

The Taking of Sawyer's Mills

By Carrie Crane

It was the late 1800's and Boston, Massachusetts was growing in size and population and the need for quality water was growing along with it. In 1893, the Massachusetts Board of Health was tasked with the job of finding a source to slake Boston's thirst. After investigating several options, in 1895, the decision was made to flood the Nashua River Valley by building a dam in Clinton, Worcester County, Massachusetts and thus create the Wachusett Reservoir. The Metropolitan Water Board was created to oversee the project. Along with all the design and engineering work this entailed, the Board also needed to acquire the 7 square miles of land to either be submerged or to protect the reservoir's watershed. The process of taking the land and compensating the owners took place over several years. It was the intention of the Board to accomplish this fairly and by far the majority of these land acquisitions were settled without issue although some cases did end up as law suits.

"It has been the policy of the Board, from the outset, to acquire, so far as possible, the various lands and estates required for its operations, by deed, through voluntary settlements with the various owners. In this way, more than five-sixths of the land in Clinton, Boylston, West Boylston, and Sterling, required for the Wachusett Reservoir, has been conveyed to the Commonwealth after voluntary settlements of value with the owners." Annual Report, Metropolitan Water Board, 1899

By the end of 1900, the Metropolitan Water Board has secured settlements with 590 landowners, totaling 10,380 acres and \$3,304,418. While the bulk of this was located within the reservoir area, some land was needed in other parts of the state along various pipelines and aqueducts and smaller reservoirs in the system.

The photographs and map included here present a brief depiction of six of those 590 properties that were once located in the Sawyer's Mills area.



Nathaniel L. and Everett Kendall and the Heirs of Moses Woods

At the time of the takings, this property was held in the name of Nathaniel L. and Everett Kendall and the Heirs of Moses Woods. These owners were descendants of Aaron Sawyer Sr., the son of Joseph Sawyer who first settled this area which came to be known as Sawyer's Mills. Their 799 acres of land and buildings; one house and several barns, were settled on 11 October 1899.



Lancaster Mills

From the early days of Sawyer's Mills, which in 1757 consisted of a blacksmith shop, a fulling mill and a sawmill, grew over almost a century and a half to the mill complex seen here in 1896. At the time of the takings, the mill complex was owned and operated by Lancaster Mills of Clinton, Massachusetts where they produced gingham yarn and other textile products. At the time of the takings, they were by far the largest property owner in the Sawyer's Mills area, owning these mill buildings as well as numerous tenements and commercial buildings. The company agreed to a settlement of \$535,000 for a total of 1228 acres of land and all buildings.



The Charles Bray house

Charles Bray Jr. (1841- 1932) was a farmer with land in the Sawyer's Mills area where his son, Charles Bray III (1869-1952) was a foreman in the Forestry Industry. In 1880 the original Bray farm, owned by Charles Jr, was taxed at 210 acres. It consisted of 50 acres of tilled land, 30 acres of meadowland, 120 acres of woodland, and 10 acres of unimproved land. After the death of his mother in 1882, Charles Jr. sold to his son and removed to Boylston Center where he would operate Charles Bray Sr.'s (1814-1865) farm. Charles Jr was active in the Boylston Grange serving as Master in 1905. Charles Bray III continued to reside on the Bray property at Sawyer's Mills. The land consisted of 161 acres, a house and several barns when he settled with the Metropolitan Water Board for the sum of \$4675 in 1897.



The George W. Ball house.

George W. Ball (1843-1902) owned a 30-acre parcel and home with barns just north-east of Sawyer's Mills. The property consisted of 15 acres of tilled land and 15 acres of meadow land. His settlement with the Metropolitan Water Board included additional land in Clinton and Sterling. The total acreage was 1034 acres for which he was paid \$4600 in 1898.



The Lydia Ball House

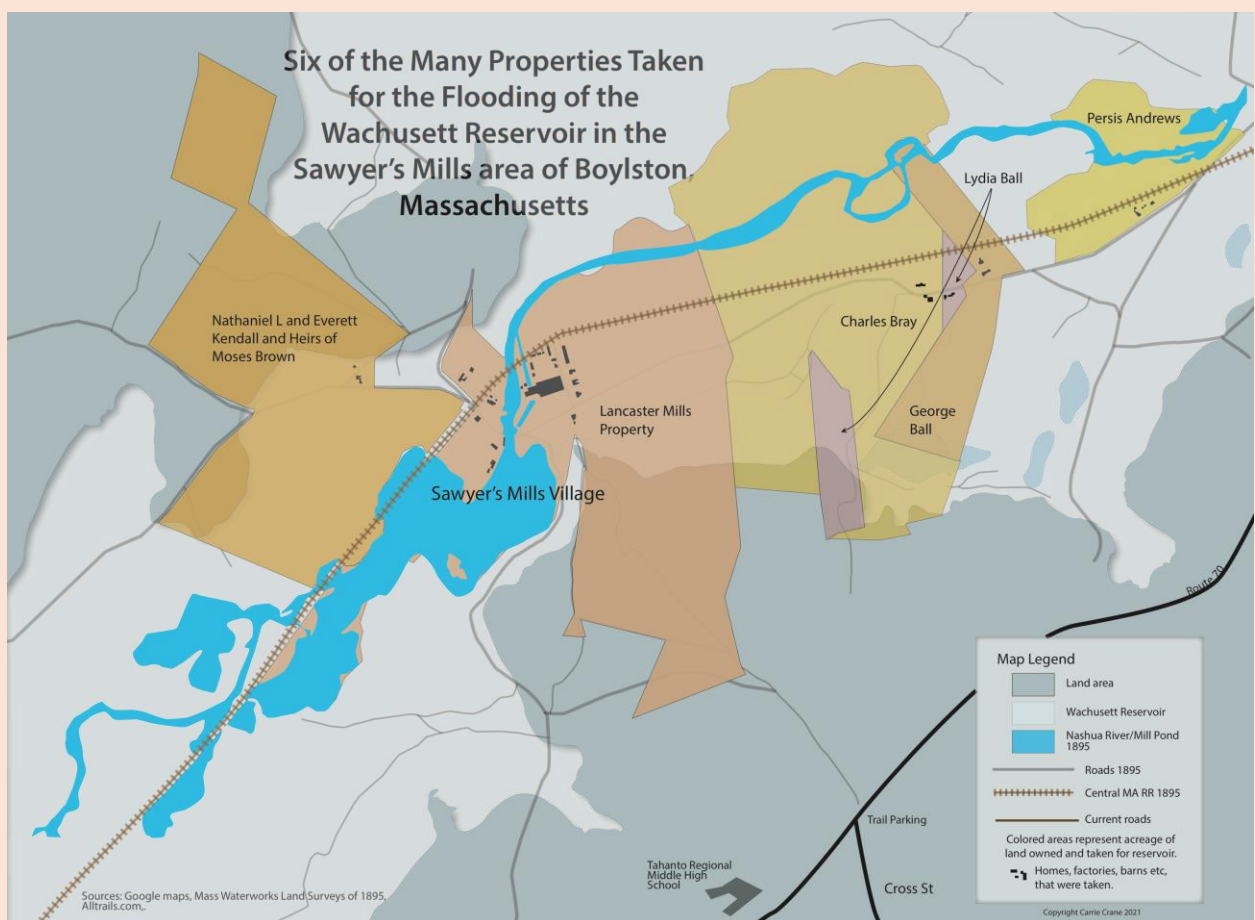
Abutting George W. Ball's was the property of his recently deceased aunt, Lydia Ball (1806-1897). She owned one 2.5-acre piece with home and barns and one detached parcel of 10.5 acres. A settlement was reached in 1898 for this property in the amount of \$1800.



The Persis Andrews house.

Persis Andrews owned land in Clinton and Boylston. A 30-acre parcel, including this home and barns was situated northeast of Sawyer's Mills. Her settlement for all land and buildings came to \$3750 in 1898. In the Boylston Historical Series one can find this moving quote from an interview with Persis Andrews at the time of the takings:

"It seems hard for me. I don't like to think about it, but I suppose I shall have to do the same as the rest. When I go down into the cellar and see the big stones in the wall, which father rolled into place with his own hands, it makes me feel sad to think that the house will be destroyed."



Overview of six of 590 properties taken

Nathaniel L. and Everett Kendall & Heirs of Moses Woods property

Lancaster Mills property

Charles Bray property

George W. Ball property

Lydia Ball property

Persis Andrews property

The actual work of the reservoir began on 7 August 1895 and was completed on 24 June 1905 with a total of 12,680 acres being taken; 2,761 of these acres contributed by Boylston, 1,125 acres contributed by Clinton; 870 contributed by West Boylston; and 407 acres contributed by Sterling ending with a water capacity of 65,000,000,000 gallons for the Metropolitan area of Boston, Massachusetts. Boylston would lose prime land which amounted to 39% of the town's total assessed valuation; 302 people would be displaced, 10.95 miles of roads would be lost, 46 homes would be moved or demolished, a church lost and 3 schools of its 6 District Schools would become part of its past. All to satisfy the thirst of a fast-growing city 45 miles to the east.

Acknowledgements:

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