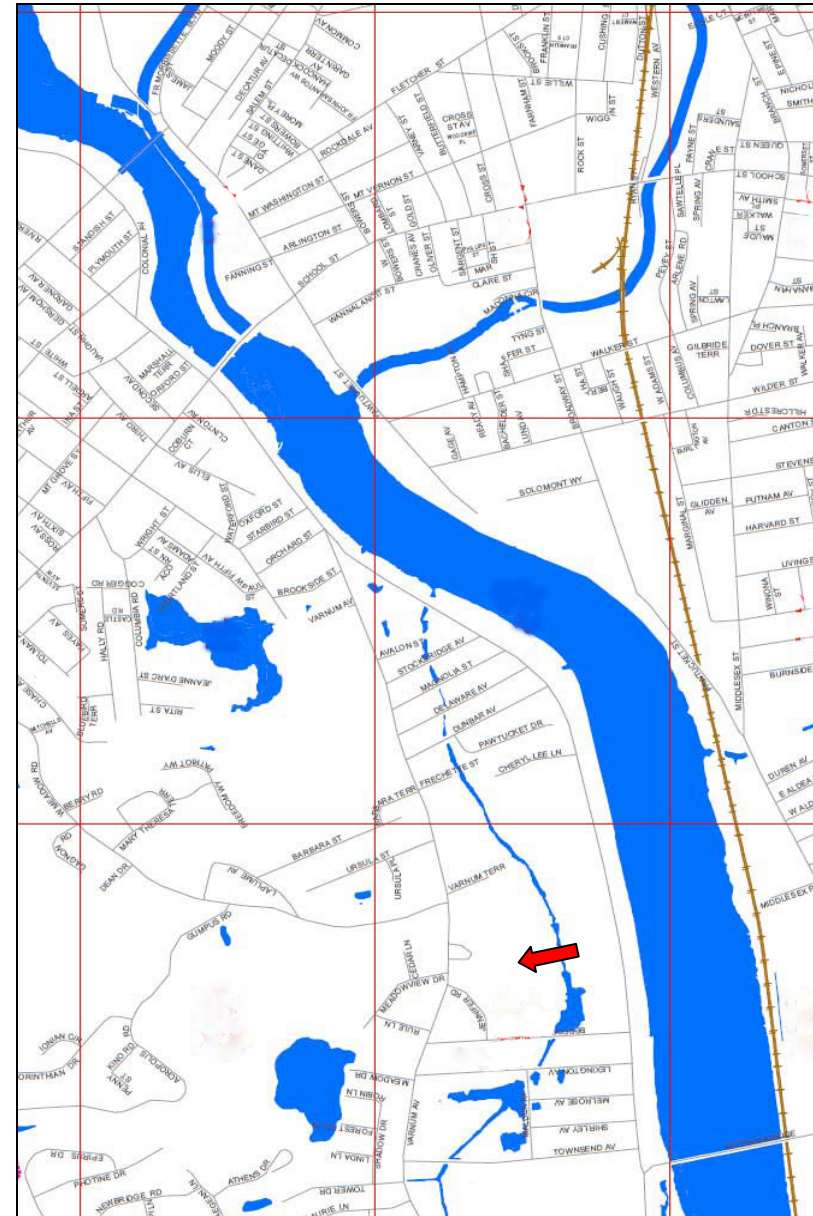


Fig. 1: As indicated on this location map, Hawk Valley Farm (red arrow) extends between Varnum Avenue and Clay Pit Brook.



Fig. 2: Satellite image of the area along Varnum Avenue, including the Hawk Valley Farm (red arrow). A section of Clay Pit Brook (blue arrow) runs through the farm property.

and the surrounding region, notably the town of Dracut and the industrializing city of Lowell. Moreover, it seeks to shed light on the interplay between Lowell's burgeoning industrial

society and the area's agriculturally oriented society, as seen through the experiences of the Varnums on their Hawk Valley Farm. This study also encompasses a broad timeframe, ranging from the colonial period and the Early Republic to the rise of industry in the 19th century, and ultimately into the 20th century, marked by the decline of the family-run farm.

The most important sources consulted in the course of the research for this study were local newspapers, the federal manuscript census, city directories, local atlases and maps, property deeds, probate records, and the few surviving documents and images in the possession of the Varnum family.¹ As indicated in the citations, a number of scholarly works in environmental, economic, and social history were used, along with several published histories of Lowell, Dracut, and Chelmsford. A particularly valuable source was a genealogy of the Varnum family published in the early 20th century. In addition to archival research at the Center for Lowell History and the Dracut Historical Society, field work was conducted at the Hawk Valley Farm.

This project was generously funded by the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities. Special thanks to Louisa Varnum who graciously guided me around her historic property and through her remarkably intact 18th century family home. She also allowed me to examine the collection of family papers. Also thanks to Harvey Gagnon of the Dracut Historical Society for his help in researching several of the archival collections in the society's library. And throughout this project Jane Calvin, executive director of the Lowell Parks & Conservation Trust, was an invaluable colleague, as well as an exceptional director of the entire project.

¹ Many of these sources were available online. Especially important were the digitized property deeds available through the Northern Middlesex Registry of Deeds, as well as the federal census records retrieved from the commercial genealogical website, Ancestry.com.

Part I: Physical Setting and Early History

Comprising about five acres, the conservation land associated with the Hawk Valley Farm is part of a formerly extensive agricultural property owned since the 1660s by the Varnum family. This small conservation tract is located on the north side of the Merrimack River, off Varnum Avenue in Lowell. Nestled above the river on a gently sloping plain, the farm is now heavily wooded and some of the stone foundations of old agricultural buildings, which are scattered about the property, are partially covered with vegetation. Clay Pit Brook, a small stream that parallels the Merrimack River, runs sluggishly along the farm's southern margin, with thick vegetation growing in the marsh and meadows on either side of the brook. Adjacent to the conservation land is the 18th century Varnum house, a vernacular wood structure with Federalist architectural elements. One of the earliest surviving buildings in the Greater Lowell Area, the Varnum house retains much of its historic appearance and is a notable reminder of the important role that farms and farming families played in the region's early history.

Of course the first inhabitants in the region predated the Varnums and other English colonists by some 10-12,000 years. Native Americans had migrated north and eastward into arctic tundra-like landscapes and vast forested areas that had gradually replaced the massive glaciers, covering New England until the late Wisconsin period.² The arrival of these Paleo-

² For an outstanding description of the ecological changes in New England following the region's last major glacial period see Brian Donahue, *The Great Meadow: Farmers and Land in Colonial Concord*, (New Haven, CT: 2004), pp. 36-37.

Indians coincided with a nearly 5,000-year period of a warming climate and a diversifying array of plant and animal life. The early people who inhabited these lands were constantly on the move, hunting and foraging in small bands, their movements tied to the seasons. It was also during this period of global warming that Indians began making ever greater uses of the resources around them with concentrations of people returning constantly to particular areas that they favored for the natural resources found there. This included, for example, falls along rivers and streams where fish and other game were plentiful. By the Early Woodland Period—about 3,000 years ago—the first semi-permanent settlements were established in places such as those in the vicinity of the Pawtucket Falls on the Merrimack River.³

In 1604, the French fur trader and explorer Pierre du Guas, Sieur de Monts, recorded perhaps the earliest observation of the Merrimack River made to a European by Native Americans. “The Indians speak of a beautiful river,” wrote Pierre du Gua Sieur de Monts, “far to the south, which they call Merrimac.”⁴ Nearly 30 years later English colonist Simon Willard, settled on a plantation in the Musketaquid Valley and

³ An excellent source on the first Americans in northern New England is David R. Starbuck, *The Archeology of New Hampshire: Exploring 10,000 Years in the Granite State*, (Lebanon, NH: University of New Hampshire Press, 2006). Starbuck offers a fine blend of narrative history integrated with an array of archeological evidence uncovered over the past 30 years.

⁴ The poet John Greenleaf Whittier opened his poem “The Merrimack” with these words of Sieur de Monts.

traded with Native Americans for fur and other goods⁵ Early accounts of other English colonists, noted that presence of Indians of the Pennacook Confederacy, which included the Pennacooks, the Wamesits, the Pawtuckets, the Nashobas, and the Souhegans, in the region. These Indians spoke various dialects of the Algonquian language and worked the land surrounding their villages that were established up and down the Merrimack, typically in the vicinity of the various falls. Their horticulture centered on several crops, including corn, squash, and beans.⁶ The soil along the streams in the area that became Dracut and Chelmsford was of an especially rich variety of loam that yielded, as colonists soon discovered, bountiful harvests of vegetables, fruits, and hay.⁷

By the time of Willard's exploits in the Lower Merrimack Valley, however, disease had ravaged the Indians, especially members of the Pawtucket and Wamesit tribes. Possibly as much as ninety-five percent of the population perished in the

⁵ Donahue, *The Great Meadow*, pp. 41 & 77-78; Bernard Bailyn, *The New England Merchants in the Seventeenth Century*, (Cambridge, MA: 1955), pp. 28 & 55-56.

⁶ J. Frederic Burt, "Passaconaway's Kingdom," in Arthur L. Eno, Jr., *Cotton was King: A History of Lowell, Massachusetts*, (New Hampshire Publishing Co., 1976), pp. 3-4.

⁷ The soil found here has been classified as Merrimac loamy sand and Gloucester loamy sand. The topsoil of the latter type is dark brown at the surface and with lighter yellowish-brown shades below. At a depth of approximately 20 inches there is found a compact or sandy yellowish loam. In some areas the Gloucester sandy loam contained fewer stones, which made cultivation of this land far less laborious. See W.J. Latimer and M.O. Lanphear, *Soil Survey of Middlesex County*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1923), pp. 16-20 & 48.

wake of a plague in 1616-19 and the horrific smallpox pandemic in 1633-34.⁸ One result of this massive loss of life was a falling off in the use of the land around Pawtucket Falls by indigenous people. At about the same time Willard and other Englishmen were actively acquiring property in this region, trading cloth, clothing, and other goods in exchange for large swaths of Indian lands. Into the 1630s the English did not consistently record these transactions with formal deeds. But as more white settlers moved to the frontier, the lands were increasingly surveyed and property boundaries were established. The English drew up legal deeds not only for their property, but also for Indian lands. Some of these deeds included usufruct rights, which, in some instances provided Indians with the use of colonists' lands for hunting, fishing, or planting, while, in other cases, these rights extended to Englishmen and permitted them to use Indian lands for grazing livestock or cutting timber for firewood or building lumber.⁹

⁸ No consensus has emerged as to the kind of plague in 1616-1619 that was especially devastating to Indians in the coastal area of New England. Some scholars believe it was either bubonic or the pneumonic plague, while others maintain that it was chickenpox or smallpox. For a short summary of these various theories see Richard W. Cogley, *John Eliot's Mission to the Indians before King Philip's War*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), en 14, pp. 274-275.

⁹ An outstanding study that explores the meaning and understanding of property rights by both Indians and Englishmen in colonial New England is Peter S. Leavenworth's "The Best Title That Indians Can Claim": Native Agency and Consent in the Transfer of Penacook-Pawtucket Land in the Seventeenth Century," *The New England Quarterly*, v. 72, (June, 1999), pp. 275-300. As historian James Drake points out, prior to the Pequot War English colonists did not receive formal title to Indian lands, for they considered the Pequot Indians a politically sovereign group. After the

Not far from the Hawk Valley Farm, on the south side of the river, below Pawtucket Falls, was an Indian village that extended along the Merrimack and Concord rivers. Passaconaway, sachem of the Pennacooks as well as a shaman, resided here and in other Indian villages to the north and west. He was well known to the English and in 1831, according to colonial governor Thomas Dudley, Passaconaway commanded between 400 and 500 men in the Merrimack Valley.¹⁰ Although Passaconaway and his people avoided the ravages of the plague, the Pennacooks suffered severely from the smallpox outbreak in the 1630s. They were also subject to attacks from Mohawk Indians from the west. Survivors of warfare and disease, the Pennacook people continued to live up and down the Merrimack River and the village at Pawtucket Falls remained one of their major settlements.

The sachem maintained peaceful relations with the English, even after a militia was sent from Boston to Pawtucket Falls in 1842, with orders to seize Passaconaway and disarm his tribe. Two years later he submitted to the rule of the General Court, believing that the English offered a measure of protection from other hostile Indians, such as the Mohawks, and that his people

English defeated the Pequots in 1637, and as more tribes, including those of the Pennacook Confederacy, declared their loyalty to the English, they were considered subjects of colonial authority, with rights and obligations under English civil law. See Drake, "Restraining Atrocity: The Conduct of King Philip's War," *The New England Quarterly*, v. 70, (June, 1997), pp. 36-37.

¹⁰ Based on Daniel Gookin's estimate, the population of the entire Pennacook Confederacy numbered about 3,000 people. See Sherburne F. Cook, *The Indian Population of New England in the Seventeenth Century*, University of California, Publications in Anthropology, v. 12, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976), p. 16.

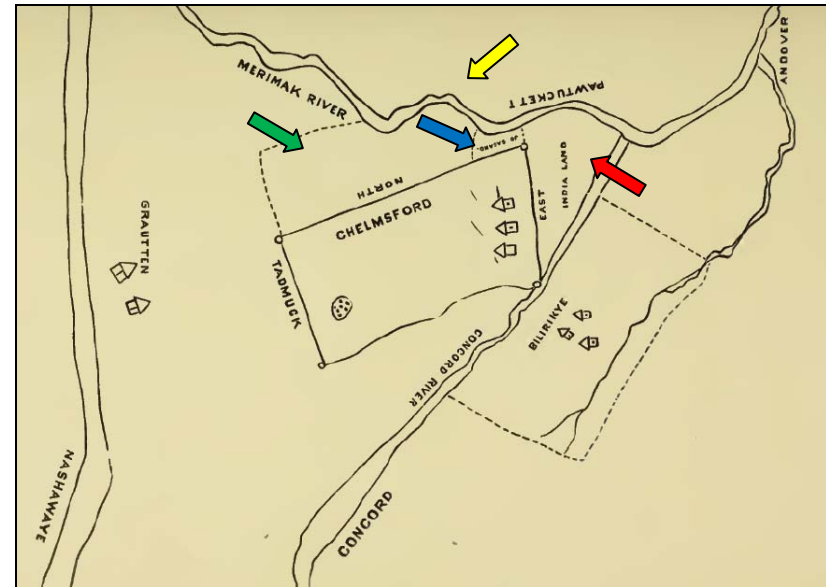


Fig. 3: As shown in this plan of Chelmsford from ca. 1653, the Wamesit Indian reservation (red arrow), labeled "India Land," extended along the Merrimack and Concord rivers. The long strip of land along the Merrimack River and bordering Chelmsford to the north (green arrow) was, for a few years, shared jointly by Indians and town settlers. The smaller section, labeled "Joe Sagamore" (blue arrow), was the Indian land. By 1686 all of the Wamesit property passed into the hands of white settlers. (Source: Wilson Waters and Henry Spaulding Perham, *History of Chelmsford, Massachusetts*, 1917, opp. p. 8). Today's Hawk Valley Farm (yellow arrow) is situated on the river's north side. At this time the land to the north of the Merrimack River had not been surveyed.

would prosper through a stronger bond with the colonial government. The submission of Passaconaway and other sachems coincided with an intensification of Christian missionary activities aimed at the religious conversion of

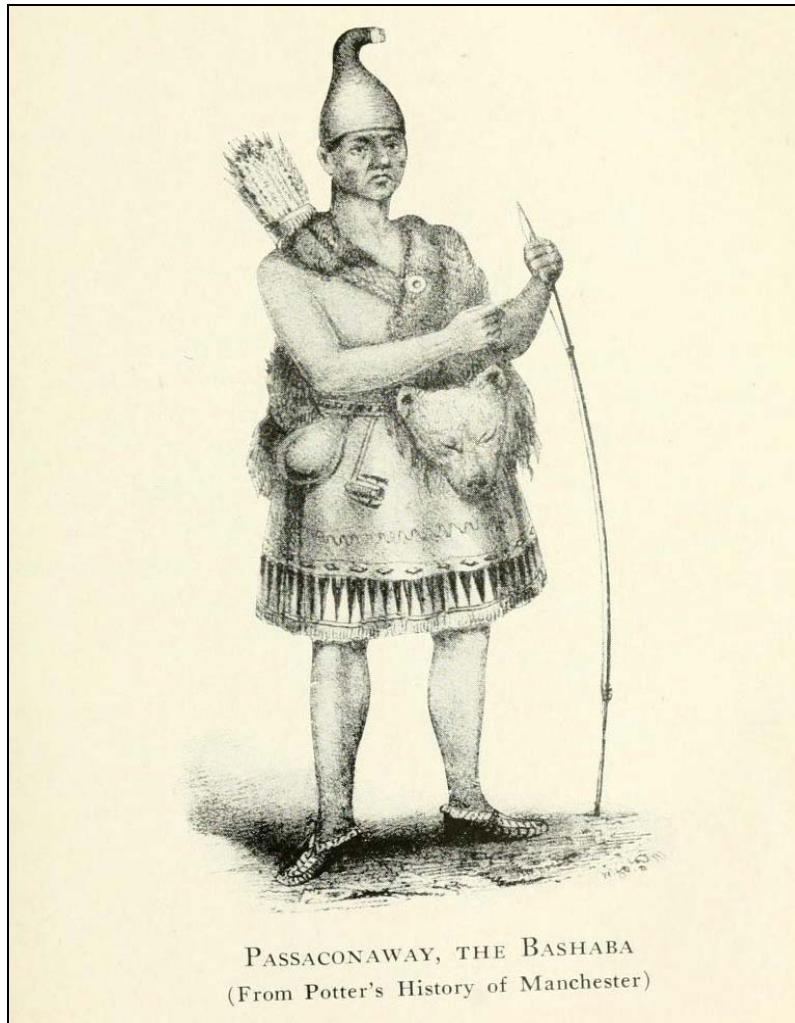


Fig. 4: The sachem Passaconaway, also called the Sagamore or Bashaba, as reproduced from Potter's *History of Manchester, New Hampshire*, in Charles E. Beals, Jr., *Passaconaway in the White Mountains*, (Boston: Richard G. Badger, 1916), opp. p. 22.

Native Americans. Among the most prominent was Episcopal clergyman John Eliot who established a number of “praying villages” including one near Pawtucket Falls. One of the few Englishman fluent in the Algonquian language, Eliot was especially intent on persuading Passaconaway, sachem of the Pennacooks, to convert to Christianity and he prevailed in 1648 when the venerable chief adopted the “God of the English.”¹¹ Five years later a group of settlers petitioned the General Court to grant them title to property on a large tract of Pennacook land that became Chelmsford. Although these men received title to this property, Eliot negotiated successfully on behalf of Passaconaway’s tribe to set aside a large triangular-shaped swath of land, called Wamesit, which ran from Pawtucket Falls to the Concord River. By the early 1660s about fifteen families lived in the village and the ruling tribal member, Numphow, was a son-in-law of Passaconaway.¹²

The General Court also established an Indian reservation on the north side of the Merrimack River that encompassed parts of today’s Dracut and the Pawtucketville section of Lowell. Bordering this reservation and extending west to Wicassee (later Tyng’s) Island in the Merrimack River, was a large tract of land, which, in 1659, the General Court awarded to John Everend (also known as John Webb) and two other men for their military service. Although Eliot sought to prevent the sale of additional lands to the colonists, including Wicassee Island, he failed to do so. Eliot also negotiated a land sharing

¹¹ Richard G. Cogley, *John Eliot’s Mission to the Indians before King Phillip’s War*, (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1999) pp. 146-148; Burt, “Passaconaway’s Kingdom,” p. 5.

¹² Cogley, *John Eliot’s Mission*, pp. 146-147.

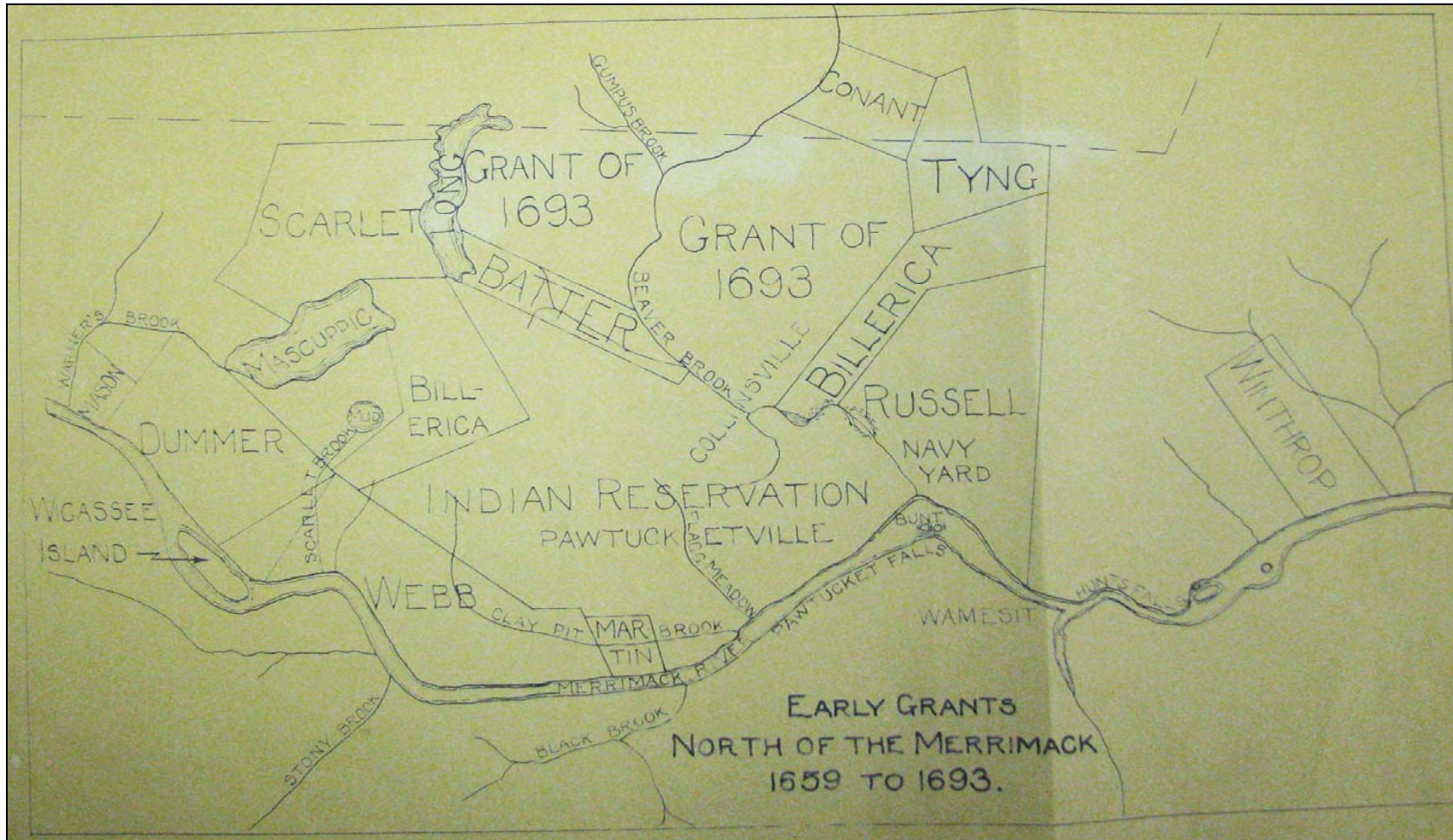


Fig. 5: This map, which purports to show the early grantees of land on the north side of the Merrimack River prior to 1693, is somewhat inaccurate. For example, it does not show the Varnum property that encompassed parts of the Webb and Martyn (spelled "Martin" on this map) grant. It does, however, depict with some accuracy the location of the Indian Reservation, a large part of which, in the 1660s, was sold to English colonist John Webb by a daughter of Chief Passaconaway and other members of her tribe. (Map from the Dracut Historical Society.)

agreement between the Pawtuckets and the town of Chelmsford for a large expanse of property along the Merrimack River in the vicinity of Black Brook, but this held together for only a few years before the Indians lost most of this acreage in a land exchange in 1660. In contests over land ownership the General Court often, though not always, decided in favor of colonist's claims over those of Indians.¹³

As more English settlers moved to the frontier towns of Chelmsford, Dunstable, and Groton, relations between colonists and Pennacooks became increasingly strained.¹⁴ An unleashing of violence and bloodshed in the Merrimack Valley followed the outbreak of King Philip's War in June, 1675. For the Pennacooks, including those who, like Passaconaway, had become Christians, the armed conflict resulted in terrible loss and suffering. In September, a group of militia and volunteers led by Captain Samuel Mosely, a former privateer in the West Indies who had a reputation for ruthlessness, pursued Passaconaway up the Merrimack River to present-day Concord, New Hampshire, and finding an empty village with

food stored for the winter they burned it to the ground.¹⁵ While most of the tribal members within the Pennacook Confederacy refused to participate in the uprising sparked by Chief Metacomet (King Philip), they faced warring parties from both colonists and Indians who demanded that they fight to oust the English.

In Chelmsford, in late summer, with tensions running high, a group of townspeople demanded the removal of all Wamesit Indians from their reservation after a haystack on the farm of James Richardson had been set afire.¹⁶ Although there was no evidence that Wamesits were involved in this action, a militia led by Lieutenant Edward Oakes of Cambridge, Massachusetts, rounded up some 145 tribal members, including elderly women and men, as well as children. Oakes was likely assisted by some of Chelmsford's militia, whose members, numbering

¹³ Waters, *History of Chelmsford*, pp. 30-32 & p. 82; Leavenworth, "The Best Title That Indians Can Claime," p. 292-293.

¹⁴ Between 1629, when Passaconaway conveyed to the English a massive tract of land extending from the Piscataqua to the Merrimack River, and 1675 the Pennacooks and the English maintained generally peaceful relations. There were exceptions to this, however, most notably in 1642 when authorities in the General Court fearing an Indian uprising ordered the disarming of Passaconaway and his tribal members. An armed militia failed to seize the Pennacook sachem, but his son Wannalancit was captured along with Wannalancit's wife and child. Passaconaway subsequently yielded to colonial authority and ordered that all firearms be surrendered to the English. See Burt, "Passaconaway's Kingdom," pp. 4-5.

¹⁵ Mosely was born in Braintree, Massachusetts, in 1641 and went to sea as a young man. His exploits as a privateer gained him a great deal of notoriety in New England as did his vicious acts against Indians during King Philip's War. See George M. Bodge, *Soldiers in King Philip's War*, (Leominster, MA: n.p., 1896), pp. 59-78.

¹⁶ Much of the information on Chelmsford during King Philip's War is from Lowell lawyer and amateur historian Charles Cowley in his book *Memories of the Indians and Pioneers of the Region of Lowell*, (Lowell: Stone & Huse, 1862) and from Daniel Gookin's 17th century history of the Christian Indians, subsequently republished as "An Historical Account of the Doings and Sufferings of the Christian Indians of New England," *American Archaeologia: Transactions and Collections of the American Antiquarian Society*, v. 2, (Cambridge, MA: University Press, 1836), pp. 234-534. Later histories of Dracut, Lowell, and Chelmsford that include short chronicles of King Philip's War drew heavily from Cowley.

about sixty, included Samuel Varnum.¹⁷ After the General Court sent orders to Oakes to arrest only the younger able-bodied men, the militia marched thirty-one Wamesits to Boston, allowing the rest of them to remain in their village. After being held in a Charlestown prison these Indians received a hearing before the General Court. The court found one of the young Indians guilty of committing the incendiary act and ordered that he and two others, who the court saw as a danger to Englishmen, be sold into slavery. Several more were deemed not to belong to the Wamesit tribe and continued to be held in prison. The remaining Wamesits, numbering about twenty, were released and permitted to return to their village.¹⁸

On the north side of the Merrimack River, Chelmsford was sparsely populated. Edward Coburn headed one family and owned a tract of farm land alongside another large agricultural property, held by Samuel Varnum. The Varnum family, however, lived on the opposite side of the river and had the protection of a nearby garrison. The Coburns, by contrast, built

their own garrison to ward off hostile Indians.¹⁹ Much of the violence in Chelmsford during the initial months of King Philip's War, however, was on the river's south side with most of it directed at the Wamesits. Among the worst incidents occurred in November, 1675, and followed on the heels of another fire, which was set allegedly by Indians allied with King Philip, destroying a barn filled with grain and hay, belonging, once again, to James Richardson. A mob of armed Chelmsford men moved upon the village of the Wamesit and demanded that all of the inhabitants gather together. Although the intent of this mob remains unknown, two of the men fired shots into the assembled group of Indians, wounding four women and children, and killing a boy. Leaving some of their food stores and possessions behind, yet fearful of more violence from the English and hostile Indians alike, the Wamesits fled north toward Canada, despite the perils that faced them in coming winter months. There they sought to reunite with Chief Wannalancit, son of the deceased Passaconaway.²⁰

¹⁷ A list of Chelmsford townsmen who served under Lieutenant Thomas Hinchman is recorded in Wilson Waters, *History of Chelmsford, Massachusetts*, (Lowell, MA: 1917), pp. 89-90.

¹⁸ Some months after the trial, an Indian allied to King Philip and sentenced to death in Boston confessed to setting the fire in Richardson's field with the intent sparking unrest between the English and the Wamesits. See Jenny H. Pulsipher, *Subjects Unto the Same King: Indians, English, and the Contest for Authority in Colonial New England*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), p. 146. On their return to Wamesit village, one of the Indians was shot and killed as they passed by a group of militia men training in Woburn. Although the suspected murderer was tried in court, the jury acquitted him. Richardson, who was a lieutenant in the militia, escorted the Indians back to their village. Cowley, *Memories of the Indians*, p. 17

¹⁹ Coburn and his sons used an old building as a garrison by reconstructing it with a defensive palisade. This building was originally one of Eliot's schools for Indians and subsequently served as court room and a tavern. See Coburn, *History of Dracut*, p. 36.

²⁰ In Cowley's account of this incident, the perpetrators were hostile Indians, but according to a later version, an Englishman seeking to provoke violence aimed at the Wamesits burned Richardson's barn. See Waters, *History of Chelmsford*, p. 99. Cowley claimed that this mob was composed of Chelmsford townsmen, but Pulsipher (*Subjects Unto the Same King*, p. 146) states that it was a group of Chelmsford soldiers who would have been under the command of Englishman Nathaniel Reynolds, a lieutenant, sent by the Massachusetts governor to direct the militia at the Chelmsford garrison. The child who was killed was the grandson of Tahattawan, sachem

Despite an entreaty by the governor's council, encouraging Wannalancit to return to Chelmsford under the protection of Lieutenant Thomas Henchman, one of the town's early settlers and a large landholder who was on good terms with the praying Indians, the sachem remained in the northern reaches of the Connecticut River Valley. Most of the Wamesits seeking to rejoin their leader failed to find him and resettled in their village, fatigued and malnourished. Yet they found the conditions there to be quite harsh in the midst of the continuing hostilities between the English and Indians allied with King Philips. In February, 1676, after only a few weeks in their village and fearing further attacks from the warring parties, many of the Wamesits departed again, northward, toward Canada, leaving behind a few of the old and feeble men and women. Soon after, yet another mob of Chelmsford townsmen gathered one night and set upon the nearly empty village, setting it ablaze and killing the few remaining inhabitants, defenseless in their wigwams. Other Wamesits, including the ruler Numphow, died from exposure during their trek to join Wannalancit²¹

of the Musketaquid. Two Chelmsford men, Jonathan Largin and David Robbins, were indicted for the shootings, but no court would convict them and they were freed from prison.

²¹ A copy of the directive to Wannalancit from the Governor Leverett is found in Robert B. Caverly, *History of the Indian Wars of New England with Eliot the Apostle, Fifty Years in the Midst of Them*, (Boston: James H. Earle, 1882), p. 146. The men responsible for the heinous act of burning the village and murdering the inhabitants undoubtedly feared, as did other nearby settlers, that the Wamesits who had fled their village had allied themselves with King Philips. There is no evidence, however, that any Wamesits joined in the fighting. None of the mob was ever brought to justice. See Waters, *History of Chelmsford*, pp. 100-103.

In March, more violence erupted in Chelmsford as Indians attacked and, over the course of a few weeks, burned as many as fifteen houses. In addition, two settlers, who were members of Samuel Varnum's family, were shot while crossing the Merrimack River in a boat to attend to the livestock on their farm. From the river bank on the north side, Indians opened fire on the men killing instantly sons Samuel and George. The father who was also a militia man directed a group of soldiers from the garrison to return fire, but the Indians quickly ran off and were never apprehended. Although the identity of the Indians who attacked the Varnums is not known, one early account claimed that it was Wamesits, about forty in number, who slayed the two young men, after which they burned a number of homes on the north side of the river. The Varnum sons were the only English settlers to die in Chelmsford during the war.²²

²² There are various accounts of this deadly encounter. The earliest is from Reverend William Hubbard of Ipswich, a friend of the Varnums and Coburns. According to Hubbard it was a group of Wamesit Indians who killed the Varnum sons and burned the dwellings that belonged to the Coburn family. See William Hubbard, *A Narrative of the Indian Wars in New England, from the First Planting Thereof, in the Year 1606, to the Year 1677*, (Danbury, CT: Stiles and Nichols, 1803), p. 184. Another early account dates from 1851 and states that Samuel Varnum's daughter, Hannah, was also in the boat when the attack commenced and that one of her fatally wounded brothers fell into her lap after being shot. This same account notes that accompanying the Varnums was a group of soldiers commanded by Samuel Varnum. If accurate, this indicates that Chelmsford residents remained highly anxious over the possibility of further attacks by hostile Indians in the late winter of 1676. See Isaac Childs, "An Account of the Varnum Family, from Their First Coming to America from England," *The New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, v. 5 (Boston: Samuel G. Drake, 1851), p. 79.

The death of King Philip in the summer of 1676 did not halt hostilities between the English and Native Americans. Threats of Indian attacks persisted into the 1680s. The war, however, marked the end of Wamesits occupying their village at Pawtucket Falls. Wannalancit and a few members of his tribe returned to the area, bringing with them several whites who had been held in captivity. The aging sachem found the English had planted crops on Indian land. For a short time he and his people resided on Wickasee Island, which was once their property, but was now owned by Jonathan Tyng. Whether they felt dispirited is not known; however, they departed again, moving north and uniting with the St. Francis Indians along the St. Francis River in Odanak, Canada. There they remained except for a brief sojourn in 1686 when they returned to Chelmsford and deeded the last of their land to Thomas HENCHMAN and Jonathan Tyng.

With the eruption of King William's War in 1692, ostensibly a conflict between the colonial powers England and France, English colonists were again pitted against particular Indian tribes. In Chelmsford leading townsmen believed that the presence of Wannalancit would aid against attacks by hostile tribes. They sent word to him requesting his return. Although he no longer held any property in region Wannalancit accepted an offer to take up residence again along the Merrimack River and lived the remainder of his days in the home of Colonel Tyng. He lived as a dependent of Tyng for about four years. Perhaps symbolizing the loss of his homeland and the passing of Native American culture in the region they had occupied for

so long, Wannalancit was buried in the Tyng family cemetery when he died in 1696.²³

Part II: Farming on the Frontier, 1660s-1780

In 1664 Samuel Varnum, an English colonist and farmer living in Ipswich, Massachusetts, acquired from John Webb part of Webb's land on the north side of the Merrimack River above the Pawtucket Falls (See Fig. 6). Fellow English yeoman, Richard Shatswell, also of Ipswich, joined Varnum in the purchase of this property described as "meadow and pasture [lands]," and fields "now in tillage."²⁴ Varnum's holdings amounted to 1,000 acres of land, which at the time was part of Chelmsford and was on the very frontier of English settlements. He lived with his family on the south side of the

²³ Coburn, *History of Dracut*, p. 69; Burt, "Passaconaway's Kingdom," p. 8. After Passaconaway's death Jonathan Tyng petitioned the General Court with a request that he be paid for the expenses, including those for food and clothing, that he incurred while caring for the sachem. In this petition Tyng noted that he was "also at some small charge to bury him, he having shewed himself friendly to ye English in the former war, and now authority would not suffer him now in his old age to be ill treated." This petition is reproduced in Waters, *History of Chelmsford*, pp. 136-137.

²⁴ John Webb, also spelled Web, settled in Boston and also used the alias John Everend. It is not clear why Webb adopted this other name, but, for his military service to the Crown, he was awarded a large tract of land on the north side of the Merrimack River. Webb held the rank of captain and appears to have lived briefly in Chelmsford. In 1668 he drowned off Boston harbor while attempting to catch a whale. See John M. Varnum, *The Varnums of Dracutt (in Massachusetts)*, (Boston: David Clapp & Son, 1907), p. 18; and Silas R. Coburn, *History of Dracut, Massachusetts*, (Lowell: Courier-Citizen Co., 1922), pp. 65-66, and. Also see Northern Middlesex Registry of Deeds, Dracut, v. 1, pp. 1-3, which includes a description of the lands purchased by Shatswell and Samuel Varnum.

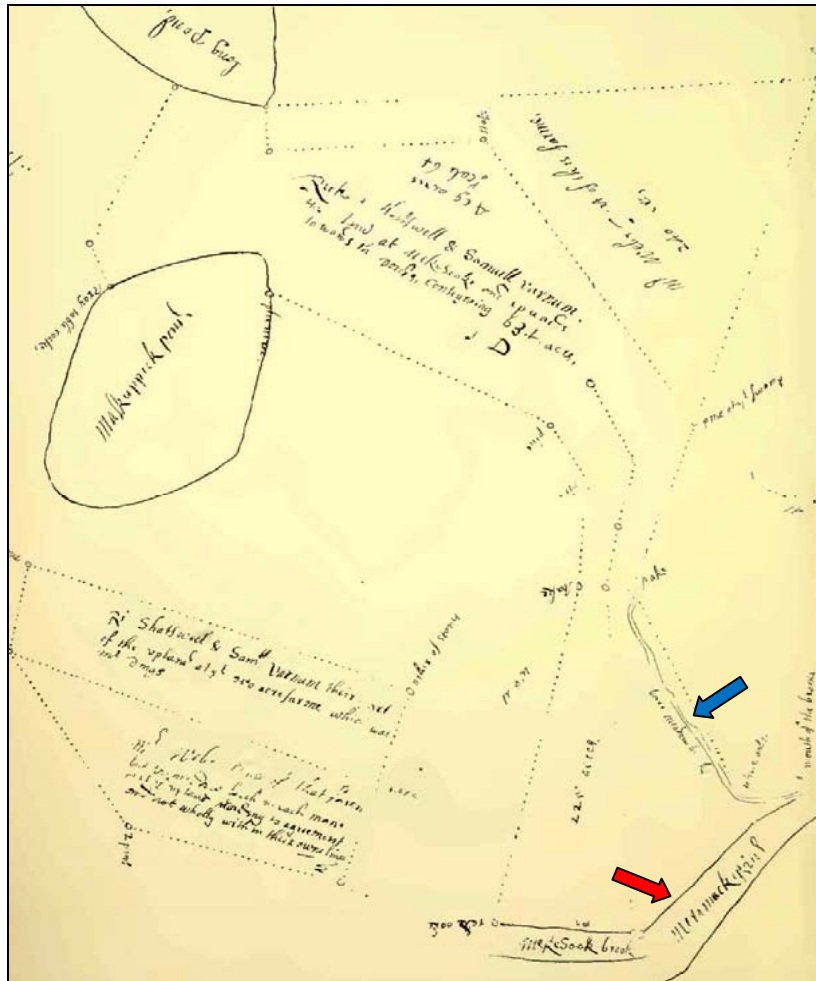


Fig. 6: This plat shows the original (1664) Shatswell-Varnum land purchase in Chelmsford. The holdings extended on the north side of the Merrimack River (red arrow) mostly on the west side of Beaver Brook (blue arrow) to as far north as Long Pond and Mascuppick Lake. From Varnum, *The Varnums of Dracutt*, preceding p. 17.

river, in the area that became Middlesex Village, very likely because of the protection provided by a small garrison established to ward off hostile Native Americans. Shatswell held his Chelmsford property for only a brief time before exchanging it with Edward Coburn for land in Ipswich. The Coburns and Varnums would become two of the principal and long-standing farm families in Dracut.

Similar to many other early colonists in New England Samuel Varnum hailed from English yeomen stock. Born in about 1619 in the rural parish of Lilbourne in Northamptonshire, he had emigrated to New England with his family, headed by his father, George, around 1635. The Varnums, including Hannah, Samuel's mother, and his sister, also named Hannah, were among the earliest settlers in Ipswich. George Varnum owned land on the east side of the village off High Street, near the Meetinghouse Green (see Fig. 7). He evidently prospered in Ipswich for when he died in 1649 he left to his wife a house and household goods, along with a barn and livestock, all valued at nearly £90. (By contrast, some twenty-five years later, the far larger amount of land acquired in Chelmsford by Shatswell and Varnum cost £200.) Following his mother's death Samuel Varnum inherited the Ipswich property. He sold this estate in 1665, soon after he settled in Chelmsford.

As historian Roger Thompson notes, the movement of colonists to the frontier in mid-17th century Middlesex County may be attributed to any number of factors, including pressure of growing populations in river towns, a search for more extensive and varied farm lands, and social conflict between

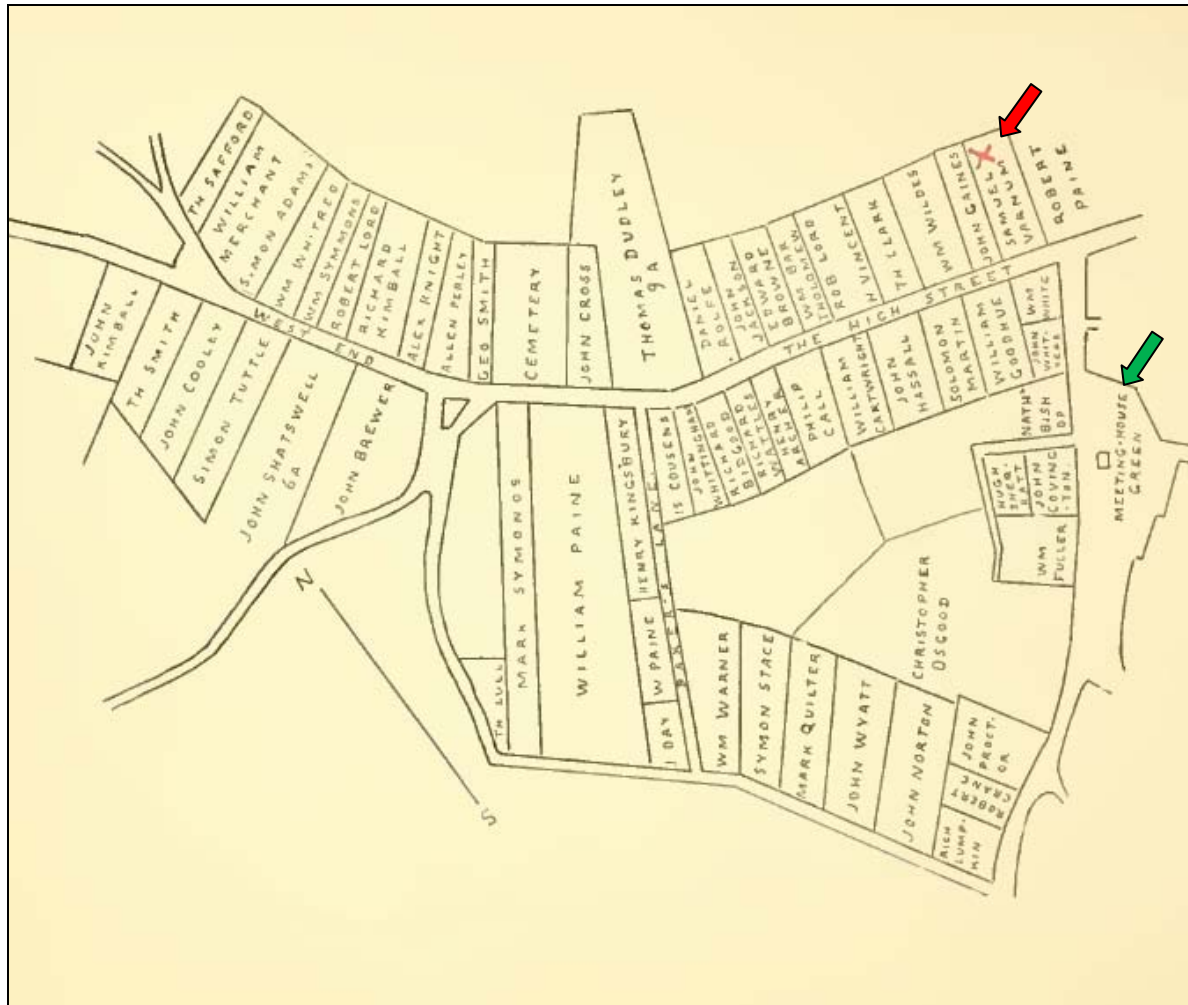


Fig. 7: This sketch showing landholders in 1660s Ipswich shows the extent to which were clustered around the town's center. Samuel Varnum's property (red arrow) was the east end of the village near the Meetinghouse Green (green arrow). At this time Ipswich had a population of about 1,200 inhabitants, composed primarily of freemen and their families, along with a number of indentured servants. Based on probate records, it appears that the Varnums held no servants while living in Ipswich. See "The Old Manse, the home of Revd Nathaniel Rogers, pastor of the 1st Church on the site of the lot sold by Samuel Varnum, Sen., sold to Edward Dean [Deare] with a house, April 8, 1665," in Varnum, *The Varnums of Dracutt*, p. 17.

townspeople or over town policies.²⁵ The reasons behind Samuel Varnum's departure from Ipswich are not known for he seems to have been a relatively prosperous yeoman. It seems most likely that he sought greater economic opportunity for himself and his growing family. The potential reward from a farm with extensive meadows and pastures for livestock, fertile land for crops, and woodlands that could be exploited for timber products must have been irresistible to the middle-aged Varnum.

The Varnum family's initial years on his Chelmsford farm appear to have been profitable. Samuel retired the debt he incurred from his purchase of the land from Webb, a large part of which he paid for in the grains he harvested, along with "beefe, porke, or Indian corne" that his farm produced.²⁶ While the corn, wheat, and malt produced on the land were critical to the success of the family's agricultural pursuits, the trade in beef, pork, and dairy goods were especially important financially for the Varnums and other New England farmers as the region lacked a single lucrative cash crop like tobacco in

²⁵ Roger Thompson, *Sex in Middlesex: Popular Mores in a Massachusetts County, 1649-1699*, (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), p. 3.

²⁶ The payment in agricultural goods instead of cash was a common practice in Colonial America. Varnum paid off his debt within three years in accordance with the terms of the purchase from Webb. In addition to income derived from his Chelmsford farm, Samuel Varnum also added to his wealth through the sale of his Ipswich property and possibly by an inheritance from part of the estate of his father-in-law in 1671. See Varnum, *The Varnums of Dracutt*, pp. 17-18.

the Chesapeake.²⁷ At the same time, raising livestock required an intensive and continuous kind of labor that entailed building and maintaining fences and barns, growing hay and insuring that animals were properly fed and cared for (which also included killing or warding off predators), and milking cows. For the Varnums, living on the opposite side of the river from their farm, this work was somewhat more difficult for it required the constant crossing of the Merrimack in a boat.

Although Varnum's move to the farm on the frontier proved to be economically rewarding, he and his family suffered grievously when, during King Philip's War, he lost two of his sons, Samuel and George, who were shot and killed by Indians. As noted earlier, this occurred in March, 1676, about nine months after the outbreak of hostilities that began in Southeastern Massachusetts. The father and two sons were crossing the Merrimack in their boat to tend to their cattle and were attacked as they approached the river's north bank.²⁸ After burying his son's in "Howard's field" on the south side of the river, Samuel Varnum promptly enlisted in the militia and served under his former townsman in Ipswich, Captain Nicholas Manning. Within a few months, Varnum participated in the bloody Narragansett campaign in Rhode Island that resulted in the killing or capturing of more than 200 hundred Narragansett Indians as the war came to a close.²⁹ After his

²⁷ Virginia DeJohn Anderson, *Creatures of Empire: How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

²⁸ tensions among Chelmsford residents is from Wilkes Allen who

²⁹ Varnum served under Captain Nicholas Manning, who was also an Ipswich, Massachusetts, freeman. See Varnum, *The Varnums of Dracutt*, p. 19; Eric B. Schultz and Michael J. Tougias, *King Philip's War: The History*

military service he returned home and remained there with his wife, daughter, and three surviving sons until the end of his life.

It was a few years after King Philip's War that Samuel Varnum and his sons built a house on the north side of the river, near Clay Pit Brook, and the family moved into its new residence. For the Varnum family the next three decades were marked by prosperity and controversy. Samuel Varnum and his sons Thomas, John, and Joseph significantly enlarged their holdings, purchasing former Indian land from Thomas Henschman and Thomas Richardson, as well as other tracts primarily from various Chelmsford men. Soon after each purchase, they were able to retire the debts they incurred in these transactions, typically paying for these lands with agricultural goods, rather than cash.³⁰ The growing wealth amassed by the Varnum men compared favorably to their neighbors, the Coburns, and more generally other New England farmers into the 18th century. As economic historian Gloria Main points out successive generations of colonial Massachusetts farm families enjoyed a slightly better, or no worse, level of prosperity.³¹

Families like the Varnums and Coburns, living on the north side of the river, had "a peculiar relationship to Chelmsford," as one local historian put it.³² While the town grant awarded to

Chelmsford did not encompass lands in the area that became Dracut, the freemen living there voted and paid taxes in the town, and received protection from Chelmsford's militia. They were also expected to support the ministry in Chelmsford and attend the religious meetings in the town's church. On at least one occasion Samuel Varnum and his son-in-law, Ezra Coburn, who had married Varnum's daughter, Hannah, ran afoul of town authorities for their neglect in observing the Sabbath. In a warrant of contempt issued to the General Court in 1692, two of the town's elders swore in a complaint that "Samuell Varnum and Ezra Coburn have bin very remis in attending the publick worship on the sabath day at [the] meeting [house] in Chelmsford."³³ But when Andrew Spalding, the town constable, crossed the river and attempted to serve Varnum and Coburn with the warrant he was barred from each of the households. Both men were summoned before a Middlesex County grand jury in Charlestown to answer to the charges and although the outcome of each case is not known, the two transgressors likely suffered a fine and public opprobrium. This incident perhaps deepened a sense of social isolation to go along with the physical separation that the families felt from Chelmsford and the town's elders.

The Varnums experienced another scandal in early 1696 when the family's unwed maid-servant, Susannah Coburn, gave birth to a child which, she claimed, was fathered by Samuel's second

and Legacy of America's Forgotten Conflict, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), pp. 64-66.

³⁰ Varnum, *The Varnums of Dracutt*, pp. 21-24.

³¹ Gloria Main, "The Standard of Living in Colonial Massachusetts," *The Journal of Economic History*, v. 43, (March, 1983), pp. 107-108.

³² Waters, *History of Chelmsford*, p. 475.

³³ The warrant and testimony of Solomon Keyes and John Perham against Varnum and Coburn are reprinted in Waters, *History of Chelmsford*, pp. 410-411. The testimony of Keyes and Perham stated that Varnum had periodically neglected to attend the church for one year, while Coburn had not been present for the entire year.

youngest son, John. A niece of Ezra Coburn, Susannah was the daughter of Ezra's brother, Edward, who had been killed at Brookfield, Massachusetts, while serving in the militia during King Philip's War. She had been in the Varnum household for a number of years and was known to have frequented the company of various young men, occasionally spending the night with them. Because sex outside of marriage was not only considered immoral, but was also illegal, the case involving Susannah Coburn's illegitimate child was heard before a Middlesex County magistrate. In addition, the magistrate probed the question of paternity to determine who would be responsible for supporting the mother and child.

Historian Roger Thompson has examined legal cases, such as this one connected to the paternity of Susannah Coburn's child, while attempting to interpret the changing role of family patriarchs in the enforcement of social mores in early colonial New England.³⁴ This case also reveals, on a local level, family and kinship relationships, as well as social relations between farm families, like the Varnums and Coburns, in relatively isolated, colonial frontier locales. As discussed earlier, the Varnum and Coburn families were among the earliest of the English to settle and farm the land in this area and, through marriage, had become closely connected to one other. Moreover, Samuel Varnum's wife Sarah was a midwife who had probably delivered many children over her lifetime, including Susannah Coburn.³⁵ At some point after the death her

father, Susannah joined the Varnum household, taking up domestic duties for the family. In addition to Samuel and Sarah, who were in their seventies, sons Joseph, John, and Thomas, who were all single, in their twenties, and resided in the house while working on the farm. One Varnum daughter, Sarah, had died at the age of thirty-three in 1690, and the other, Hannah, had married Ezra Coburn in 1681 (see Fig. 8). Thus Susannah, who was in her twenties, was the youngest female in household.

The case elicited strong passions in Chelmsford with one group supporting Susannah and another, composed primarily of Varnum family members, standing firmly behind John who denied being the child's father. As Thompson points out, the fact that Susannah did not name John as the father during her pregnancy and waited instead until she testified in court, some months after the birth of her baby, intensified speculation throughout the town not only as to the father's identity, but also about the character of Susannah and the various young men known to have consorted with her. To Susannah's supporters, she was deserving of pity, having been orphaned as a child and with few friends to guide and help her. Witnesses testified that she feared naming John as the father because his mother was her midwife and one of John's brothers "had threatened her." Among those who rejected Susannah's claim was John's sister Hannah Coburn. She stated in a deposition that in a conversation with Susannah days after the baby was born, the young mother cried out, "I am a great sinner, nobody will

³⁴ See David D. Hall's "Foreword," in Thompson, *Sex in Middlesex*, pp. vii-x.

³⁵ Unfortunately there is no information in the standard histories of Dracut and Chelmsford on midwives in this area during the colonial era or any era,

for that matter. The best source on midwives is Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812*, (New York: Random House, 1990).

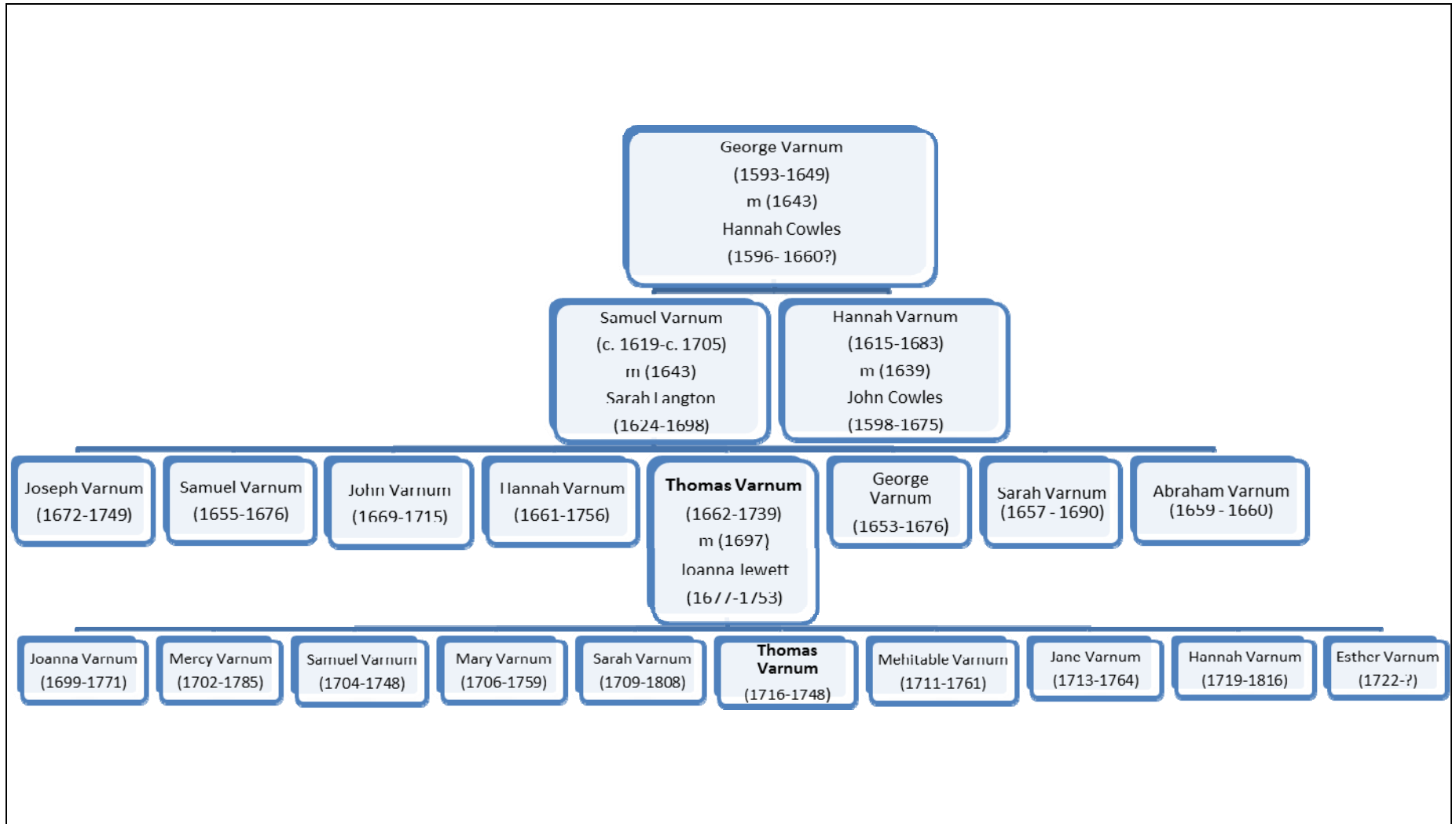


Fig. 8: This family tree shows the first four generations of Varnums in New England and highlights the branch of the family associated with Thomas Varnum. (1662-1739), the patrilineal ancestor of the family that subsequently owned the Hawk Valley Farm.

endure me,” and when “asked who is the father. . . .she answered if it would save my life I cannot tell who is the father of my child and wept bitterly.” When confronted by the patriarch, the elderly Samuel Varnum, Susannah reportedly confessed “that she had belied son John. . . . and did weep bitterly.” Other witnesses stated that Susannah had claimed John as the father because he had rejected her advances and she therefore sought revenge. In the end, the case against John Varnum was dismissed while Susannah Coburn was found guilty of fornication and “sentenced to the standard penalty of a forty shilling fine or ten stripes [lashes].”³⁶ Susannah’s fate is not known, but it is safe to conclude that she was cast out of the Varnum household. John, on the other hand, married Dorothy Prescott, the daughter of a prominent Groton, Massachusetts, landholder, received part of his father’s estate, and had seven children, all born on the family farm in Dracut.

Toward the end of Samuel Varnum’s life he was among the petitioners to the General Court to separate from Chelmsford and form the town of Dracut, which was granted in 1701. In his will he split his vast farmstead between his three sons, with Thomas, the eldest, inheriting the family home. Thomas married Joanna Jewett, of Ispwich, in 1697, not long after the paternity case involving his brother, John, came to an end. He and his wife would have ten children all born between 1699 and 1622. His youngest brother Joseph also wed in 1697 and the bride was Ruth Jewett, a first cousin of Joanna. The father of seven children, Joseph significantly expanded his landholdings along Beaver Brook and, about 1710, he



Fig. 9: This sketch of the Joseph Varnum house appears in *The Varnums of Dracutt*. Around 1710 the youngest of Samuel Varnum’s sons, Joseph, erected this substantial wood-frame, two-and-one-half-story dwelling. Called the “garrison house,” it stood on what is now Riverside Street in Lowell and was originally built as a residence for the Varnum family as well as a fortification against hostile Indians. Eventually the house passed into the hands of the Hamblett family and was occupied until about 1887 when the building was dismantled, with part of the lumber sold and shipped to Franklin, New Hampshire.

constructed a garrison house. Throughout their lives the three Varnum brothers lived and farmed on land near each other in Dracut. All of the brothers participated in the civic affairs of the fledgling town with Joseph, the most politically prominent of the three, gaining the distinction of being elected Dracut’s first representative to the General Court.³⁷

³⁶ Thompson, *Sex in Middlesex*, pp. 48-50.

³⁷ Varnum, *The Varnums of Dracutt*, pp. 27-30, 45-47 & 119-125

Active in local government, Thomas Varnum served as town clerk between 1713 and 1715, and he was a key figure in the establishment of the Dracut's first meeting house. The eldest brother provided a small piece of his land, near Flagg Meadow Brook and the Merrimack River, for the church along with an outbuilding called the "Noon-house" or "Sabba'-Day house." As was the custom of the time, the raising of the buildings was a festive affair and Varnum supplied "one barrell of Cyder and such a quantity of Rhum" as the trustees deemed necessary for the occasion. The completion of this church in 1718 and the filling of the pastorate in 1720 was an important event for the town for this signaled that Dracut was a settled and independent community.³⁸

The children of Thomas and Joanna Varnum included eight daughters and two sons, the eldest male being Samuel and the youngest, Thomas, was born in 1716. In 1734 Samuel married Mary Goodhue, whose family, like the Varnums, were early settlers in Ipswich. Mary's father, Ebenezer, a farmer, moved to Dracut in 1712, having acquired fort-six acres of land in the area that became part of the Centralville section of Lowell. His daughter's union with Samuel marked an increasingly

³⁸ Since churches of this era were typically not heated nearby outbuildings were commonly built and served for community gatherings before or after religious services. Very often the "Sabba'-Day house" contained a fireplace and cooking area that provided parishioners with food and warm drink. At a town meeting late 1719, Varnum and others in attendance selected Thomas Parker, who had graduated from Harvard a year earlier, as the first pastor. Parker was only nineteen years of age when he settled into the church and remained there until his death in 1764. Atkinson C. Varnum, *History of Pawtucket Church and Society*, (Lowell: Morning Mail, 1888), pp. 14-17; Varnum, *The Varnums of Dracutt*, p. 28.



Fig. 10: This detail from an 1879 atlas of Lowell shows the approximate location (red arrow) of Dracut's first meeting house constructed between 1716 and 1718 on land provided by Thomas Varnum. It was located near Flagg Meadow Brook (blue arrow), east of today's Hawk Valley Farm (green arrow), and served as a church until the town erected a new meeting house in 1748.

common pattern of intermarriage among members of Dracut's prominent farm families.³⁹

For reasons that are not clear, Samuel inherited only 200 acres of his father's estate, which was deeded to him at the time that he married. Perhaps Thomas senior felt that his eldest son, having married into the Goodhue family, was well established and would benefit adequately with a gift of a "Medow of considerable value." After Thomas Varnum's death in 1739,

³⁹ Various Varnum sons and daughters married into such Dracut farm families as the Coburns, the Richardsons, the Goodhues, and others. See Varnum, *The Varnums of Dracutt*, in which the author provides genealogies of the many branches of the Varnum family.

his youngest son, who had not yet married, inherited the majority of the family property, including the homestead. The late patriarch awarded each of his daughters a cash amount of £33, a sizable sum at this time. His widow, Joanna, received most of the household goods and was left in the care of her son Thomas. In addition, unmarried daughters Hannah and Esther were to be supported and provided living accommodation “for one full year” upon the execution of the will.⁴⁰

It was not until eight years after his father’s death that Thomas Varnum married. In 1747, at the age of thirty-one, he wed eighteen-year-old Sarah Coburn, one of two daughters of Edward Coburn, whose uncle Ezra, had married Hannah Varnum, some seventy-six years earlier. About nine months after their wedding, in May, 1747, Sarah gave birth to a son, they named Thomas. A little more than three months later, however, the father died, leaving his young widow and infant boy. Varnum’s death appears to have been sudden because he left no will and, as a result, his estate was placed in the hands of Sarah, age nineteen, and she became the guardian of her boy. The extent to which Thomas Varnum added to the family’s wealth during his short lifetime is not known. But

⁴⁰ The land that Samuel received included meadows extending along Flagg Meadow Brook, part of which adjoined the farmland of his late uncle, John Varnum. Before his death in 1748, Samuel Varnum added to his property, which included land from his uncle, Joseph Varnum, along Beaver Brook at its confluence with the Merrimack River. When he died his estate encompassed 640 acres of land. See Varnum, *The Varnums of Dracutt*, pp. 29-30; Northern Middlesex Registry of Deeds, Dracut, v. 2, pp. 179-181, for the deed, dated 1734, from Thomas Varnum to his son Samuel; and see Northern Middlesex Registry of Deeds, Lowell, v. 2, pp. 35-38, for the deed, dated 1743, from Joseph Varnum to Samuel.

shortly before his death he was one of the richest farmers in Dracut, with his real estate and buildings valued at nearly £3,000 and his personal estate assessed at about £1,000.⁴¹ (Fig. 11 shows the major landholders in Dracut between 1775-1783, including the many branches of the Varnum

Historians have long debated the role of colonial farmers in the rise of capitalism in early America. On the one hand, a group composed primarily of economic historians argues that farmers were entrepreneurial and profit-minded from the outset and that they tied agricultural development and production to broader market exchange. A second group of historians, who have exerted wide influence in the field of social history, maintains that these same farmers were not capitalist in their orientation, but instead prized family and community over wealth and individual acquisitiveness. Part of this debate hinges on the question of the time period, during which farmers were, whether it was by necessity or design, active participants in the production of goods for profit. Most scholars generally agree, however, that capitalism became firmly rooted throughout the countryside of the North in the late 18th and early 19th century.⁴²

⁴¹ Varnum’s estate encompassed about 2,000 acres of land, three times more than that of his brother’s estate. Varnum, *The Varnums of Dracutt*, pp. 30-32. By contrast, in 1771 the median farm size in Massachusetts was twenty acres. Bettye Hobbs Pruitt, “Self-Sufficiency and the Agricultural Economy of Eighteenth-Century Massachusetts,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, v. 41, (July, 1984), p. 338. Thomas Varnum who gained possession of the family farm upon obtaining his full majority in 1768, continued to hold the same acreage as his father.

⁴² A recent synthesis of these competing schools of thought is found in Naomi R. Lamoreaux, “Rethinking the Transition to Capitalism in the Early

Viewed through the lens of the Varnum family, the early patriarchs exhibited characteristics that have been identified in each of these two scholarly perspectives. For example, John Varnum (1704-1785), a first cousin of Thomas (1716-1748), was not only a successful farmer who significantly expanded his landholdings along Beaver Brook to Long Pond, but was also an extremely active businessman trading his agricultural goods in Boston and in other coastal towns to the north. In the 1770s, during the Revolutionary War, Varnum profited from such products as cider, which he made from apples in his orchard and transported in barrels to Boston using a local teamster. Varnum, like other Dracut farmers, also grew wheat and oats and had his occasional business partner, Isaac Parker, grind the grains at Parker's grist mill on Beaver Brook (at today's Collinsville section of Dracut). Varnum then paid Parker a commission to cart bushel barrels of meal to Newburyport and sell the goods there. On another occasion Varnum was involved in the sale of 150 pounds of salmon taken from the Merrimack River at Pawtucket Falls (and possibly from Beaver Brook) and shipped by Parker to Boston, where he sold it for a net of \$200 and returned to his Dracut partner with cash and three quarts of the "best West Indian rum."⁴³

American Northeast," *Journal of American History*, v. 90, (September, 1994): pp. 437-461.

⁴³ The various business transactions of John Varnum during the Revolutionary War are found in Varnum's diaries, which are housed at the New England Genealogical and Historical Society, and have been excerpted in Varnum, *The Varnums of Dracutt*, pp. 54-64.

Judging from other documents, including wills and deeds, the various Varnum patriarchs exhibited commercial behavior similar to merchants in Boston and in other larger towns. At the same time, they often oriented production around their families' needs as well as those of their townspeople. It appears that in a number of instances members of the branch of the Thomas Varnum family engaged more intensively in local trade, frequently bartering with their neighbors for goods, services, and even the acquisition of property. Before he died in 1739, Thomas Varnum left "all of his flax [that] may be improved for the use and benefit of my present family according to the discretion of my wife."⁴⁴ The inventory of the estate of his son Thomas, who died eleven years later, shows that the Varnums possessed a range of household goods, farm tools, livestock, and crops, far beyond a subsistence level and indicative instead of a strongly independent farm family.

Certainly Dracut in the 18th century had, per capita, wealthier farmers than many other Massachusetts towns and led in grain production (see Fig.12). By 1778, its population amounted to about 225 souls with a large number belonging to one of a dozen prosperous farm families. While quite a few of these family members worked on their farms, there were also a smaller number of laborers dependent upon the town's leading agriculturalists for their livelihood. Some, like, William Young, were part of a floating population that hired themselves out and performed farm labor for an agreed upon time, before moving on. John Varnum (1704-1785) employed Young for six

⁴⁴ Varnum, *The Varnums of Dracutt*, p. 29.

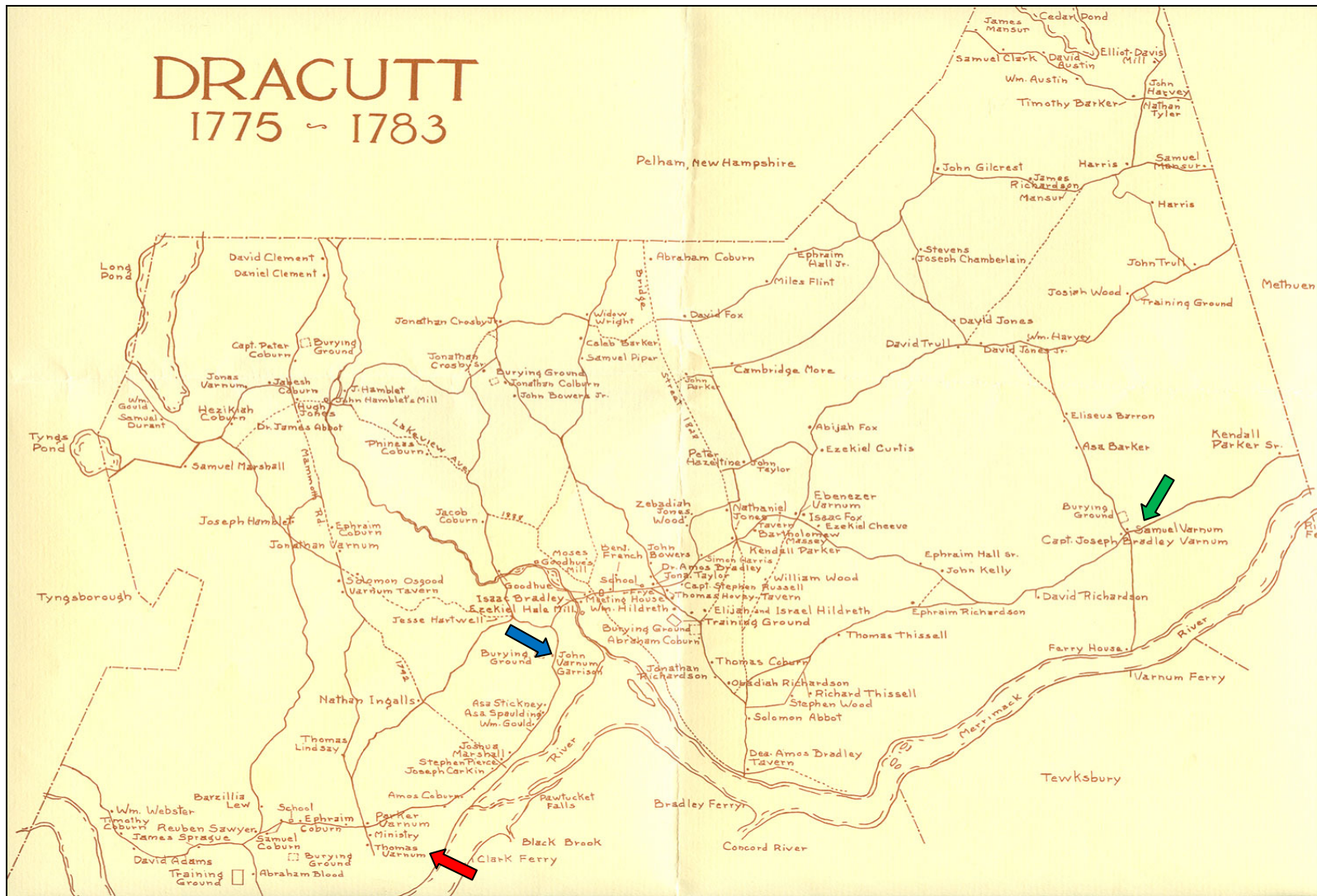


Fig. 11: This map from the Dracut Historical Society shows the major landholders in the town between 1775 and 1783. This includes the substantial farms of Thomas Varnum (b. 1748, d. 1805, (red arrow), John Varnum, b. 1704, d. 1785, (blue arrow), and Samuel Varnum, b. 1714, d. 1797, (green arrow).

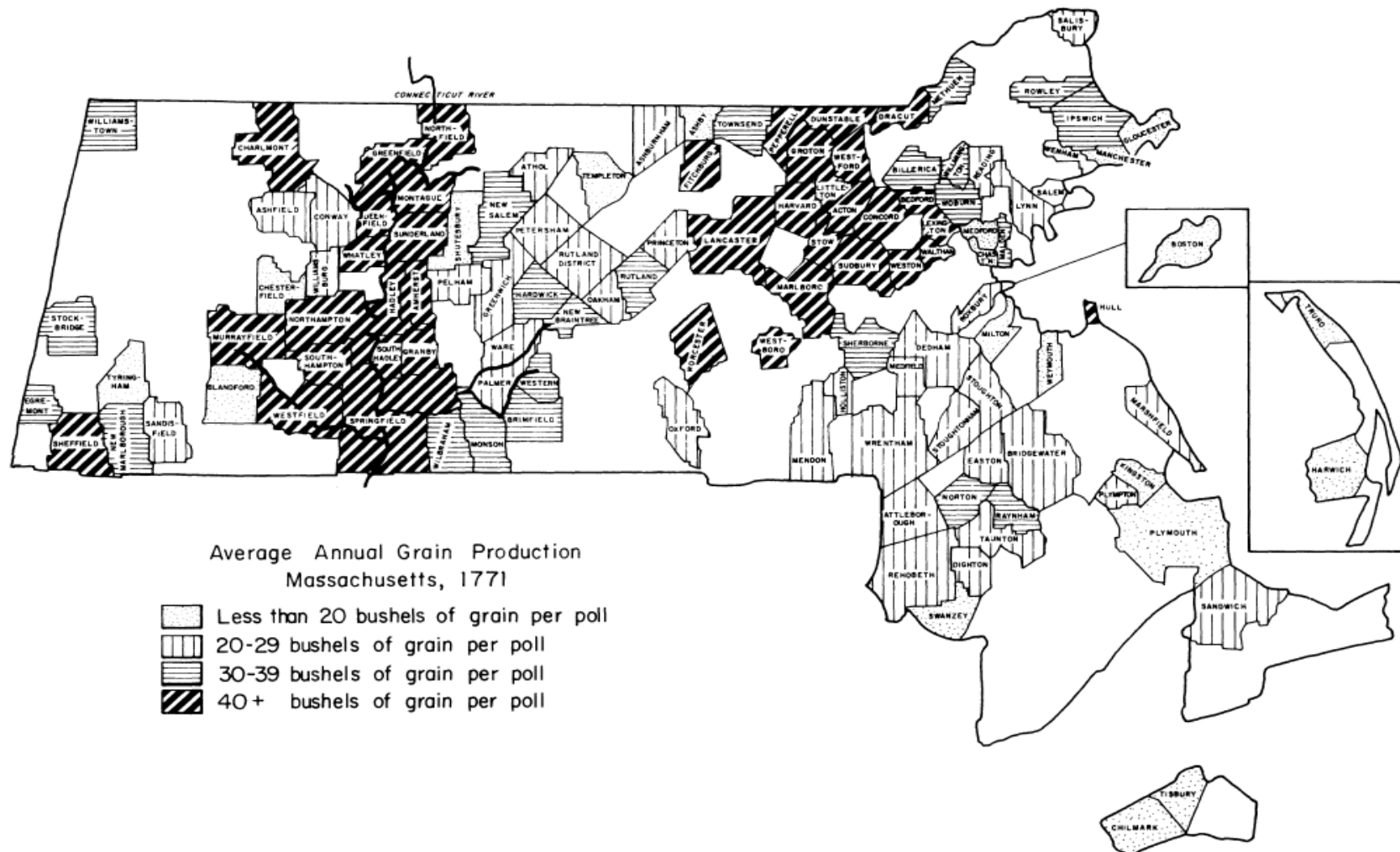


Fig. 12: Grain Production in Massachusetts, 1771. From Bettye Hobbs Pruitt, "Self-Sufficiency and the Agricultural Economy of Eighteenth-Century Massachusetts," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, v. 41,

months beginning in April, 1778, for the planting and cultivating seasons. In addition to a small sum of \$10 in cash, Varnum was to provide Young “a wool home-made coat, waistcoat & breeches, two shirts, 2 pare [sic] of Trowsers, 2 pare [sic] of stockings, a pare [sic] of shoes, [and] a hat. . . .for which s[ai]d Young promised to labor for me for 6 mo[nth]s from this day.” Through Isaac Parker, Varnum purchased for \$30 wool cloth for William Young’s coat and clothing. Varnum did not record the name of the person who made the woolen clothing, but it was likely one of the women in his household.⁴⁵ On the Varnum farm, as on most farms in colonial New England, family members and hired labor performed much of the work.

In addition, there were two other kinds of workers employed on farms in growing numbers throughout the colonies: These were indentured servants and slaves. Chattel slavery, composed primarily of people of African descent, was, of course, far more widespread in the South; however, slave labor existed throughout New England and to some extent in Dracut. Of the

⁴⁵ The son of John Varnun, Sr., who was one of Thomas Varnum’s brothers, John, Jr., was born in 1704 and married Phoebe Parker of Andover, Massachusetts, in 1730 when he was twenty-six and she was nineteen. Between 1731 and 1752 they had thirteen children, including eight daughters and five sons. Prominent in Dracut’s civic affairs, Varnum gained renown as young man for his exploits during the Wabanaki-New England War of 1722-1725. He and a company of militia hunted down and killed a group of Indians in Maine. Despite this slaughter that included the death of a young Indian boy and the taking of scalps, Varnum later campaigned for the abolition of slavery. See Varnum, the *Varnums of Dracutt*, pp. 51-53; the excerpt from Varnum’s diary concerning the hiring of William Young are on p. 59.

many branches of the Varnum family, one of them, headed by Joseph Varnum (1672-1749), held slaves. As noted earlier, Joseph owned a large farm along Beaver Brook and had erected a dwelling and garrison on his property around 1710. By the late 1720s Varnum, along with his wife and the four children who survived into adulthood, lived on this farm. The male children included sons Joseph, Jr. (1710-1783), Samuel (1714-1797), and John (1721-1786). Around 1728 Joseph Varnum purchased an African slave, a nine-month-old boy whom he named Cuff and who may have been owned by a family in Billerica.⁴⁶ Varnum subsequently bought a second African slave, named Pegg, who was also a child. His reasons for purchasing such young children as slaves is not known, but it appears as they grew older they were used primarily as domestic servants. When he filed his will in 1646, three years before his death, Varnum listed Cuff as a “Neagro [sic] man servant,” worth £320, and Pegg, as a “Neagro [sic] woman servant,” worth £230.⁴⁷ The fate of these slaves is not known, but in his will Varnum passed them onto his wife.

The other slaveholder in the Varnum family was Joseph’s middle son Samuel. Just as his father had done for his sons, Joseph Varnum divided his farm equally among his three boys and Samuel received land that was located on the Merrimack River along the road to Methuen and Haverhill, the farthest

⁴⁶ In researching his family’s history, James Varnum found a deed of sale from Thomas Farmer of Billerica to Joseph Varnum for “one certain negro boy called Mingo,” dated 1728. The author believed that this was the slave that Joseph Varnum subsequently named Cuff. See Varnum, *Varnums of Dracutt*, p. 125.

⁴⁷

from the original Varnum homestead. This property was known as the “Prime purchase,” which Samuel’s father had acquired in 1712 from Samuel Prime, a farmer and land speculator from Rowley, Massachusetts. Samuel Varnum married Prime’s daughter in 1736, but she died the following year, possibly from complications arising from a pregnancy. Two years later he remarried. His second wife, Hannah Mitchell, was the daughter of Captain James and Martha (Bradley) Mitchell of Haverhill, whose family gained fame for resisting Indians in the raid on Haverhill of 1708, one of several bloody confrontations in Massachusetts during Queen Anne’s War. On their Dracut farm, Samuel and Hannah Varnum had twelve children, including Joseph Bradley Varnum (1749-1821), who distinguished himself during the Revolutionary War and was later a U.S. Congressman, Speaker of the House, and Senator (see Fig. 13), and James Mitchell Varnum (1748-1789), who also served as a General in the Continental army and became a prominent attorney in Rhode Island. In Boston, in the 1740s, for reasons not entirely clear, Samuel Varnum purchased two African babies, a boy and a girl, whose mother was presumably a slave, and brought them to his Dracut homestead. The baby girl died en route from Boston, but the boy, named Silas Royal (also spelled Ryal) grew to adulthood in the Varnum home.⁴⁸

The Varnums manumitted Royal when he was a young man, but he remained with the family and became a servant of Joseph Bradley Varnum in the early 1770s after the eldest son



Fig. 13: This portrait of Joseph Bradley Varnum dates from ca. 1819, two years after he left the U.S. Senate. The painting is attributed to Ezra Ames (1768-1836) and is in the collection of the Smithsonian Institution’s National Portrait Gallery.

⁴⁸ Varnum, *The Varnums of Dracutt*, pp. 128 & 142-218.

had obtained his majority and his father deeded him part of the farm. During the Revolutionary War, Royal served in the Continental Army and as a privateer on two raiding voyages.⁴⁹ After his second stint as a privateer, Royal became enmeshed in a legal case that reflected the struggles of free blacks and escaped slaves in Revolutionary America.

The case stemmed from the actions of Joshua Wyman, of Woburn, who claimed to be Royal's master and, after having taken a large part of Royal's share of his bounty as a privateer, seized the young freed African and sold him to John White of Haverhill. In the face of Royal's struggle to show he was a free man, White shackled him in iron handcuffs and sought to sell him into slavery in the South. Word of White's actions quickly reached members of the Varnum family and they set out at once to obtain Royal's release. As John Varnum recorded in his diary:

Jan. 19, 1778. This morning while at breakfast heard that Joshua Wyman had sold Ryal Varnum, that ye News was brought from Westford by Jos. Varnum, Jr. & that said Ryal was carried off in a covered waggon Handcuffed – on hearing which I immediately called for my horse, Galloped to Jos. Varnum's to Know ye Certainty. He confirmed it, Sent him to Capt. Jo's [Joseph Bradley Varnum] to come immediately. Sent Jonas [Varnum] with my horse. Gave Jonas \$20 to

bare his expenses, with orders to pursue at all possible speed, overtake, Bring back and not suffer arbitrary voyalance, to Escape with Impunity. They pursued, came to Woburn, found the News confirmed. That it was the infamous Joner White, the Scurrilous tinker of Haverhill, that Bought him (at ye same knowing sd Ryal was a free man), sd White had imprisoned him, Woburn people had liberated him.

Jan. 20. Capt. Joseph & Jonas Varnum went to Boston, Complained to Gen. Heath against said White, had sd Ryal liberated & a promise from ye General that he would take notice of sd White. They gave him sd. White's Just Character, he promised that he would take Notice of it. They went to White, Informed him of what they had done. He was extremely angry. Curst & Swore very Profainly, they dealt him very sharply for his Conduct to Ryal. He said that he did not know Ryal was free. They told him that he could not know that his Crime alleged against Ryal, for which he was put under Gaol, was true, but that he knew ye Contrary. He said that all such Damnd Neagrees ought to be slaves. They told him that Ryal was as Good a man & of as much Honor as he, at which he was extremely angry & profain. They told him . . . that they on sd Ryal's Behalf, should Bring an action of Damage for false Imprisonment, that such arbitrary Tyrants and manstealers should not go unpunished. They came to Wyman's ye same Day. Gave him ye like Trimming.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ The best source for Silas Royal's service in the Continental Army and, fact, the most extensive work on blacks and Indians who participated in the American Revolution is *Patriots of Color*, by George Qunital, who carried out his study for the National Park Service's Boston National Historical Park and published by the Government Printing Office in 2004.. For the entry on Silas Royal, see pp. 188-189.

⁵⁰ These excerpts from John Varnum's diary are in Varnum, *The Varnums of Dracutt*, pp. 219-220

Aided by the Varnums, Silas Royal took legal action against Wyman. In one case, heard in the Middlesex County Court of Common Pleas, Royal won a judgment to recover the money owed to him as privateer that Wyman had taken. A separate lawsuit for damages against Wyman for imprisoning Royal and amounting to £5,000 was filed in Taunton, Bristol County court in 1779. James M. Varnum served as Royal's attorney; however, Royal lost the suit and was required to pay court costs. He returned to the home of Joseph Bradley Varnum and spent much of the remainder of his life as Varnum's servant. He died in 1826 and was buried in the family cemetery of Samuel, his former master. At Royal's request, his resting place was beside an Indian "in a remote corner of the ground, asserting his belief," according to John Marshall Varnum, "that he was not worthy to lie in the family burial plot."⁵¹

While it appears that no slaves toiled on the lands of the Hawk Valley Farm, at least one person of African descent labored for Thomas Varnum. This was a "Negro boy named Jupiter" whom Varnum employed as an indentured servant. At the time of Varnum's death in 1748, Jupiter had about three years remaining to fulfill the terms of his indenture and according the inventory of Varnum's estate, the value of his indenture amounted to £40.⁵² Along with Varnum's young widow, Sarah (Coburn) Varnum, it appears that two of her unmarried sisters-in-law, Jane (b. 1713) and Esther (b. 1722) lived at the Varnum homestead, and they relied on either Coburn family members,

other Varnum relatives, or hired and indentured labor, or some combination of all of these, to work the land.

Although over 400 men and boys from Dracut served in the military during the Revolutionary War, the farms on which many of them had grown up continued to produce grains, fruits, livestock, and other goods. Women performed evermore physical labor that had been carried out by men. But there is no evidence that farm production declined as the war lingered on. For large Massachusetts farms like those owned by the Varnums, Coburns, and Richardsons, prices rose for agricultural goods by as much as fifty percent between 1776 and 1783.⁵³ John Varnum recorded numerous profitable transactions for various products that his farm produced and sold in the immediate area and in Boston. He also sold beef cattle to the Continental Army⁵⁴

In the aftermath of the War for Independence the United States, although free from British rule, struggled economically with extremely high inflation and financial depression. Many of the smaller farmers in Massachusetts, including men like Daniel Shays who had served in the Continental Army, were deeply in debt and sought relief from their creditors through their representatives in the General Court and even from the Commonwealth's governor. Failing to gain support, Shays led a group of ex-soldiers and farmers, numbering between 2,000 and 4,000, in an insurrection that began in 1786 in towns such as Northampton and spread westward to Springfield, where, in

⁵¹ Varnum, *The Varnums of Dracutt*, p. 223

⁵² Varnum, *The Varnums of Dracutt*, p. 33.

⁵³ James A. Henretta, *The Origins of American Capitalism: Collected Essays*, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991), pp. 241-242.

⁵⁴ Varnum, *The Varnums of Dracutt*, pp. 61-64.

early 1787, Shays and his insurgents attempted to seize the federal arsenal. Answering the governor's call for volunteers to join a state militia were nearly 120 men from Dracut farm families. Joseph Bradley Varnum who was serving as a senator from Middlesex County in the statehouse responded at once and led a company of men to help put down the rebellion. Backed by the state and many of the merchant and land-owning elite, Shays and his army were roundly defeated at Springfield and then at their encampment in Petersham, Massachusetts. While some leaders like Shay escaped and were later pardoned, dozens of men were indicted, some served prison time, and two were hanged.⁵⁵

The economic turmoil after the Revolution touched many in Dracut and in Massachusetts, including the wealthy and the less well-off. But it affected disproportionately the state's many poorer farmers, small merchants, and local artisans. Yet America's economy was recovering by the late-18th century with a growing merchant class in cities such as Boston prospering in both the growing maritime trade and in the expanding domestic markets. Families like the Varnums who owned and worked the larger farms in the Commonwealth weathered the lean years and looked favorably upon the new republic, with the hope of enjoying the fruits of their labors and the destiny of the young nation.

⁵⁵ Coburn, *History of Dracut*, pp. 162-166. For a scholarly essay on Shays' Rebellion and its implications in the creation of the U.S. Constitution see Robert A. Gross, "The Uninvited Guest: Daniel Shays and the Constitution," in Robert A. Gross (ed.), *In Debt to Shays: The Bicentennial of an Agrarian Rebellion*, (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1993), pp. 1-46.

Part III: Farming in the Early Republic, 1780-1836

Except for his service as a Minuteman—his company included his cousin Joseph Bradley Varnum—during the first weeks of the American Revolution, Thomas Varnum remained on his farm throughout the war. He had inherited his father's property upon obtaining his majority in 1767 and it appears that he and his widowed mother managed the farm throughout most of his life. Varnum remained single until 1781, when he was forty-two years old and he married Polly Atkinson, age nineteen, who hailed from a farm family in Pelham, New Hampshire (see Fig. 14). Between 1784 and 1805 they had nine children, four daughters and five sons, all of whom survived into adulthood. Varnum added to his farm in the 1780s—a parcel of land that was sixty acres—but this expansion was the most modest of his ancestors. When he died at the age of sixty-five in 1805, the year his youngest child, Oliver, was born his farm was valued at about \$5,500. He left no will but eldest son Thomas, born in 1788, inherited his father's farm.

During the last decade of his life Thomas Varnum witnessed two major improvements in transportation that proved to be a boon to farmers, among others, in the region. This was the construction in 1796 of the Pawtucket Canal (see Fig. 15), which skirted the falls on the Merrimack River at Chelmsford, and aided in shipping goods downstream to Newburyport, Massachusetts, followed in 1803 by the completion of the Middlesex Canal from Chelmsford to Charlestown (see Fig. 16). While both canals allowed bulk goods, such as grain, to be shipped more economically the Middlesex Canal had the



Fig. 14: This silhouetted profile of Thomas Varnum is the only known image of him and was probably done in the 1780s not long after he married. There was undoubtedly a matching silhouetted profile of Varnum's wife Polly. The delicate bow around Varnum's neck and the high collar give the appearance that he was a fashionably attired country squire.

greater advantage for it reached one of the nation's busiest harbors and a far larger population center (see Fig. 17). Dracut farmers, however, continued to rely on teamsters, particularly during the winter months, when the canal was frozen.

One other significant transportation improvement occurred in Varnum's lifetime and entailed the construction of a bridge across the Merrimack River at the Pawtucket Falls in 1792 (see Fig. 18). Prior to this wooden span, the river was crossed by either Clark's Ferry, which ran from the Thomas Varnum farm on the river's north bank, to the south bank in Chelmsford. Jonas Clark of Chelmsford established this ferry in the 1740s with an iron chain extending across the river and he likely used a large wooden flat-bottom boat that could wheel heavy loads and livestock to either shore.⁵⁶ The bridge at the falls, the proprietors of which included well-known engineer of the Middlesex Canal, Loammi Baldwin, along with James Varnum, who served as treasurer of the enterprise, charged a toll as was common for most major stream crossings.⁵⁷ Soon after the Pawtucket falls bridge was completed the Clark Ferry ceased operating.

Economic historian Winnifred Rothenberg has pointed out that during the first two decades of the 19th century Massachusetts farmers typically traveled fifty miles or more over country lanes and highways to sell their agricultural goods to merchants

⁵⁶ Waters, *History of Chelmsford*, p. 812; Coburn, *History of Dracut*, p. 260.

⁵⁷ Prior to building the wooden span, James Varnum and about thirty other men, including some the most affluent farmers and merchants in Chelmsford and Dracut, chartered the Merrimack Bridge Company, which then operated the toll bridge. Coburn, *History of Dracut*, pp. 260-263

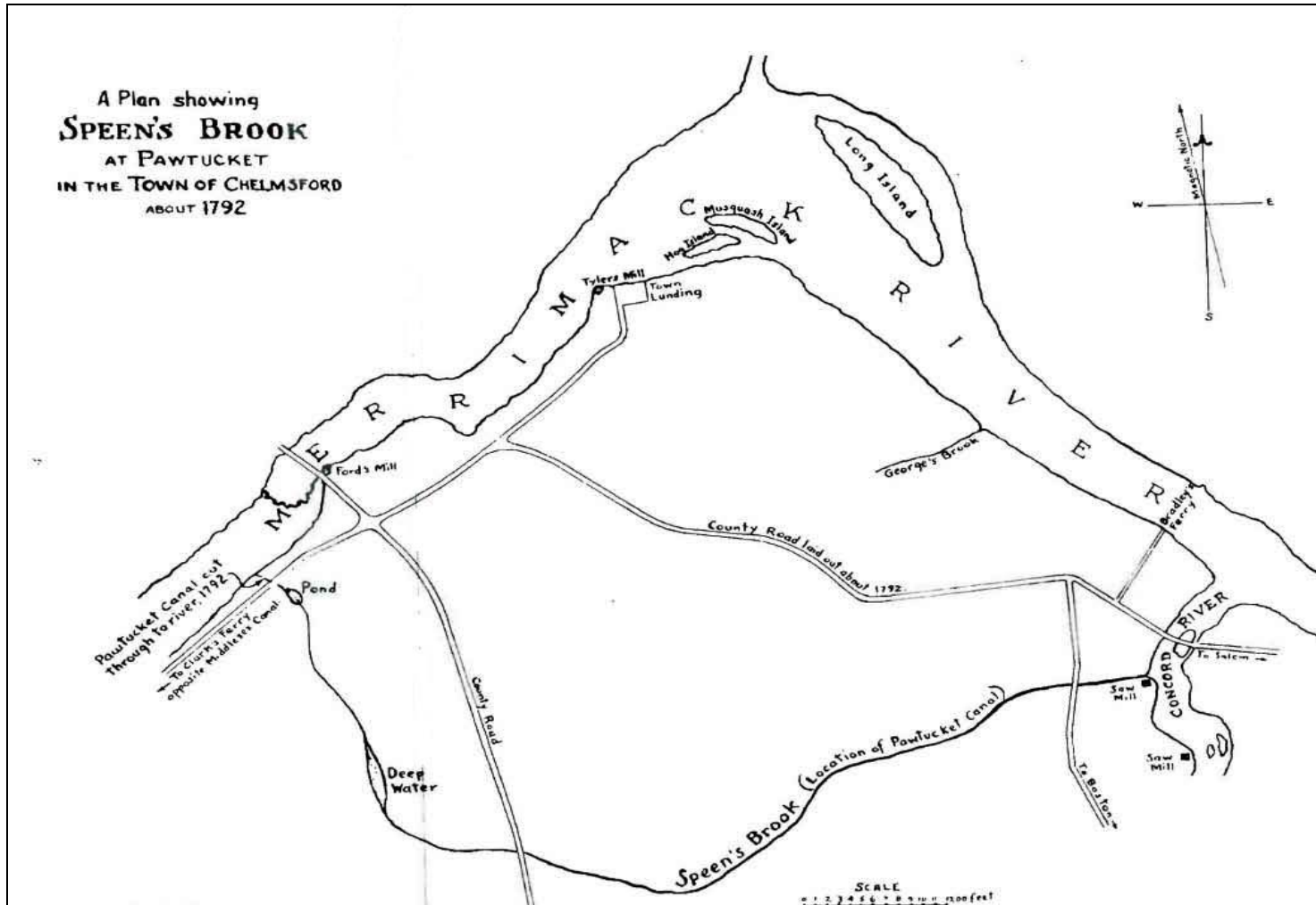


Fig. 15: This map shows the location of the Pawtucket Canal, constructed by the Proprietors of Locks and Canals of the Merrimack River in 1792. Part of the canal route, which skirted the Pawtucket Falls, used the streambed of Speen's Brook and terminated at the Concord River, near its confluence with the Merrimack River. (Source: Drawings of the Proprietors of Locks and Canals, Center for Lowell History, UMass Lowell.)



Fig. 16: Route of the Middlesex Canal, construction of which began in 1793. (Source: Middlesex Canal Association.)



Fig. 17: An artist's rendering of the kind of scow used on the Middlesex Canal, which was eventually superseded by the Boston & Lowell Railroad. (Source: Middlesex Canal Association)



Fig. 18: This detail from Alvin Fisher's painting of the Pawtucket Falls in 1833 shows the toll bridge crossing the Merrimack River. (Source: Harvard University's Baker Library.)

in larger markets.⁵⁸ Canals and turnpikes facilitated the movement of farm products and cash rather than bartering increasingly dominated commercial exchange.⁵⁹ Throughout the early 1800s the cash economy, specialization of production for larger markets, and the rise of wage labor, especially in workshops and in the growing factory system, were changing the lives of rural Massachusetts families. As historian George Rogers Taylor has pointed out, the improvement of roads, the construction of canals, and the establishment of railroads, beginning in the late 1820s, accelerated these fundamental social and economic changes throughout the Commonwealth and the nation.⁶⁰

When Thomas Varnum took over part of the family farm after his father's death in 1805, there were a handful of small water-powered industries along the rivers and streams in Dracut and Chelmsford. In addition to grist mills, there were carding and fulling mills, as well as forges and blacksmith shops. One of the most successful of these early industrial operations was Moses Hale's mill on River Meadow Brook in East Chelmsford. Hale famously produced a fine woolen cloth used to make a suit for Joseph Bradley Varnum, who, as Speaker of

the House in 1806, opened a session of Congress wearing this fabric that symbolized the importance of high-quality domestically produced goods.⁶¹ Hale's mill and the mill of Jonathan Goulding and Jonathan Knowles (later Hurd's Mill) along the Concord River were dramatically eclipsed in 1823 with the completion of the massive Merrimack Mills, the first cotton factory along the Merrimack River on the site that would become Lowell.

Of the myriad social and economic transformations brought about by the development of Lowell as a center for the nation's textile industry, the fortunes of farmers in the surrounding region changed as well.⁶² The construction of additional factories, boardinghouses, homes, and commercial buildings in Lowell accompanied the growing population that numbered about 2,500 people in 1826, when Lowell was chartered as a town, to more than 17,000 souls ten years later when it was incorporated as a city (see Fig. 19). In 1842, when Charles Dickens visited the thriving textile center and wrote glowingly of its people and industry, the city was second only to Boston in size as well as in political and economic importance

⁵⁸ Winnifred B. Rothenberg, "The Market and Massachusetts Farmers, 1750-1855," *Journal of Economic History*, v. 41 (June 1981), 288-95.

⁵⁹ Michael Merrill, "Cash is Good to Eat: Self Sufficiency and Exchange in the Rural Economy of the United States," *Radical History Review*, v. 7 (1977), see pp. 43-46 & 60-61; James A. Henretta, "Families and Farms: *Mentalité* in Pre-Industrial America," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, v. 35 (January 1978), see especially pp. 14-20.

⁶⁰ George Rogers Taylor, *The Transportation Revolution, 1815-1860*, (New York, Evanston & London: Harper Torchbook Edition, 1968 [originally published in 1951])

⁶¹ Frederick W. Coburn, *History of Lowell and Its People*, v. 1, (New York: Lewis Publishing Company, 1920), p. 122.

⁶² The scholarship on Lowell, its early manufacturing, and its predominately female workforce is voluminous. Among the best are Patrick M. Malone, *Waterpower in Lowell: Engineering and Industry in the Nineteenth Century*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009); Robert F. Dalzell, Jr., *Enterprising Elite: The Boston Associates and the World They Made*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1987). Thomas Dublin's *Women at Work*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), remains the definitive history of Lowell's female workforce in the antebellum era.



Fig. 19: Produced by John Barber, this engraving of Lowell dates from the mid-1830s and shows the growing factory town from Dracut Heights. Note the cows pasturing in the foreground and the stark contrast this scene presents between the bucolic pastoralism of Dracut and the teeming industrialism in Lowell.

in Massachusetts. Local farmers like the Varnums gradually shifted much of their agricultural production to the lucrative and close-at-hand market of Lowell. This resulted in a move away from grains to larger amounts of vegetables, fruits, and dairy goods.

The advent of Lowell and its large-scale water power system that was fed by the Merrimack River with a dam at Pawtucket Falls, altered parts of the landscape and farm property upstream. The Hawk Valley Farm was among those affected by the Proprietors of Locks and Canals turning the river into a mill

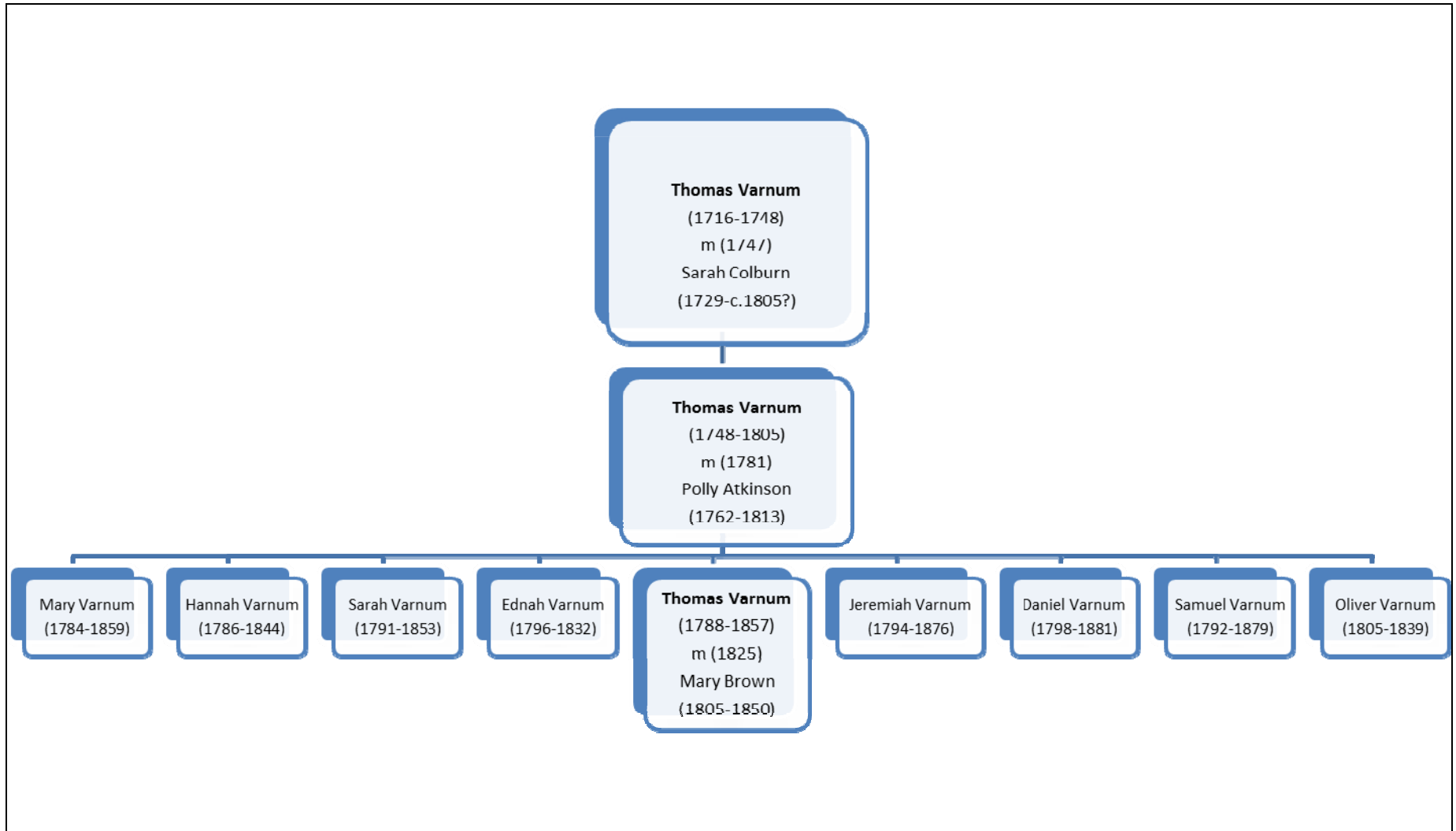


Fig. 20: This part of the Varnum family tree shows the fifth generation of the Thomas Varnum family branch, as a result of the union between Thomas Varnum and Polly Atkinson. Each of the five sons of Thomas Varnum (1748-1805) inherited a part of the farm, with the eldest, Thomas, receiving the family homestead.

pond, as the waters of Clay Pit Brook overflowed the banks and submerged a number of acres of the Varnum land. Thomas Varnum and other farmers whose lands were similarly inundated received cash under the aegis of “flowage payments” from the Proprietors.⁶³ The alterations to the Varnum land as a result of periodic flooding proved to be but one part of a larger dynamic of social and economic change that was centered around the emerging industrial-capitalist order.

Part IV: Farming in the City, 1836-1930

Over the course of the 19th century, as Lowell’s population and physical boundaries were expanding, the surrounding farms in Dracut, Chelmsford, Tewksbury, and Billerica were becoming more and more subdivided. And the few remaining farms in Lowell were disappearing altogether. This smaller farm size was partly a result of the long-lived practice of apportioning land among the male heirs of agrarian patriarchs like Thomas Varnum. For example, following Varnum’s death in 1805, his once sizable estate was split between his five sons, Thomas, Jeremiah, Samuel, Daniel, and Oliver (see Fig. 20).

Little is known about Samuel who, like Daniel and Oliver, never married and lived his entire life in Dracut. But before his death in 1879, he created the name of Hawk Valley Farm for

⁶³ Malone, *Waterpower in Lowell*, p. 64; For a discussion of the various lawsuits and conflicts involving the Proprietors of Locks and Canals and landholders in the Merrimack Valley see Theodore Steinberg, *Nature Incorporated: Industrialization and the Waters of New England*, (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 114-136

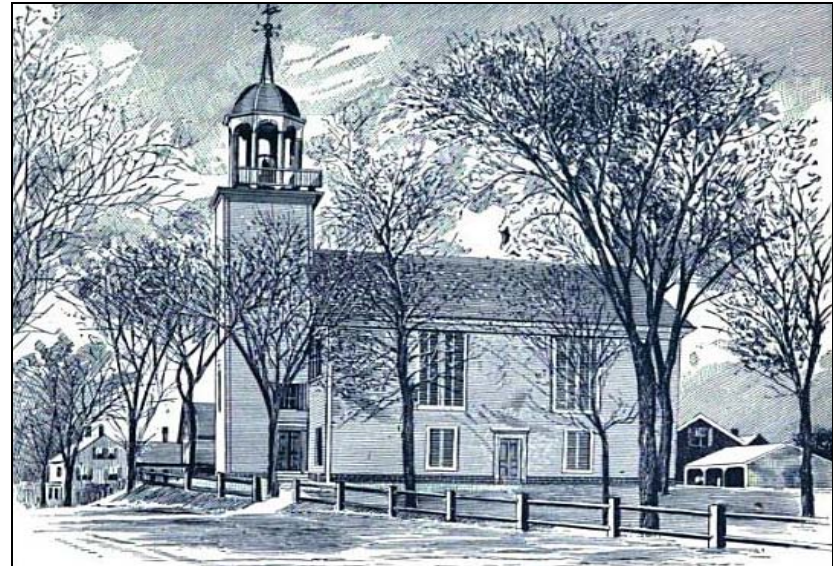


Fig. 21: Built in 1797, the Pawtucket Congregational Church served Dracut’s West Congregational Society that formed as a result of a controversy among parishioners over the preferred location of a new church to replace the old (1747) meeting house. Several Varnums, including Thomas (1747-1805) were staunch supporters and founders of the Pawtucket Church and its society. (Engraving from A.C. Varnum, *History of Pawtucket Church and Society*, 1888.)

the property surrounding the old Varnum homestead.⁶⁴ Oliver was a deeply religious man and a talented violin player, very

⁶⁴ The story handed down by Varnum family members is that Samuel was a dedicated to the raising of chickens whose numbers were constantly threatened by the many hawks that inhabited the area. A two-sentence notice of Samuel Varnum’s passing appears in the *Lowell Daily Courier*, February 8, 1879. In Lowell’s “Deaths Registered in the City” the cause of Varnum’s death is simply noted as “old age” and his occupation is listed as “yeoman.” See Lowell Vital Records, 1879, v. 311, p. 94.

likely self-taught. His grandfather, Thomas Varnum, was among a group of residents, living in the western part of town, who formed the West Congregational Society and were instrumental in the construction of the Pawtucket Congregational Church (Fig. 21). He and his brother Jeremiah, a long-time deacon of the church, were active abolitionists as early as the 1830s. Oliver was only thirty-four years old when he died in 1839 and although he had deeded to him some farm land, it appears that he was more interested in spiritual matters than in the production of agricultural goods.

Thomas, Jeremiah, and Daniel were all active and well-known farmers during their lifetimes and supported the Middlesex North Agricultural Society, which formed in 1855 and established a large fairground in south Lowell (see Fig. 28). This society not only organized and administered Middlesex County's yearly agricultural fair that began in 1861, but also promoted a more scientific approach to farming. For nearly half a century the fair was among the largest in Massachusetts and the society's related farmers' institutes sponsored numerous meetings throughout each year. These institutes, in which a number of Varnums participated or led, brought together local farmers who not only shared their knowledge of agricultural practices—from soil fertilization to improvements in growing crops and animal husbandry—but also sought to strengthen business approaches to farm operations and to improve the pricing of their goods.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Articles on the Society and the meetings of the various farmers' institutes are found in Lowell newspapers from the 1860s into the 1890s. See, for example, the *Lowell Daily Courier*, August 30, 1860; September 22, 1870; August 24, 1883; September 21, 1887, and November 26, 1888.



Fig. 22: In the early 1880s Thomas Varnum had this two-and-one-half story, wood-frame house constructed on land adjacent to the old family homestead. For about 50 years thereafter the old 18th century house was run as a boardinghouse, with farm hands residing there. (Photo courtesy of Louisa Varnum.)

Although Thomas Varnum and his wife Mary (Brown) had five children, only three, one son and two daughters, lived into adulthood. The son, Thomas, Jr., born in 1837, took over the farm after his father's death in 1857. Over his long life, Varnum continued to prosper in his agricultural pursuits, although he undoubtedly observed many other farmers in the area who saw their fortunes waver and decline. Like his forbearers, Varnum continued to raise livestock, namely dairy and beef cattle, and maintained orchards and pastureland. He also had his hayfields and his croplands. But among his most profitable crops was cabbage, which he planted in far larger

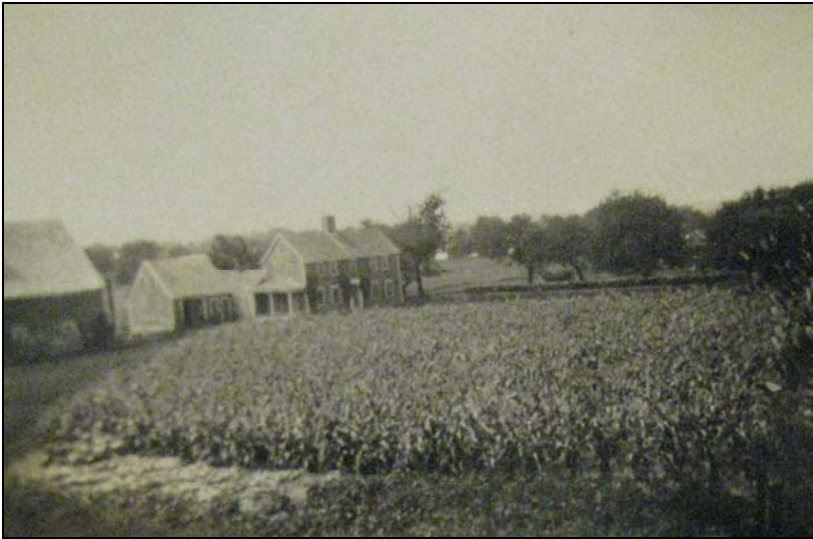


Fig. 23: This photograph taken around 1915 and looking southwest toward the Varnum homestead, shows a corn field that extended from Varnum Avenue . (Photo courtesy of Louisa Varnum.)

amounts than his ancestors. It appears that most of the sales of his agricultural goods were directed toward local markets, notably Lowell.⁶⁶

The year his father died, Thomas married Sarah Pierce, who was his same age and hailed from Winchendon, Massachusetts. They had no children (see Fig. 29). Perhaps owing to his wife's desire for a more modern house, Thomas Varnum built a large residence along Varnum Avenue on land adjacent to the family's homestead (see Fig. 22). The two-and-one-half story, wood-frame house featured some Queen-Anne elements,



Fig. 24: By the 1870s cabbage proved to be the most lucrative cash crop grown by the Varnum family. This photograph, which dates from the 1910s, highlights the winter squash crop. In the distance are the main barn and family homestead. (Photo courtesy of Louisa Varnum.)

though it was not as ornate as some dwellings built in this popular style. After moving into their new residence the Varnums used the old homestead as a boardinghouse for their farm workers. By this time, however, a large extent of the Varnum property was no longer in Dracut, having been annexed to Lowell in 1874 see (Fig. 30). This annexation, which many in Dracut, including Varnum, opposed, was carried out in conjunction with the construction of Lowell's first municipal

⁶⁶ *Lowell Daily Courier*, March 9, 1882 and April 24, 1888.



Fig. 25: This photograph dates from the 1910s and was taken from the cupola of the main barn on the Varnum farm. It shows the family's farm fields extending from Clay Pit Brook, in the foreground to the Merrimack River. The trees visible in the distance line the boulevard that the City of Lowell developed in the late 1880s. (Photo courtesy of Louisa Varnum.)

waterworks that drew water from the Merrimack River with intakes pipes located near the Varnum farm.⁶⁷

Without any children to assist in the farm work, Thomas Varnum turned increasingly to hired help. In the 1880 federal census, there was listed in the Varnum household, wife Sarah, along with a young, New Hampshire-born female, Harriet "Hattie" Jameson, who was a domestic and was hired as cook

⁶⁷ Varnum and other Dracut farmers testified against the annexation at a legislative hearing in Boston. Among Varnum's objections was the increase in property taxes that he would have to pay should his land become part of Lowell. See the *Lowell Daily Courier*, February 26, 1874.



Fig. 26: By the 1880s about a half dozen farmworkers resided and labored on the Varnum farm. Virtually all of the field workers were male and included boys as young as 12. Some of the young men were Varnum family relatives. This photograph dates from the 1920s and shows three young lads at work at the manure pile, filling the manure spreader pulled by a gasoline-powered tractor. (Photo courtesy of Louisa Varnum.)

and housekeeper for the farmhands, and three males ranging in age from fifteen to twenty-one, including two English-Canadians, who were described as farmers and farm workers. There was one Varnum relative, as well, a nephew named George Varnum, age twenty-two and born in Maine, who was part of the household. This pattern of hiring and boarding male farmworkers from either Canada or New England was quite pronounced from the 1860s into the 1880s.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ See the federal manuscript census for Lowell, 1880. Similar patterns in gender, ages, and ethnic backgrounds of Varnum farm workers are seen as well in the federal census of Dracut in 1860 and 1870.

Twenty years later, however, the work force on the Varnum farm had become somewhat ethnically diverse, reflecting the larger change in the area's ethnic population. While Harriet Jameson, now forty-four years old and still single in 1900 continued to work as a domestic servant, there was also Frank Tighe, age twenty-two, of Irish birth, Henry Giroux, twenty-two and born in French Canada, but a citizen of the United States, a Timothy Donovan, forty-four, who like Tighe, was of Irish parentage, and two other men, Ernest Pierce, age thirty and born in English Canada, and Foster Marshall, age forty, born in Massachusetts, each of whom was listed as a farm laborer or servant. In addition, the Varnum household included two Swedish-born female domestic servants, Matilda Johnson, age fifty-eight, and her daughter, Alma, age twenty.⁶⁹

Along with the altering composition of the farm workforce, the physical landscape around the Varnum property was changing. Among the most dramatic in the late 1880s was the city's creation of a park and the construction of a boulevard along the Merrimack River. The advent of the park and boulevard cut off the Varnum farm's access to the river. Thomas Varnum and other residents affected by the land taking were not opposed to this action and negotiated a settlement with the city.⁷⁰ In 1891 Lowell General Hospital built a new hospital building on the Samuel Fay property, just east of Varnum's farmstead. Another major change that portended even more development on a

⁶⁹ See the federal manuscript census for Lowell, 1900. Additional domestic servants were likely hired because Thomas Varnum had remarried after his wife's death in 1891 and he and his second wife had, by 1900, two daughters.

⁷⁰ *Lowell Daily Courier*, March 28, 1889.



Fig. 27: Dating from ca. 1908, this portrait of Varnum family members was likely taken by Thomas Varnum on the lawn in front of the house on Varnum Avenue. Varnum's young family included his wife, Helen (Allen), born in 1865, his two daughters, Mary, born in 1898, and Helen, born in 1900, and son, Thomas, born in 1901. (Photo courtesy of Louisa Varnum.)



Fig. 28: This poster advertising Middlesex County's yearly agricultural fair, which was held by the Northern Middlesex Agricultural Society, depicts the racing oval in center, with the grandstand in the distance, the exhibition building and tents to the left, and the main hall and office building to the right. Although often hard-pressed for funds, the Society received much of its financial backing from some of Lowell's business elites. At the time of the establishment of the fairground in south Lowell, this section of the city was still surrounded by farmland, including the large agricultural estate of Joshua Swan. A small passenger railroad station was erected to serve visitors to the fairground, which was also a popular horse race-track. (Image from the Library of Congress)

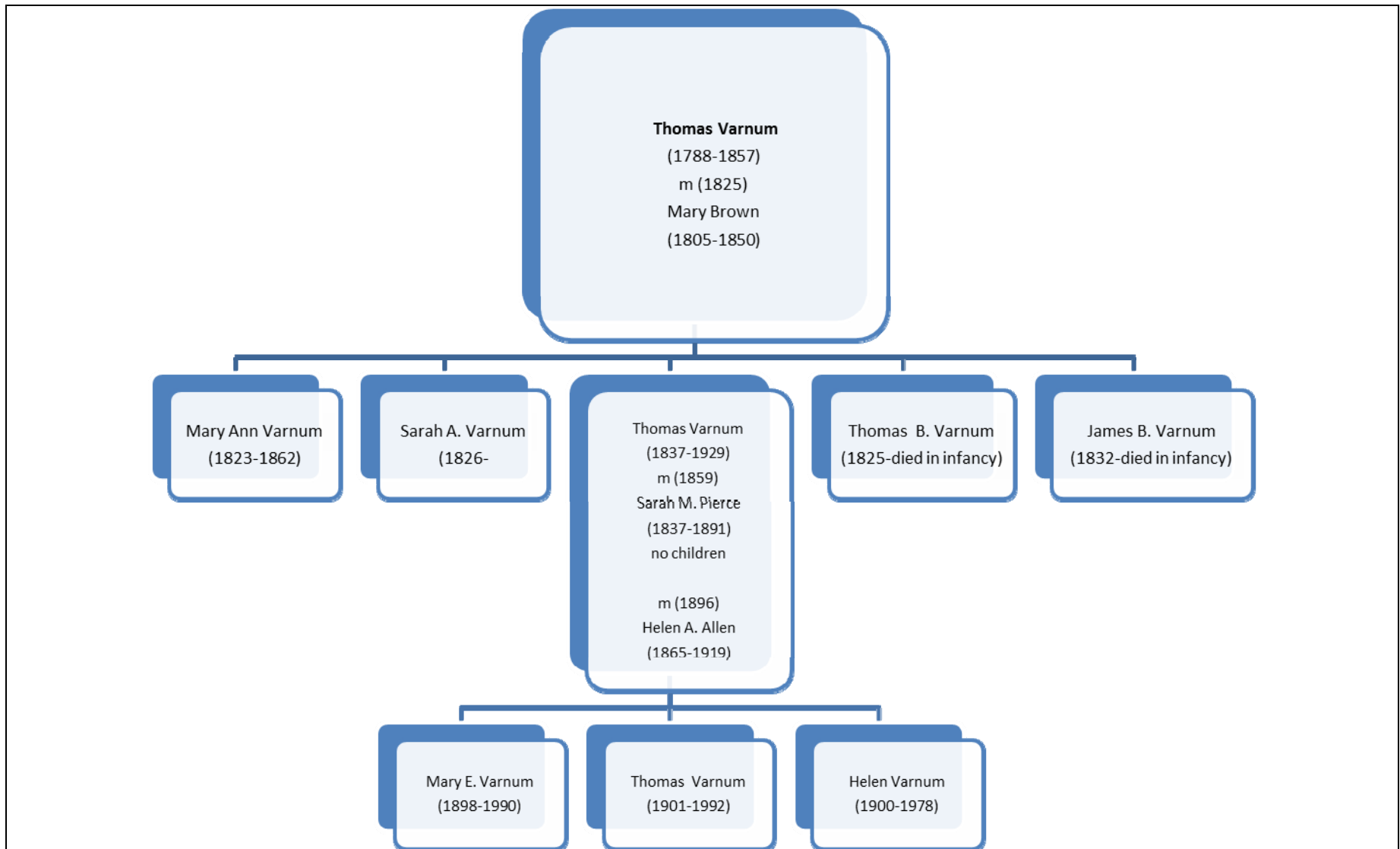


Fig. 29: This part of the Varnum family tree shows the sixth and seventh generations of the Thomas Varnum branch.

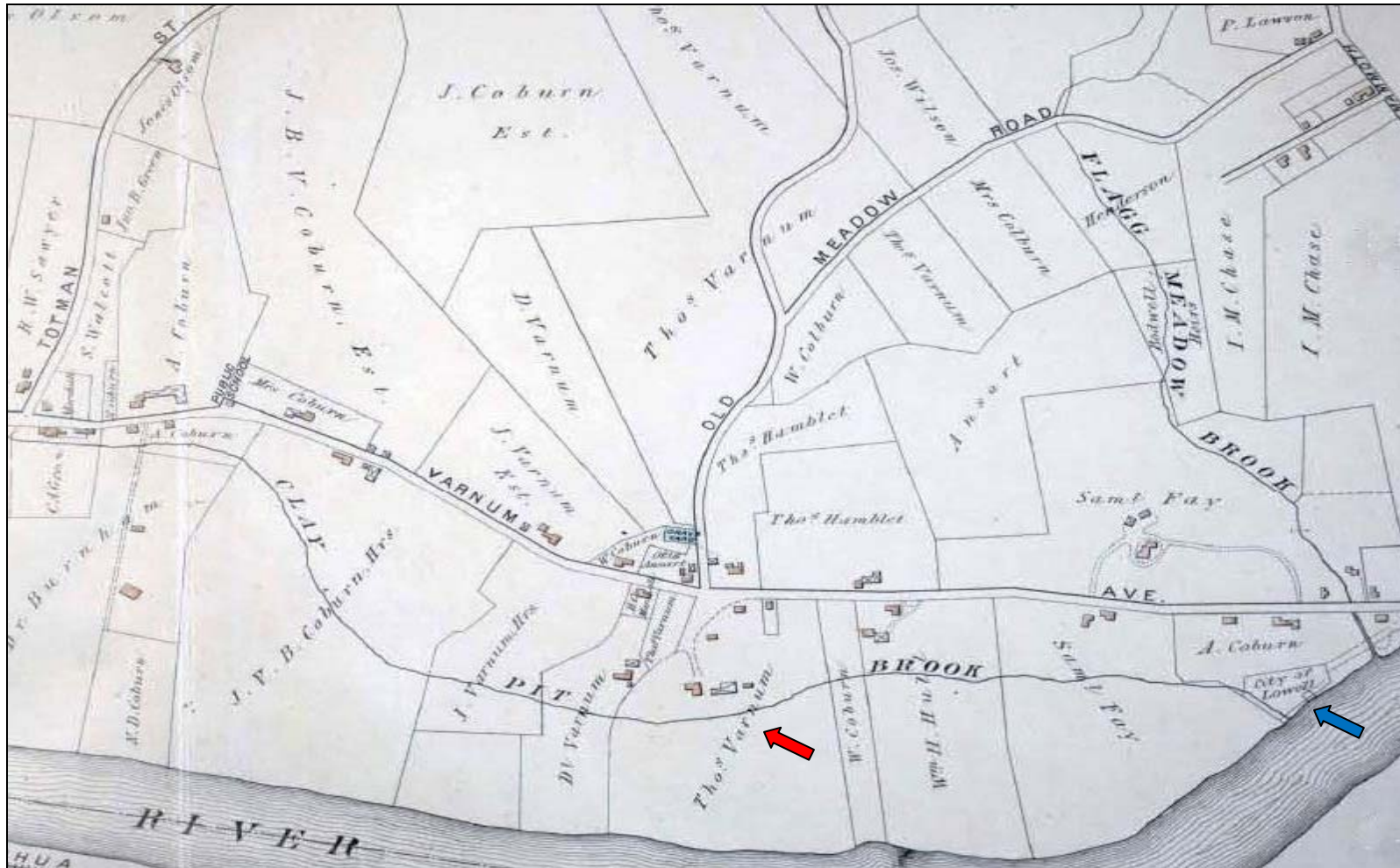


Fig. 30: This detail from an 1879 Lowell atlas shows the Thomas Varnum homestead (red arrow) and the surrounding properties five years after this section of Dracut had been annexed to Lowell in connection to the city's municipal water supply. The intake pipes (blue arrow) for that drew water from the Merrimack River are seen east of the Varnum farm. (Center for Lowell History, UMass Lowell.)



Fig. 31: This detail from an 1896 Lowell atlas shows the newly built Pawtucket Boulevard (brown arrows) and the building and grounds of Lowell General Hospital (yellow arrow), in relation to the Thomas Varnum farmstead (red arrow). Note that Varnum also had a large tract of land by Druid Hill along Old Meadow Road (green arrow). At the same, some of earliest suburban home development (blue arrow) was underway in this area. (Center for Lowell History, UMass Lowell.)



Fig. 32: This detail from a 1924 Lowell atlas shows Lowell's isolation hospital which was placed on land formerly owned by Thomas Varnum. Note the platting of additional suburban lots along Varnum Avenue, including several on top of Clay Pit Brook. Suburban development increasingly encroached upon the old Varnum homestead (red arrow) and the 1880s Varnum house (green arrow). (Center for Lowell History, UMass Lowell.)



Fig. 33: This photograph dates from the 1920s and shows Thomas Varnum, who was in his eighties, posing in front of his main barn while holding two lanterns. (Photo courtesy of Louisa Varnum.)

larger scale in the 20th century was the creation of a suburban housing tract on land of the heirs of Joseph B. V. Coburn (see Fig. 31).

Thomas Varnum's life was undergoing significant change as well. In 1891 his wife of thirty-two years died, leaving him alone in the grand home he had built for her. But in 1896 he remarried. His younger bride, born in 1865, was Sarah Helen Allen, Varnum's second cousin who had lived in Blue Hill, Maine.⁷¹ Within five years they had three children, including daughters Mary, born in 1898, and Helen, born in 1900, and the youngest, a son, being given the traditional name of Thomas, born in 1901.

In his late years and with a second wife and young family, Varnum increasingly relied on his farmhands to tend the fields and maintain the dairying operation, although he remained firmly in charge of the farmstead. He purchased additional land, some of which were woodlots, which he then leased to obtain additional income. The Varnum acreage was somewhat reduced in 1913 when the city claimed land along the West Meadow Road and constructed an isolation hospital (see Fig. 32) for those with highly communicable diseases. The landscape along Varnum Avenue was also rapidly changing

⁷¹ Sarah H. Allen's mother, Elizabeth (Varnum) Allen, married Alvin B. Allen in Lowell in 1861. At the time of the marriage, Alvin Allen was listed as a "fishmonger" from Sedgwick, Maine, although he was raised in a Sedgwick farm family. He, his wife, Elizabeth, and their children subsequently lived in Haverhill, Massachusetts, where Allen was employed in the shoe industry. See the federal manuscript census for Sedgwick, Maine, 1860; Haverhill, Massachusetts, 1870; and the marriage record from Lowell, March 23, 1861.



Fig. 34: By the time this photograph was taken in the early 1900s, the Varnum homestead had been used as a boardinghouse for nearly 25 years. (Photo courtesy of Louisa Varnum.)

with the growing hospital facilities and additional residential development. In addition, horse-drawn traffic along Varnum Avenue had all but disappeared as automobiles, in increasing numbers, motored along the newly paved road.

Part V: Decline of the Family Farm, 1930-2000

In 1929, a few months before the Great Stock Market Crash and the beginning of the Great Depression, Thomas Varnum, Sr., died from a heart attack, at the age of ninety-two, after spending a hot summer day haying in one of his fields. His son Thomas had finished high school, graduated from the Massachusetts Agricultural College (now part of UMass



Fig. 35: This view of the 18th century Varnum home dates from ca. 1932 and shows the north façade of the two-story residence and the kitchen L-addition that was built ca. 1840. This photo was produced not long after the young Thomas Varnum had undertaken considerable work, renovating the old homestead. The work encompassed some strengthening of the original mortise-and-tenon wood structure, as well as the installation of new windows and improvements to the house's interior. (Photograph from the Harriette Merrifield Forbes Collection, American Antiquarian Society.)

Amherst), and embarked on a career as a teacher, rather than a farmer. But having grown up in the large family home on Varnum Avenue, overlooking the Hawk Valley Farm and the old 18th century homestead, he felt a strong connection to the land worked by his ancestors for so many generations. He was determined to reclaim the old residence and turn it from a tenement into a family home (see Fig. 34).

For local farmers, tough economic times had already taken a toll. Lowell had been struggling since the early 1920s when the city's textile corporations began closing the large mills, casting thousands of men and women out of work. Fallow agricultural fields in Lowell and outside the city limits were sold to real estate interests or were lost for back taxes. Some areas were developed for residential use, while a number of farms, including Hawk Valley, continued to produce through hard work, but with limited reward. A close look at the city's atlas from 1936 reveals that on farm land formerly owned by Coburns, Varnums, Richardsons Hamblets, and Parkers, were names of French Canadians, Greeks, Poles, and Italians. Some of these families of émigrés and old New Englanders alike were eking out a living producing vegetables, fruit, hay, and dairy goods.

Thomas Varnum, as well, was straining to make ends meet at the Hawk Valley Farm. He and other farmers along the river suffered yet another catastrophe in 1936 when a great flood inundated the valley and heavily damaged much of farm property (Fig. 36). In the end, however, it was the unrelentingly dismal economy that proved too much. In 1941, he sold the dairy barn and thirty acres of land to a New Hampshire farmer. In addition, he sold several hundred acres to the state for the creation of the Lowell-Dracut State Forest. The once expansive farmstead of more than 1,000 acres now amounted to about four acres of land that surrounded the 18th century Varnum home.⁷²

⁷² Much of this information on the Varnum family and farm in the 20th century is from Louisa Varnum, Thomas's daughter. I am very grateful to



Fig. 36: Although this photograph is slightly out of focus, one can see the extent to which the Merrimack River overflowed its banks during the 1936 flood and inundated the Hawk Valley Farm. In the center is the dairy barn, with an older storage and hay barn to the right. (Photo courtesy of Louisa Varnum.)

her for the interview she did with me on July 12, 2013, at the Hawk Valley Farm.



Fig. 37: View of the north façade of the Varnum home. (Photo by the author.)

Thomas Varnum continued his education and teaching career. He obtained a graduate degree in English at Boston University, attending this school in the summers, and, after several years teaching at a public school in Torrington, Connecticut, he accepted a job in his hometown of Lowell, teaching English at the city's high school. The only farming he pursued was a large vegetable garden for his family. During his years teaching in Connecticut he leased out the old Varnum homestead, which he had repaired in the 1930s following his father's death. The man who purchased the Varnum dairy and farm land in 1941 was Weston W. Hayward, of North Hollis, New Hampshire. Along

with his brother, Charles P., he was the proprietor of Hayward Farms, which ran a number of dairies in the region. The Haywards also owned a popular ice cream stand in Nashua that continues in business today.

Hayward operated the former Varnum dairy until the late 1950s. He continued to produce hay in the fields and used the barn buildings for hay storage, but around 1960 a fire destroyed the former dairy barn. Hayward subsequently sold a large part of the land to real estate developers, Gladstone Brothers, and this firm built a 324-unit apartment complex, named Camelot Court, along Pawtucket Boulevard.⁷³ This development encroached upon the wetlands surrounding Clay Brook. Ownership of the former Varnum land along the Merrimack River was assumed by the state, which became part of the Regatta Field. Another tract of the former Varnum farm along Varnum Avenue was taken by the City of Lowell for back taxes and, in the mid-1970s, the city tore down the remaining historic buildings that stood west of the Varnum homestead.

Part VI: Hawk Valley Farm Today

For a number of years the city held title to a five-acre tract of the Hawk Valley Farm. In 2009, however, the Varnum family once again obtained title to this property. In conjunction with the city's sale of the land, a conservation restriction, secured through a partnership between the Lowell Parks and Conservation Trust and the Trustees of Reservations, and approved by the state, thus secured the property from future

⁷³ *Lowell Sun*, April 16, 1972.



Fig. 38: The foundation wall and remnants of farm equipment is seen in this image, looking south toward Clay Pit Brook. (Photo by the author.)

real estate development. While the 18th century Varnum home is not part of this conservation land, the remarkably well-preserved, residence is the most impressive surviving historic structure, not only on the Hawk Valley Farm, but in the City of Lowell. Indeed, it likely dates from the 1720s or 1730s, and is one of the oldest extant buildings in Lowell. The conservation property features a number of foundations and stone walls, associated with the historic farm. The most prominent are connected to the ruins of a small dwelling, later used as a storage building. The remains of early 20th century farm equipment, including a manure spreader and a hay rake are extant within the foundation area (see Fig. 38). Another larger



Fig. 39: This is largest of the stone foundations on the Varnum property on top of which once stood the dairy barn. (Photo by the author.)

large stone foundation wall that was originally part of a large dairy barn is located to the east of the Varnum house, but it is not part of the Trust property (see Fig. 39). Archeological work has never been carried out on the grounds of the farm and it is likely that many more foundations and artifacts would be uncovered should such a project were to be undertaken.