

Historical Notes

Picture two dignified gentlemen paddling down-stream on the frigid waters of the Concord River in January 1617. You can probably feel the chill as you envision them turning their canoe to the east bank and disembarking at two great rocks.

These men, John Winthrop and Thomas Dudley, were the two most prominent leaders in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and as a result of this trip the General Court of England would grant them approximately 2,000 acres for the purpose of starting a “plantation.”

Using a small stream to part their lands, along with the two very large rocks as the dividing property between them, given by England, they agree on the boundaries, some of which are reflected on the ancient map on the inside cover of Hazen’s *History of Billerica*. Their handshake seals the agreement, and the seeds are sown which will, some fifteen years later, provide the first tiny roots of the land which will become our town, Billerica.

Little by little more parcels of land were granted by the General Court, which functioned under the control of England. By 1653, 13 families had settled in the area. A “ten acres” lot entitled the owner to 113 acres of upland and 12 acres of meadowland, which was essential for growing hay and grazing stock.

How did the 13 original families manage in their chosen spot, which by 1655 had officially adopted the name of its chosen mother-town, Billericay, in Essex County, England? One hearty settler, Jonathan Danforth, proved to be an accurate surveyor. Danforth mapped out Billerica as well as other towns in the surrounding area. Danforth was eventually named the father of our town.

By 1673 there were 50 families in Billerica, and they were not alone! The settlements in Chelmsford, Andover, Woburn, Concord, and Cambridge had been established, providing neighborly assistance to farmers anxious to develop their crops.

Although society was primarily agrarian, farmers quickly branched off into other professions. In fact, Hazen conjectured that one of our first settlers, John Rogers, Sr. was a baker, since in 1656 the town granted him an extra eight-tenths of a single share of land on which to set a “kitchen house.” This location was approximately what is now the center of town, where the Old Town Hall (now the Billerica Public Library) stands.

Tragedy hit the area during the witchcraft trials of 1692 and later during the French and Indian Wars. Billerica, however, continued to develop. Industry took the form

of saw and grist mills, which were erected on brook and river sites throughout town.

As the Revolution was approaching, a Billerica man, Thomas Ditson, was tarred and feathered in Boston by British soldiers who claimed he had tried to make a British soldier desert. He is remembered as “Yankee Doodle,” for whom Billerica’s annual Yankee Doodle Day Parade is named.

After the war came a period of prosperity and expansion, when new and larger homes, including several around the Common, were built. In addition, the Middlesex Canal, the Middlesex Turnpike, and the Boston and Lowell Railroad encouraged travel and commerce. In 1811, Francis Faulkner from Acton founded a woolen mill east of the mill dam in North Billerica on the Concord River and in 1857 the Talbot brothers began their woolen operation west of the dam.

Although Billerica can be considered another “typical” New England town, it has a unique history that is rich in detail. In a community originally based on subsistence farming, “home-based” industry developed in the 18th century and centralized mills began appearing in the 19th century. Since the 1950’s, the larger mills have been replaced by smaller, more diversified industry and the larger farms by suburban development.

Summarized from documentation submitted by Margaret B. Ingraham, Town Historian, (1992 - 2006).