

HAMLET OF STRAW HOLLOW

“A Hive of Activity in 1800s Boylston”

by Patricia Kelleher Bartram

Who knew that hat-making was an early industry in New England? Or that Massachusetts in particular, was a center of American hat-making? Many small hat-making factories and related concerns were centered in numerous small towns across the region and the state. Many hat-makers specialized in palm-leaf hats for men and straw bonnets for women.



STRAW HAT

A hive of such activity was underway in the relatively sleepy southeast corner of Boylston that came to be known as “Straw Hollow.” While it is not known for sure where it came from, the name “Straw Hollow” likely reflected the fact that families in that area were indeed involved in the manufacture of straw hats and brooms. *Hayward’s New England Gazetteer* of 1839 noted that the then popular “palm-leaf hats” were among the items manufactured at that time in Boylston (along with the combs, boots and shoes that came out of Sawyers Mills in the northwest corner of the town, and which is now under the Wachusett Reservoir).

Although Straw Hollow was not specifically defined geographically, it was generally thought to be the area between Stiles Road and Central Street, including Reservoir Street and Barney Road. As evidence of this hamlet’s 1800s population, Straw Hollow was home to the First East District School, a wooden one-room schoolhouse that was dismantled in 1851 and replaced that year by a brick-built the new East District School House. The earlier school was on Stiles Road and the



THE NEW EAST DISTRICT SCHOOL HOUSE
BHSM Photograph Collection

later school was on Central Street. The later school served the area until 1903 when it was dismantled. The brick from the schoolhouse was used in the construction of the Willis A. Fuller home at Boylston Center. For more information on these schools see our *Then and Now* <https://www.boylstonhistory.org/images/2023%20Feb%20FFF/Then%20and%20Now%2002232023%20The%20First%20East%20School%20House2.pdf>.

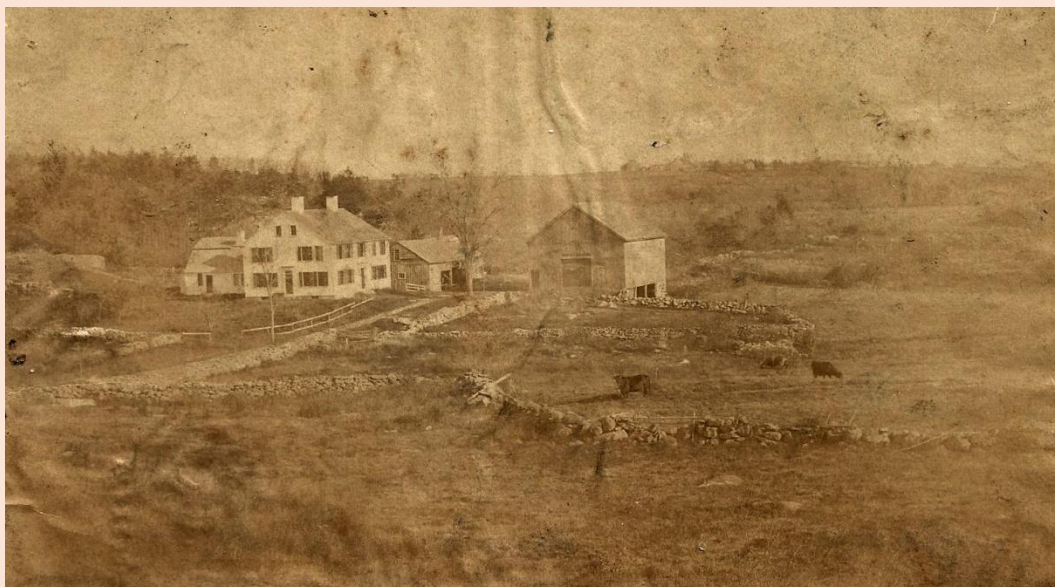
A Baptist Church was erected in 1815 at the corner of Stiles Road and Reservoir Street, the approximate location of today’s 211 Stiles Road. The church served Baptists from both Boylston and Northborough before it later became a tenement to house local workers and then taken down about 1888.

The area became a major commercial dairy/orchard complex during 1830-1870. Palm leaf hat and straw braid production was centered there during the first half of this period, with a high of 3,000 hats made there in 1832, although straw hat production declined to nothing by mid-century. During the 1870s, a large creamery and stock farm were established at Straw Hollow. They continued into the early 20th century, providing large quantities of milk, butter, cream, cider, and vinegar to Boston markets.

Earliest Settlements - 1700s

The earliest settlement in Straw Hollow was built circa 1726-1729 by Captain Joseph Bigelow Sr. (1703-1783), whose spouse was Martha Brigham (1704-1794). It was located at Shrewsbury’s original Lot #18 located on the east side of Stiles Road near Rawson Hill Brook. Until Boylston was incorporated as a town in 1786, it was still considered part of Shrewsbury. They had eight children. Their son, Solomon Bigelow (1746-1775), built his home nearby in 1768, although it was gone by 1830.

Some eight families settled in Straw Hollow in the 1700s. In addition to the two Bigelow homes, they included the families of: Aaron Newton who built next door on Lot #17 (today’s 61 Reservoir Street) and later owned by John Whipple in 1799; John Crawford, whose son William Crawford (1735-1817) was a notorious Tory during the American Revolution; Deacon Joshua Stiles for whom Stiles Road was named; James Longley (1753-1837) a successful farmer who pioneered the

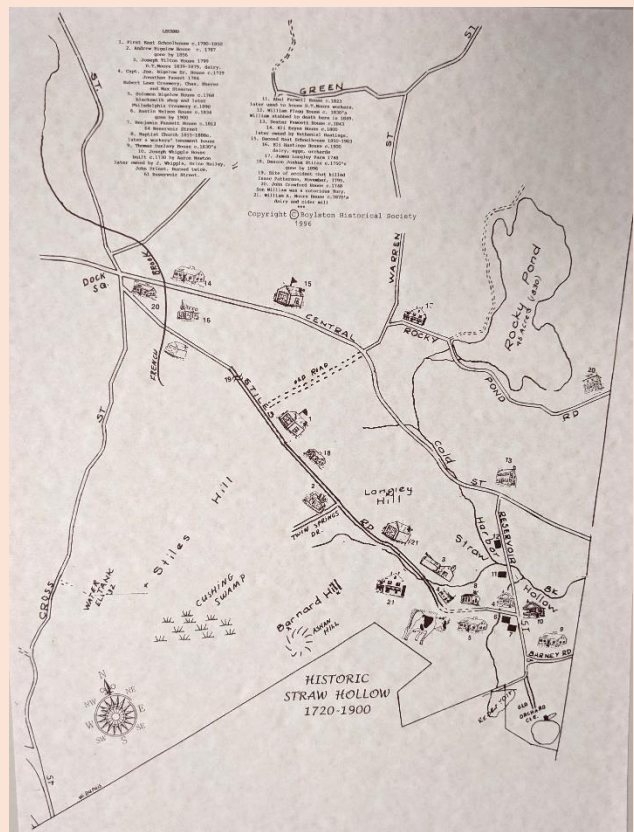


HOMESTEAD OF JAMES LONGLEY
Rocky Pond Road
BHSM Photograph Collection

Rocky Pond area, but whose land extended into Straw Hollow; and finally, Andrew Bigelow, a cooper. Most of the original homes of these settlers were not in existence by the mid-to-late 1800s.

The 1800s

Straw Hollow continued to grow in population throughout the 1800s, with another eight families settling there. These settlers were: Eli Keyes built a home circa 1800 on Central Street near French Brook and later sold it to Nathaniel Hastings; Benjamin Fassett (1786-1843) built a home on Reservoir Street near Rawson Hill Brook in 1812 and three years later built the Baptist Church; Abel Farwell Sr. (1794-1888) built his home in 1823 by Cold Brook Meadow; in 1834 Austin Nelson built south of Stiles Road near Cold Harbor Brook; Thomas Dunlavy built near the Northborough line in the 1830s; William Flagg (1805-1849), a single man and shoemaker occupied property after 1830 that was thought to have been built by his parents; and Dexter Fawcett built in Straw Hollow circa 1843. On what had originally been Captain Joseph Bigelow's property (see above), William Moore (1834-?) built a home in the 1850s-60s where he operated an orchard.



**MAP OF STRAW HOLLOW
1720-1900**
*Depicting Homesteads, Schools, and Town Boundary
BHSM Archive Collection*

Notable People and Events

A notable person who had familial ties to Boylston's Straw Hollow was Dorothea Lynne Dix (1802-1887). A Superintendent of Army Nurses during the Civil War, she became an advocate for the indigent mentally ill. It was through her lobbying efforts that the U.S. Congress created the earliest of what were then called mental or lunatic asylums. Dix's Boylston roots were her mother, Mary Bigelow (1779-1836) and maternal grandparents, Charles Bigelow (1729-1782) and Lucy Bennett (1741-1802). She was the great granddaughter of the aforementioned Captain Joseph Bigelow and Martha Bigelow, Straw Hollow's first settlers.



DOROTHEA LYNNE DIX
Daughter of Joseph Dix & Mary Bigelow

Another notable event, of a different matter entirely, was the tragic 1849 murder of 44-year-old William Flagg who died when his femoral artery severed. His brother, Marshall Flagg, was charged with murder. The event occurred on property #12 in the *Map of Straw Hollow, 1720-1900*, shown above. The facts of the murder were described as follows:

“(Marshall was) a married man, 46 years old, with seven children. His brother... was a bachelor... (and) resided in his family. (Marshall) had fallen into intemperate habits, and, whenever he can obtain liquor gets intoxicated and is cross to his family....”

“... (Marshall) was at the barn, badly intoxicated, when his brother took his bible and went out for the purposing of watching him, in order, if possible, to prevent his drinking and to get him sober again.... (After a) while, (Marshall) got out his jug of rum, and at the same time got his jack knife... (William) knocked the jug from (his hand) with a pole, and caught it, and run out of the barn, and emptied it upon the ground....”

“... (Marshall) then went at his brother, and inflicted the wound from which he died. It was a single blow with the knife, entering the thigh bone on the inside, passing almost three inches deep and severing the femoral artery from which he bled to death....” (Marshall) said he did not intend to kill his brother, but only to hurt him, and defend his jug.”

In October 1849 Marshall was convicted, by confession, of the manslaughter of his brother and was sentenced to State Prison for six years, three days of which were to be in solitary confinement.

It might seem sleepy now, but Straw Hollow was clearly buzzing in the 1800s!

Acknowledgements

- Boylston Historical Society Collections
- Editor Nancy A. Filgate, Curator, Boylston Historical Society and Museum, Inc.
- Historic Straw Hollow 1720-1900: A Companion Booklet to the Straw Hollow Map, William O. Dupuis, Old Pot Publications, Boylston Historical Society, 1996
- Hayward's New England Gazetteer of 1839, <https://newenglandtowns.org/massachusetts/boylston>
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