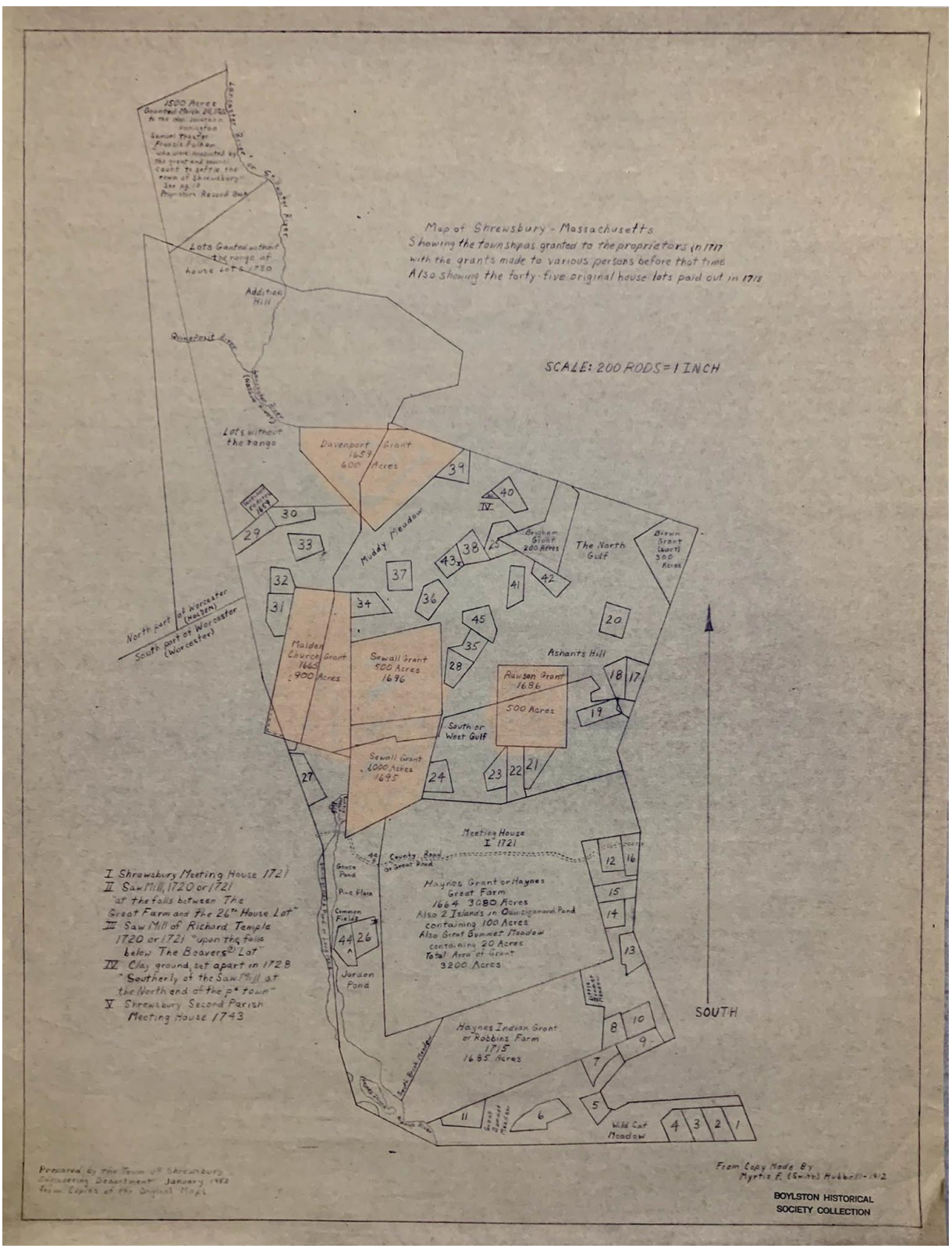
17th Century Land Grants and the Beginnings of Boylston

by Carrie Crane



MAP OF THE 17TH AND 18TH CENTURY LAND GRANTS FOR THE TOWN OF SHREWSBURY
The north half of which along with the southeast portion of Lancaster were incorporated as the Town of Boylston, Massachusetts in 1786.
Boylston Historical Society & Museum, Inc. Collections #1984.189.b

This map was prepared by the town of Shrewsbury Engineering department in 1982 using maps made by Myrtis F. (Smith) Hubbell in 1912. The shaded areas are the land grants referred to in this article.

Establishment of the General Court to Distribute Land in Massachusetts Bay Colony

In 1629, believing that the lands of New England belonged to the British crown by virtue of "*discovery and occupation*", King Charles of England, granted a charter to the "*Governors and Company of the Massachusetts Bay Colony*". This was nine years after the Mayflower Compact established the Plymouth Colony which had excluded this land. The charter set general boundaries to define the area of the Massachusetts Bay Colony from just north of the Merrimack River to just south of the Charles River, east to the Atlantic Ocean and west in theory all the way to the Pacific.[1]

The administrative system for the colony was only vaguely drawn out by the charter but by October of 1630 a General Court was formed and consisted of the Governor John Winthrop, the Lieutenant Governor Thomas Dudley and a committee of assistants and freemen all of whose ideals reflected the political, economic, and religious ambitions of the Puritan settlers. It was this General Court that was responsible for the establishment of the framework through which colonial authorities organized settlements and distributed land.

During the 17th century, large land grants were distributed among individuals and groups of individuals with the understanding that they would perpetuate the English traditions of property ownership and the Puritan vision of an orderly, religiously grounded society. Land was not simply a commodity; it was the foundation for households, agricultural production, town government, and religious institutions.

Settlement of Communities

With these land grants, colonial authorities generally sought to encourage occupation and settlement. Grants, particularly those given to groups of individuals, often came with conditions intended to ensure that settlers would establish functioning communities. Actual revenue from the land was, at that time, a secondary goal.

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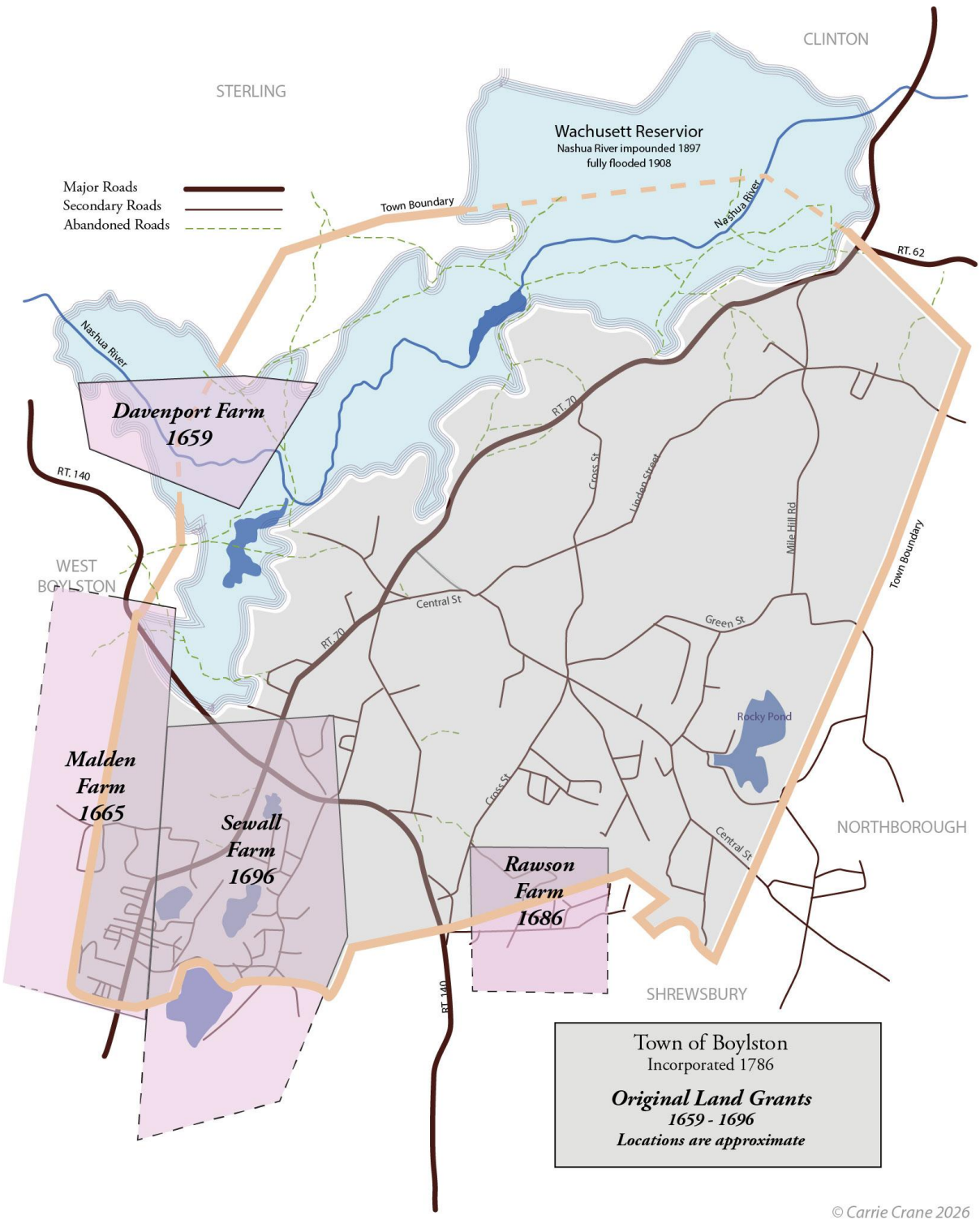
[1] Massachusetts and her Royal charter granted March 4, 1628-29.
Tuttle, Julius Herbert, 1857

The exact requirements varied, so there was no single rule governing every seventeenth-century grant. Grantees were, at a minimum, expected to improve the land by marking boundaries …*, but, depending on the terms of a particular grant, the expectations could extend to include moving to the area, establishing a farm by clearing and cultivating fields, building houses, and importantly, attracting additional families. The General Court's oversight reflected its interest in ensuring that granted land became an established settlement rather than remaining unoccupied.



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Map of Boylston, Massachusetts
with overlay of the four original Shrewsbury Land Grants
Davenport Land Grant (1659), Malden Land Grant (1665),
Rawson Land Grant (1686), Sewall Land Grant (1696)
Cartographer Carrie Crane

Land Grants of Shrewsbury (now Boylston)

In the latter half of the 17th century, back when the southern portion of what is now Boylston was then Shrewsbury, there were four significant land grants made in this region. Three of these grants were made to individuals; 600 acres to Captain Richard Davenport (1606-1665) in 1659, 900 acres to the town of Malden in 1665, 500 acres to Secretary Edward Rawson (1615-1693) in 1686, and 500 acres to Chief Justice Samuel Sewall (1652-1730) in 1696.

The grantees of these properties were people or entities with significant influence in the early days of the colonies. And there are stories to tell about each. Friday Fascinating Finds will be profiling each land grant, the history of the land and the grantee, in a series of upcoming articles. Stay tuned!!

Acknowledgements:
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