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Secrets of the Douglas Woods

BY HARRY ANDERSON

PREFACE *— The "Connecticut Bay Path" is a residual Indian trail used in ancient times that passed through a section of Sutton. Its exact geographical location is the basis of speculation. Eventually the migrants from Massachusetts in travel to Connecticut widened the path for wheeled vehicles. The author extensively analyzed historical data in accumulating convincing information to support a realistic solution to its probable location. If so, a historic milestone has been established.* — EDITOR

Can it be true that over two and a half miles of an ancient Indian trail that once ran from the Massachusetts Bay Area west toward Connecticut and points southwest, used by early settlers on the first westward expansion of our great nation, later to become known as the Connecticut Path or Great Trail, lies forgotten, deep in the Douglas woods, undisturbed by the rush of time? You decide. . .

Interest in just such a possibility was kindled over 30 years ago when E. Gendron, C. Stockdale, and the author scraped away at the floor of a rock shelter (Fig. 1) in the Douglas woods, three-quarters of a mile due west of Lake Manchaug. Evidence of Indian occupation was unearthed—arrowheads, broken pottery, campfire charcoal, animal bones and, six inches below the floor surface, a scallop shell! (Fig. 2).

About the same time, in a secondhand bookstore, the author purchased The Great Trail of New England; The Old Connecticut Path, by Harral Ayres[1]. During the 1920s and 1930s, Mr. Ayres conducted research on ancient Indian trails and historic paths in southern New England. He made extensive use of old maps, surveys, and diaries in addition to working in the field. He published his findings in 1940. Mr. Ayres predicted that such a trail did exist somewhere in the Douglas woods but it is doubtful that he ever put on his walking shoes. All of the historical data presented here was taken directly from his research unless otherwise noted

Three ancient documents provide much of the foundation for Mr. Ayres' work: the Woodward & Saffery map of 1642 (Massachusetts Archives, XXXV, 3rd series, 18), the 1645 diary of John Winthrop, Jr., and a map of ancient Windham County. The Woodward & Saffery map along with the diary provide basic source information respecting travel routes of Massachusetts and Connecticut pioneering. Both of these documents were intended to serve as wilderness guides.

MAPPING HISTORY

In 1642, Nathaniel Woodward and Solomon Saffery were commissioned by the colony of Massachusetts to establish the boundaries of the Connecticut Territory. They also mapped the trails that connected Boston and Providence and Providence and Windsor, as well as the Boston-

[1] Ayres, Harral. The Great Trail of New England; The Old Connecticut Path. Boston: Meador Publishing Co., 1940.

Springfield Route. The original map is lost but two copies are in the Massachusetts Archives (On the original map North is at the bottom, East to the left. For reader convenience we have re-drawn the map (Fig. 3) according to the convention with North at the top. At the same time the integrity of the original was preserved.) Those commissioners explored overland from Boston to Providence and from Providence to Windsor, later supplied field notes of this part of their trip. The trail between Boston and Springfield—drawn as a straight line—was constructed from information they gathered at Boston and Springfield. The few landmarks recorded are notable trail travel controls, placed on the map without regard for scale. Reading from Boston are these inscriptions: "Roxbery Pond" (Jamaica Pond), "Falls of Charles River" (Newton Upper Falls), "Little Deep Swamp" (East of Cochituate Pond), "Great Swamp" (Framingham), and "Nipnit River" (Blackstone River at Farnumsville Fordway). The inscriptions continue "through a hilly country" (the Douglas woods), then across a "Great Pond" (Chaubunagungamaugan 1830 survey gives this spelling of what is today named Webster Lake). The Trail forded the narrows at Killdeer where the water level was then four to five feet lower than at present. From here the trail took on two directions.

The main branch (not shown on the map) continued south and west to Wabaquasset (Woodstock), Windsor, Hartford, and beyond. The other branch, visible on the map, headed north and west through the Quabaug Country to Agawam (Springfield), then south along the river to Windsor. (This part of the trail became known as the "Old" Springfield Bay Path.)

On November 11, 1645 John Winthrop, Jr., with another man and one horse, left Cambridge and followed the Great Trail with the destination of Chaubunagungamaug and points southwest. Snow began to fall on November 12 and the party spent the night about two miles east of the Nipnit (Blackstone) River. On November 13, a dark and overcast day, they crossed the river and continued as far as the Douglas woods. With a blazing fire, boughs and grass for a bed, and a net filled with grass for cover, they slept. The party was headed for New London but, after the lake crossing at Killdeer Narrows, they mistakenly took the trail branch that led to Agawam (Springfield). On November 14, Winthrop tells of crossing over the lakes of Quabaug. At journey's end back at Cambridge, they were out 25 days and had covered about 280 miles.

WOODWARD & SAFFERY AFFIRMED

Larned's History of Windham County (Northeast Connecticut) was published in 1874 and with it a map of "Ancient Windham County." The northern part of the map shows the Connecticut Path (Great Trail) on a course that reaffirms the 1642 records and maps of Woodward & Saffery. The northeast end of the trail points toward the narrows of Chaubunagungamaug, five miles to the north.

With all this information in hand and serious doubts that Mr. Ayres had ever verified his findings afield, several members of the local chapter of "geriatrics anonymous" decided to take a look for themselves! If any recognizable part of the Great Trail could be found, surely it must be in the Douglas woods. Except for the occasional hunter and woodsman, civilization has virtually leapfrogged this region. Here is what we found. . .

Figure 4 shows a map of the area. Two paths, both improved with a stone bridge in colonial times for wagon travel (Fig. 5), meet at the southwest corner of the Beagle Club enclosure (point "A" on the map). More on these two paths later. A walking trip from point "A" to point "B" is a journey backward in time (Fig. 6). The distance is over two and a half miles and travelers should allow about two hours for a one-way trip. On the steep grades especially, much erosion has occurred, an indication of heavy use over many years. Several parallel bypasses along the trail give testimony to wear and tear. The trail is a direct route to the Killdeer Narrows, ending in a gravel pit off Mine Brook Road, Webster. If this is, in fact, the Great Trail, the last half mile is the most convincing. Erosion is enormous and the path's antiquity apparent. In some places the trail is worn to a depth of four to five feet relative to the immediate adjacent terrain. A thousand years of pre-historic moccasin travel would tread but lightly. There must have been more. Much more!

A TRIBAL WELCOME

Indeed there was more. Over the Great Trail Indian braves brought corn to help the Boston colonists survive the first cruel winter. In 1631 and again in 1633, Wahginnacut, Sachem of the tribe seated in the Windsor-Hartford-Wethersfield area,

made the journey over the Great Trail to visit Governor Winthrop and extend his tribe's welcome. He invited the English to come and settle. The tribe had ample and beautiful country and, with the English among them, they would be strengthened against their Pequot enemies.

In Governor Winthrop's journal for September 4, 1633, we find the first record of overland exploration from Boston to Connecticut. He wrote, "John Oldham, and three with him, went overland, to trade." Soon after this, many parties small and large found their way over the trail, lured by the inviting valley of the Connecticut. In 1635, about 60 men, women and children with their cows, horses and swine arrived safely in Connecticut after a tedious and difficult journey over the Great Trail. By 1635, Windsor, Hartford, and Wethersfield had been settled and the great migration was underway. The most notable of these journeys was led by Thomas Hooker and Samuel Stone.[2] In the 1670s, John Eliot expanded his mission work along the Trail. In 1673, the first mail route in America (Boston to New York, monthly)[3] was begun and used this trail.

The Connecticut Path remained a primary travel route for nearly a century but, by 1690, the "Old" Springfield Bay Path Tributary was losing its importance. King Philip's War, 1675 to 1676, and the resultant suppression of the Indians opened the interior to settlers. In 1686 French Huguenot colonists settled in Oxford. The same year English colonists founded Woodstock. Travel routes changed with the white occupation. A trail branch to that Oxford village site, on across the French River, southward through Dudley Hill, across the Quinebaug fordway at Fabyan, on to Woodstock Hill, then rejoining the Great Trail became known as the Woodstock Great Trail.

WAGON WHEELS AND HOOF BEATS

The Great Trail through the Douglas woods followed centuries of moccasin travel, straight up a hill, straight down the other side. Generations of pioneer traffic following this same trail accompanied by horses and livestock must have taken a heavy toll, especially on the steep last half-mile downhill to Killdeer. Years later, early colonial wagon travel, probably local traffic, no doubt found this part of the trail unsuitable. This may account for the branch C-D on the Figure 4 map, a winding, less severe descent. The lower reaches show evidence of colonial improvement. Small streams have been crudely bridged. This later branch also ends on Mine Brook Road, a short distance from the original trail.

In 1674 John Eliot and Daniel Gookin together journeyed over the Great Trail and visited the praying Indian town of Manchage (Manchaug) and laid down its location in mileage from Boston, Hassanamesett, and the Blackstone River. Without on-site archaeological evidence, these mileage estimates are by themselves insufficient to micro-locate this Indian encampment. Yet Indian artifacts have been found along the brook leading into Holbrook's cove as far as the Singletary Rod & Gun Club rifle range. One can only guess that the village was located on a sunny slope in some part of the valley south of Whittier Hill. Most likely the village was of short duration. It is said that after just one generation of contact with the white man and the introduction of gun powder, all ability to fashion flint artifacts was gone forever. This could explain the paucity of stone tools left behind to mark the site. Lake Manchaug is another story. Thousands of artifacts have been found along its shores and its role with the red man is well documented by C. C. Ferguson on pages 503 to 509 of History of the Town of Sutton, Vol. 11, (1952).

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[2] In 1636, led by Hooker and Stone, essentially the entire church and town of Newtown, later to become Cambridge, emigrated over the Great Trail and through the Douglas woods. After a three-week journey, this group of about 100, with their cattle, other livestock, baggage and utensils, made its way as far as what is now Hartford and established the first major permanent English settlement in the Connecticut colony.

Just prior to the American Revolution, more than a century and quarter later, this migration was first chronicled by Hutchinson in his History of the Colony of Massachusetts. He left an impression that the trip was a blind, blundering journey through Massachusetts to, presumably, Springfield and then down the Connecticut River. Ayres, however, insists that no early records suggest that any such route was in existence at that time.

The Great Trail was commonly known and firmly established. Wahginnacut traveled over the Great Trail in 1631 and again in 1633 with the purpose of enticing the English to settle in Connecticut country. Surely he would have directed the settlers over the same route. At the time of the Revolution, when Hutchinson wrote, men no longer remembered the trails that pioneers 125 years before had used. Further, Hutchinson did not have the advantage of modern libraries and historical collections. Until the Huguenot settlement in Oxford, the Great Trail, through the Douglas woods, was often referred to as the "ordinary way" to reach the valley of the Connecticut.

[3] A tablet erected at Oxford at an old fordway of the Maanexit (French) River states the New York-Boston Post Route passed through there in 1672. Surely there was no English path there, 14 years before Oxford was settled. The Post Route was likely over the Great Trail, through the Douglas woods.

Most agree that the Great Trail, after crossing the Blackstone at Farnumsville, continued on through Sutton Center, over Freeland Hill to the general vicinity of West Sutton. Point "A" on the map is served by two branches. Did the Great Trail likewise branch in West Sutton? Three hundred and 50 years after the fact we can only offer what little detective work we have completed and leave the final verdict to younger legs. The most direct approach would have been through the Whittier fields, over Goat Hill through approach F-A on the map. Trail E-G appears to be early colonial and heads in the direction of Fort Huguenot, 1.2 miles distant. Vestige of early white settlement is of interest at points "A" and "H." People now alive with access to land court records may have knowledge of the more extensive occupation at "J."

The trail branch K-A might first have followed around the west shore of Manchaug Pond. This shore road, in use long before the dams were built, would be under water today. At low water, the remains of a small dam, probably an impoundment for livestock, are visible as the brook enters Holbrook Cove (Fig. 7). A dated 1777 silver coin (Fig. 8) of Spanish-American mintage has been found in the water, near the present road. (Such coins were produced at mints in Mexico City, Guatemala, Peru, Columbia, and Chile.) This type of money was widely accepted and well circulated in the American Colonies. In fact, it was legal tender in this country until 1857.

Figure 1

AND MORE SECRETS

The land beneath the Douglas woods is, for the most part, inhospitable to agriculture and the contour remains undisturbed. In the west cove located in the narrow strip of land between the shore road and Lake Manchaug—with Bob Pierce Island in view—is a 30 foot diameter circular depression in the ground, mute evidence of the 18th century charcoal maker[4]. Three roughly similar fieldstone fireplace chimneys (Fig. 9)—one along the Great Trail, one in Cooperstown, and one in West Cove—suggest these workers lived in the woods for periods of time. Also, stone windbreak shelters existed here (Fig. 9A). No doubt many more of these structures sit in silence, long forgotten, awaiting discovery.

What more secrets do the Douglas woods hold? Is the trail through the woods in reality the old Connecticut Path? And if it is, why has it gone so long without notice? Are the research and conclusions of Harral Ayres credible? All interested readers should take the long walk, then decide. The Douglas woods jealously guard their secrets.

[4]Excerpt from the Journal of Henry D. Thoreau, November 14, 1850: "Saw today, while surveying in the Second Division woods, a singular round mound in a valley, made perhaps sixty or seventy years ago. . . . I soon discovered the coal and that it was an old coal [charcoal] pit."

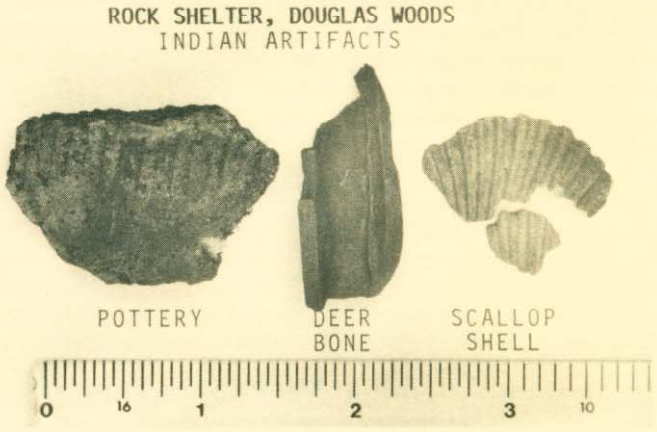


Figure 2

A Copy of – From "Archives" Vol 3 Page 1½

MASS. ARCHIVES 18 MAPS & PLANS

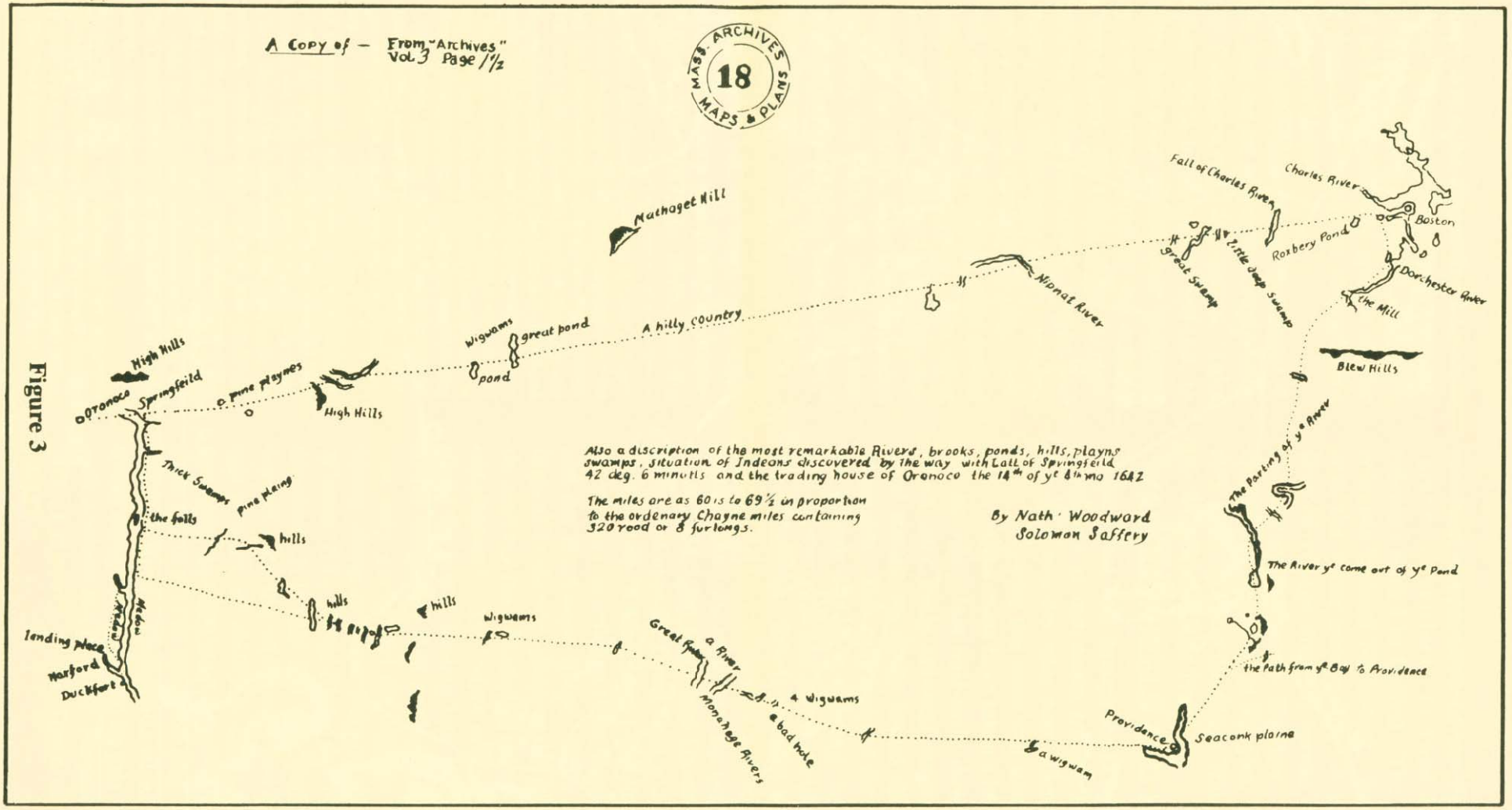
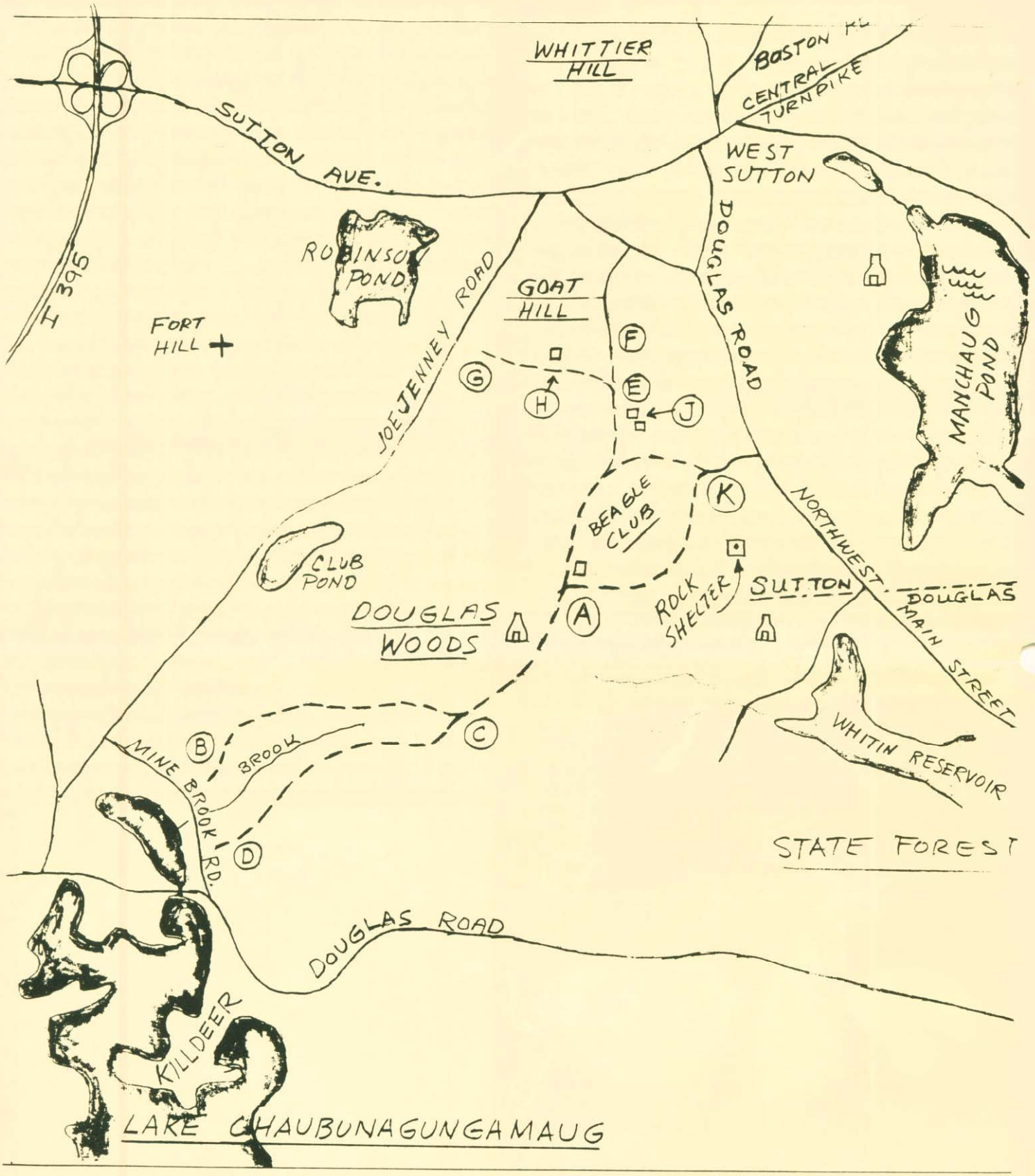


Figure 3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CENTRAL TURNPIKE
SUTTON AVE.
WEST SUTTON
I 395
ROBINSON POND
FORT HILL
JOE JENNEY ROAD
GOAT HILL
DOUGLAS ROAD
MANCHAUG POND
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G
H
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J
K
BEAGLE CLUB
NORTHWEST
CLUB POND
ROCK SHELTER
SUTTON
DOUGLAS
MAIN STREET
DOUGLAS WOODS
A
B
C
D
MINE BROOK
BROOK
MINE BROOK RD.
WHITIN RESERVOIR
STATE FOREST
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LAKE CHAUBUNAGUNGAMAUG
1 MILE
STONE CHIMNEYS

Figure 4

Figure 5

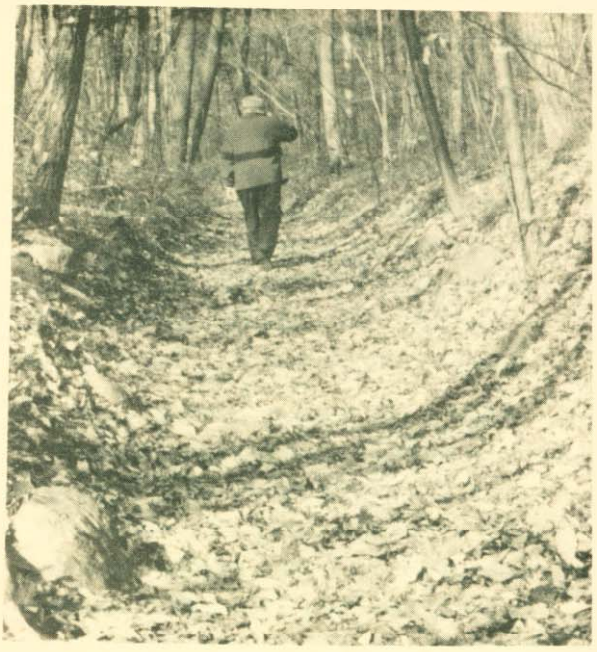

Figure 6

Figure 7

Figure 8

Figure 9

Figure 9A

MONTHLY MEETINGS

April 5 - The Society met at the General Rufus Putnam Hall with 21 persons present. Discussion centered around a new heating system as a result of expense costs during the '93 and '94 winter months. The conclusion was to determine the type of heat source and the distribution system suitable to replace the gas fired space heaters now in use. After determination of what system would be advantageous, bids will be solicited and reported into a Board of Directors meeting. New historical information concerning the 13 star Josiah Woodward flag was reported which, with other data, may help to establish the source and origin of this flag. The speaker for the evening program was Jacqueline Tidman, Conservator of the Westboro Library historical records. She talked about conservation, preservation and restoration of documents.

May 3 - 28 Society members met at the Jenckes Store as guests of the East Douglas Historical Society where their headquarters are located. This store represents a virtual museum of a 19th - 20th century typical country store of Americana in New England. All the merchandise on display in the store represents a realistic status of a scene frozen in time as the store ceased to be an active business. Marieta Howard of the East Douglas Historical Society, whose father worked in the store, narrated a personal review of the daily workings of the store and her own experiences as related to its operation. The Society members especially enjoyed browsing about the vast display of merchandise still in-situ in this emporium.

June 7 - The Society met at the Manchaug Baptist Church at 8 pm with 21 present to participate in a workshop and indoctrination presented by the ongoing inventory group under the guidance of Nora Pat Small, Society Curator. Details and exhibits were explained along with their plans for the eventual function of the museum facilities. A nominating committee was appointed to report in a list of candidates for the 1994-5 Board of Directors.

July 5 - The annual pot luck supper was held at the Blacksmith Shop. Reports for bids on the new heating system were made and the lowest viable one will be accepted by the Board of Directors. Also, details of a letter to the membership seeking funding for the cost of the heating system was explained to the membership. Plans and details for the July flea market were discussed.

REF— **HEATING SYSTEM FUND**— The membership is responding graciously to this project. If you have not as yet forwarded your donation, we will greatly appreciate that you do so. Installation is scheduled for September 12th. **THANK YOU!**

WELCOME NEW MEMBER

Mark Guiod

IN MEMORIAM

Alfred T. Beaton
Everett L. Minor
James A. Smith

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