

The Long-ago Squadrons of Cambridge

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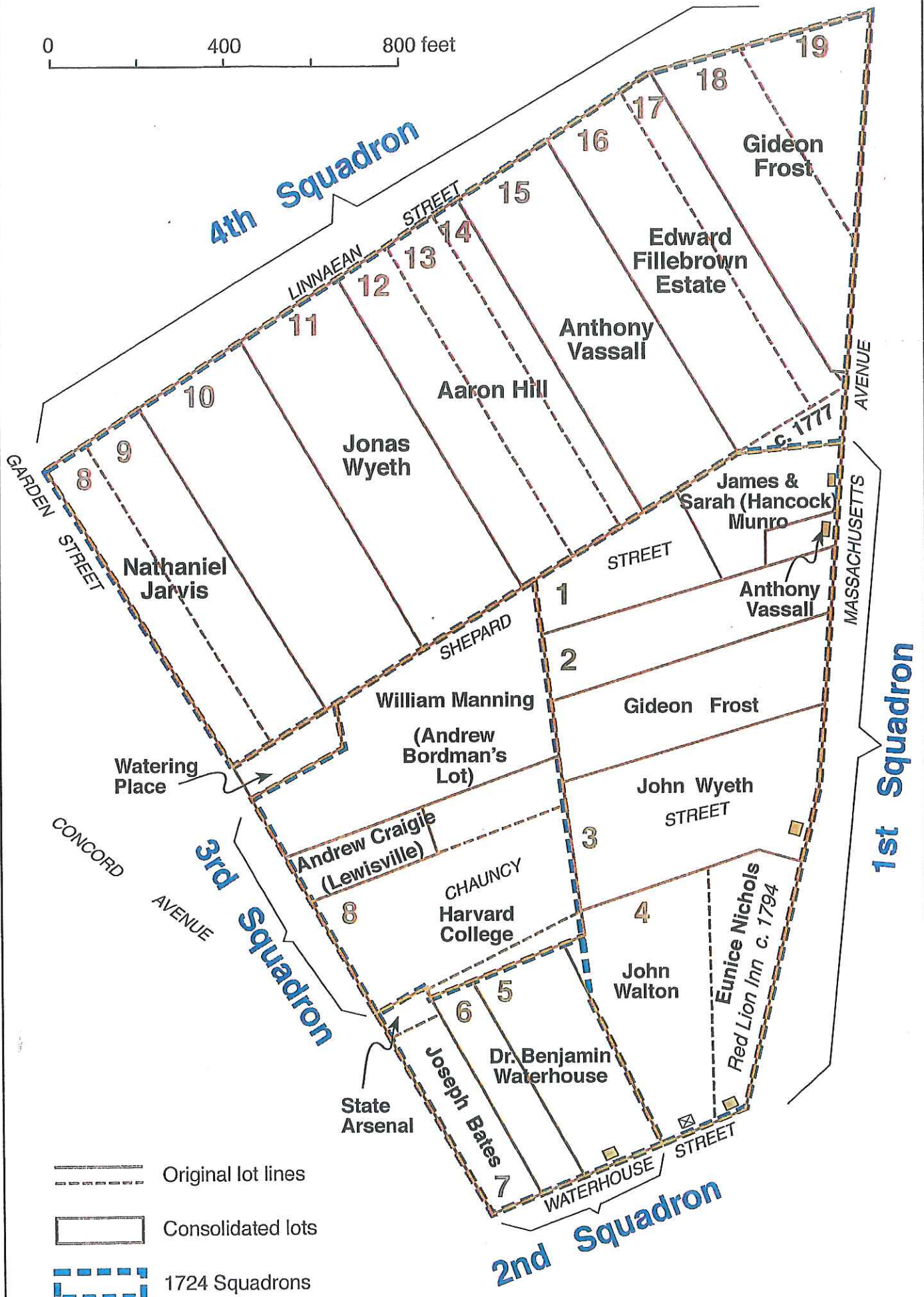
Cambridge Historical Commission
January 2017

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project was triggered by noting a curious description of early land divisions in Cambridge — “squadrons” — while reading an early draft of *Building Old Cambridge*. Co-author Charles M. Sullivan suggested that I investigate the use of that term in colonial Massachusetts. The results of that investigation are presented in this paper.

Thanks are due to Sullivan, and also to his British colleague Roger Thompson. Others who aided my research with their comments included Christopher J. Lenney and Brian Donahue whose contributions are noted in the text. The reconstructed map appears in *Building Old Cambridge*. Sara Kenney gave a careful reading and many helpful suggestions.

0 400 800 feet



- Original lot lines
- Consolidated lots
- 1724 Squadrons

“Squadrons” is a curious term that shows up in the early records of Cambridge and a number of other towns in Middlesex County and eastern Worcester County. Its curiousness comes from the fact that not only is it a term that had disappeared from use by the late 1700s and apparently appears nowhere else, but also that its origin is obscure.

In Cambridge it was used in 1683, 1707 and 1724 to describe divisions of land. Recent research in other town histories finds that “squadron” was used either for that purpose or to describe what soon became known as school districts. In only three of the towns studied so far did it have the military significance which it has today, and which it had in England as early as 1562. Left unanswered is the question of why this term appeared in New England by 1636 (in Watertown) and had disappeared by 1794 (in Chelmsford) — and why it was apparently used only in Middlesex County and nearby Worcester County, as well as one very early use in New Haven, Connecticut.

In his *History of Townsend*, a small town in the hill country along the New Hampshire border, Ithamar B. Sawtelle records that a town meeting in 1783 “chose a committee of nine to divide the town into squadrons for the convenience of schooling.”

“It is difficult to understand,” Sawtelle wrote, “why this word is used in this sense unless it was brought over by the puritans who used it in their native community to express portions of a city or county laid out in a quadrangular manner.”

However, the *Oxford English Dictionary* finds no such uses in England, referencing only two Massachusetts uses.

So the researcher is left with an unexpected opportunity to delve into old town records, but with little hope of finding an answer to the question of why “squadrons.” The major sources are *History of Middlesex County* [1880], a compilation of town histories by Samuel Adams Drake (cited

as “Drake”) and *History of Middlesex County* [1890], a similar compilation by D. Hamilton Hurd (cited as Hurd), along with a number of town histories, and in the case of Cambridge, transcripts of original records. The Cambridge references appear in the Proprietors Records.

In 1683, land totaling 2846 acres was assigned to 152 townsmen in nine “squadrons.” The largest grant, of 135 acres (and 12 cow pastures), was assigned to Thomas Danforth, then the colony’s deputy governor.

In May of 1707, three lots totaling 19 acres were laid out, and assigned by name, in the First Squadron, “in the Ox Pasture,” as the Common was known; five lots totaling 29 acres in the Second Squadron; 27 lots totaling 100 acres in the Third Squadron; and 52 lots totaling 232 acres in the “Ware Field,” an area including “Spie Pond,” today’s Spy Pond in Arlington. Apparently at the same town meeting, 78 small lots were assigned in ten squadrons, many for land in present-day Arlington — including land on Mount Gilboa, now a park off Lowell Street.

Most of those lots were between three and seven acres. Among those granted lots were such prominent early settlers as Andrew and Moses Bordman, Joseph Crackbone, Nicholas Fessenden, Samuel Kidder, Edward Pelham and “mr. Foxcroft.” Several lots were assigned to Harvard College and “mr. President Leverett.”

Some 20 years later, in March 1724, the Proprietors Records note another division of land into four squadrons. For this division a map exists that shows a set of four squadrons anchored on Cambridge Common and bounded by present-day Massachusetts Avenue, Waterhouse Street, Garden Street and Linnaean Street.

In *Building Old Cambridge*, Susan E. Maycock and Charles M. Sullivan note that in the original distribution of lots “eligible parties could literally draw lots according to their rank in the community,” with lots in the first squadron, roughly along present-day Massachusetts Avenue, going to future governor Jonathan Belcher, Selectman Moses Bordman,

and the heirs of Nathaniel Fessenden. Once again, Harvard College was granted lots, along present-day Garden Street.

Two present-day writers have cited “squadrons” in their discussions of early Middlesex County history. In *Divided We Stand*, Roger Thompson notes that the “squadrons” in Watertown’s Great Dividend of 1636 divided up 4595 acres along the town’s border with Cambridge. In *Sightseeking*, Christopher J. Lenney remarks that “many lots were soon traded, sold, consolidated, or went unclaimed.” But still, “the dead hand of the law assures that some identifiable components of this scheme will last until the end of time.”

The map reproduced here from reflects property transfers to new owners by 1800. Over the next 50 years, streets, including Follen and Avon streets, were laid out over the original squadrons.

Resesarch has found the term “squadron” used in the early records of 19 towns in Middlesex County and eight in Worcester County.

In Middlesex County are Ashby (1773), Bedford (1638), Billerica (1642/1712), Cambridge (1683), Chelmsford (1794), Concord (1676 military), Dracut (1716), Framingham (1768), Groton (1665), Marlborough (1749), Maynard (1657), Pepperell (1770), Sudbury (1655), Townsend (1770), Waltham (1783), Watertown (1636), Westford (1789), Weston (1730) and Woburn (1676 military)

In Worcester County are Clinton (1783), Douglas (1782), Gardner (1786); Lancaster (1780), Northborough (1770), Tewksbury (1769), Westborough (1765) and Worcester (1673).

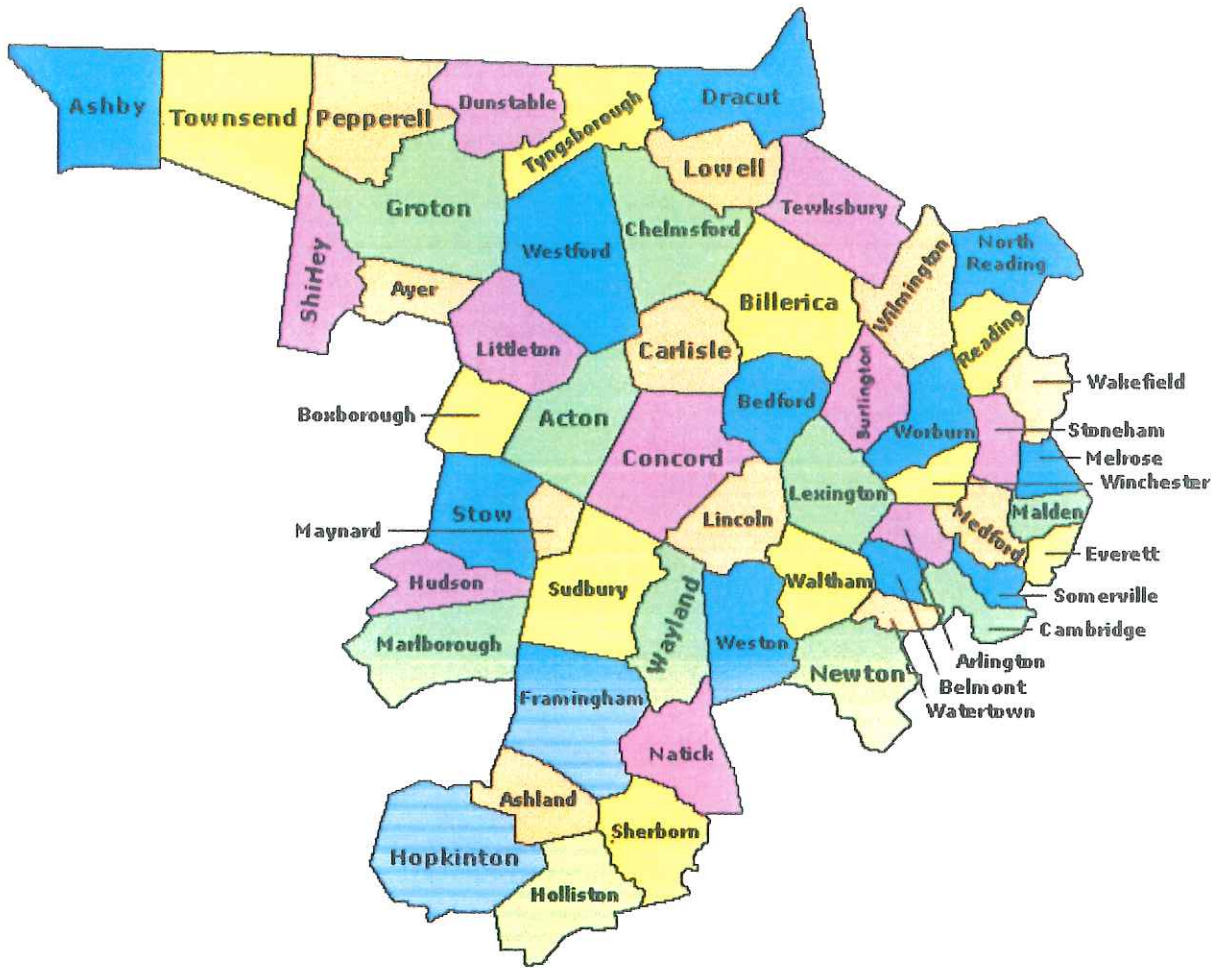
Arranged by date: Watertown (1636), Bedford (1638), Billerica (1642), Sudbury (1655), Maynard (1657), Groton (1665), Worcester (1673), Concord (1676), Woburn (1676), and Cambridge (1683), Dracut (1716), Weston (1730), Marlborough (1749), Westborough (1765), Framingham (1786), Tewksbury (1769), Northborough (1770), Pepperell (1770), Townsend (1770), Ashby (1773), Lancaster (1780),

Douglas (1782), Clinton (1783), Waltham (1783), Gardner (1786), Westford (1789), and Chelmsford (1794).

Towns where the term referred to land divisions: Watertown (1636), Billerica (1642), Sudbury (1655), Maynard (1657), Groton (1665), Worcester (1673), Cambridge (1683), Dracut (1716), and Weston (1730).

Towns where it referred to schools: Billerica (1725), Marlborough (1749), Westborough (1765), Framingham (1786), Tewksbury (1769), Northborough (1770), Pepperell (1770), Townsend (1770), Ashby (1773), Lancaster (1780), Douglas (1782), Clinton (1783), Waltham (1783), Gardner (1786), Westford (1789), and Chelmsford (1794).

Towns where it referred to military service: Bedford (1636), Concord (1676), Douglas (1782), and Woburn (1676).



MIDDLESEX COUNTY

ASHBY

The first money appropriated for schools was in 1773, when four “squadrons” (districts) were formed, each of which was to draw its portion of what it paid from the £8 assessed for that purpose... In the same year, the town appropriated £30 to support preaching.

Ithamar B. Sawtelle (Hurd v. I)

BEDFORD

Part of this territory was known as Winthrop’s Farms, and the remainder is Shawshine. The famous Squadron trading house was within its limits... the Shawshine country had its name changed to Billerica, probably before 1638.

Josiah A. Stearns (Drake)

BELMONT

The range of high hills on the north side... the highest range of hills in the vicinity of Boston and was called the Ox Pasture by the early settlers... It was sometimes called the Rocks because of the great ridges of rocks cropped out on the top and sides.

John L. Alexander M.D. (Drake)

BILLERICA

1642: Grant made to Cambridge of “all the land upon the Shawshin River and between that and the Concord River, and between that and the Merrimack River...”

[Comment] “Since the days of the Venerable “School Dames” and of Master Thompson, through the squadrons under Frye and Kidder, the children of the town have been taught... Much attention was paid to maintaining good schools, and they were regularly kept, a grammar school at the Centre, and a “squadron” school for the outlying districts.” Among the early masters were Jonathan Kidder and Jonathan Frye, Kidder a native of the town and graduate of Harvard, class of 1751.

Frederick P. Hill (Drake)

1725: Voted grants of land to the squadrons for school houses. “The sections of the town where schools were kept were at first and for a long time called squadrons.”

History of Billerica; Henry A. Hazen (1885)

CARLISLE

As early as December 21, 1780, it was voted by the inhabitants that “the district be divided by the Selectmen into six squadrons in order for the schools.”

[Carlisle was then a “district” of Acton and became a town by vote of the Legislature in February 1805.]

Sidney A. Bull (Hurd)

CHELMSFORD

“Soon after the adoption of the Federal Constitution, in 1789, the school district system began to develop... In 1792 this authority was, for the first time, transferred to a School Committee... The committee chosen consisted of nine persons, one from each district or squadron.” In 1794 it was “voted to raise £250, for the purpose of building school-houses, each squadron to draw their own money for building their school-house, location to be decided by vote of members of squadrons.”

Henry S. Perham (Hurd v. 2)

CONCORD

On March 2, 1676, the town of Groton was put on its guard by the presence of a band of savages who pillaged several houses and stole some cattle. When on March 13 the attack came, Major Willard who with ... was scouting among the exposed towns... went immediately with a squadron of cavalry from Concord to the town’s relief; but arrived too late.

History of Concord; Alfred Sereno Hudson (1904)

Brian Donahue, author of *The Great Meadow* (Yale, 2004), finds “no record of the use of squadron for land divisions in Concord,” the preferred term being “Division,” used in the 1650s and 1660s.

DRACUT

March 1716: Voted at a meeting of the Proprietors of the Common Land... that this community now chosen shall go upon the undivided land and view that land that is not yet divided and lay it out into two squadrons... (and) voted that that when the land is laid out into squadrons then they shall lay out unto every lott one hundred and thirty acres...

Reverend Elias Nason (Drake)

FRAMINGHAM

1768 — May 16: The town voted to have one grammar school that year at a charge of £50; and that each squadron keep a woman’s school for 16 weeks in the

year, having liberty to employ men, instead of women, to keep the schools, as the major part of each squadron can agree.

History of Framingham and the Plantation from 1640 to the Present;
William Barry (1847)

GROTON

October 1665: “Sergeant James Parker, Jan Koop, and William Leaken were chosen... to determen the several squadrants and hom shall work at each squadron successively.”

The earliest divisions of territory into school districts were called angles or squadrons and the term districts did not come into use until about 1790.

From Early Records of Groton, 1662-1707; Samuel A. Green

MARLBOROUGH

“At a meeting of the town held May 15, 1749, the subject of the schools was fully considered, and as the action then taken casts considerable light upon the subject, we give the record entire.

“It voted and chose a committee of seven men to apportion the schools in six societies or squadrons, and the scholars to meet at the same schoolhouse where the school has been lately kept and settled according to the [lay] of each squadron, taking the northwesterly corner for one squadron.”

October 25, 1762: Voted “that the town will build and prepare the schoolhouse in the several squadrons of the town.”

In 1781 the town voted “to build a schoolhouse in the ‘Farms’ Squadron, and move the Cook schoolhouse so as to accommodate the east squadron, near John Stow’s.”

1789: A committee was chosen “to employ masters and apportion the money to the different squadrons.”

1790: “It appears [in a report of the committee] that there were voted in 1790 seven school districts or squadrons, as they were in the habit of calling them...”

History of Marlborough; Charles Hudson & Joseph Allen

MAYNARD

At a town meting on January 4, 1657: “It was voted in ye Town Meeting that whereas there is a pond lying in ye third and second squadrons that soe our middel highway from South to North cannot pass straight, our will and vote is that ye said way shall go around the pond at ye nearest end...”

1685: “Six Stone and five acres of land that he [Jonathan Vose] purchased of John Wood sr. and John Rutter sr. and is bounded northward and westward with

the land of Thomas Wedge, southward with the land of Solomon Johnson jr., eastward with a highway 30 rods wide running between the squadron of lots in the New Grants, of Sudbury, aforesaid.”

1785: “Each squadron to have the liberty to provide a suitable place for their school.”

Maynard/Sudbury — 1655: A dispute as to how the selectmen voted some means to get the new grants laid out... at length the plan was adopted by dividing it into squadrons.

Asahel Balcom (Drake)

MEDFORD

“Medford seems to have been singularly fortunate in one respect at least: She did not drop into the educational decadence after the Revolution so far as many towns that adopted the district system. She never had districts in the full meaning of the word; we find no record of moving schools held first in one ‘angle,’ ‘squadron,’ or ‘district,’ then in another... but here schools were kept in her one school-house.”

Medford Historical Society papers, vol. 2: “Development of the Public Schools”

NATICK

“In 1805 there appears to have been five ‘squadrians’ or school districts laid out or suggested, viz. the South, the Centre, the West, the North, and the North-Brick. This old name for school districts — squadrons, squadrions, or squares — we frequently find in the ancient records of many of the towns of New England. It was variously spelled in the same town and doubtless as variously pronounced.”

Rev. John F. Norton (Hurd)

PEPPERELL

“In 1770 it was voted to have the school successively in four different parts of the district, in dwelling buses. The schoolhouse is again mentioned in 1771, and a vote passed to have a grammar master; but the schoolhouse appears to have belonged to individuals; for in 1772 the district voted to pay £10 13s/4p for it, and also to build four more. About this time the district was divided into six squadrons, as they were called — middle, west, southwest, north, south and east; and a committee of three persons in each squadron was annually chosen to see that the money was properly expended.”

“Squadrons” were changed to “districts” in 1809.

Lorenzo P. Blood (Drake)

STOW

1738: Town was “divided into three quarters and three men chosen in each quarter to locate the [school] houses.”

1788: It was “arranged... that every Quarter should draw their own pay and keep their own schools for the future.”

“The legislature of 1789 ordered that the towns should be divided into school districts... Stow had five school-houses and it was therefore divided into five districts. Liberty was given on May 12, 1794, to the “Squadron” in the middle of town to hang the town’s bell on their school-house and to set a school-house at the east end of the meeting-house on the town’s land, but nearer than the white oak trees.”

Rev. George F. Clark (Hurd)

SUDBURY

1655: January 4th: “The selectmen’s meeting voted to take some measures to get the new grants laid out... It was agreed to keep herd of cattle on the land the following summer.

“At length, a plan was adopted of dividing it into squadrons... The southeast was to be the first, the northeast the second, the northwest the third and the southwest the fourth.

“The squadrons were subdivided into parcels of equal size containing 130 acres and were apportioned to people by lot... Each lot in the first squadron was to be drawn until we come to the Concord line. The last lot joining with the Lancaster highway on the north.”

Comment: “The land laid out so regularly was good property. Some of the most substantial homesteads of the town have been, and are still, on it... This opened up new resources to the settlers by its temper lands and the circuitous course of the Wash Brook gave meadows and mill privileges upon which the people were not slow to improve.”

History of Sudbury, Massachusetts: 1638-1889; Alfred Sereno Hudson

TOWNSEND

1770: The North End of the town voted £12 “to be spent [for] a school mistress with that squadron.”

1783: “Beginning to realize that they had thrown off the British yoke and feeling the spirit of independence stirring within them... the people at a town meeting in May chose a committee of nine to divide the town into squadrons for the convenience of schooling.”

Comment: “The word squadron, meaning districts, is to be found in most of the New England town records of the period now under consideration. It is difficult to understand why this word is used in this sense unless it was brought over by the puritans who used it in their native community to express portions of a city or county laid out in a quadrangular manner.”

History of the Town of Townsend, 1676-1878; Ithamar B. Sawtelle

WALTHAM

“In November 1783 for schools, the town was divided into three squadrons; the bounds of the first being from the meeting house by Mr. Hammonds (on what is now Beaver Street) to the town bounds and all north to David Mead’s (Fiske’s) Pond; of the second, from the meeting house by the town way by Mr. John Childs, including all north; the third including the remainder of the town. The school was to be kept an equal time in each squadron, provided a majority of the voters of each division agreed upon a place and furnished an acceptable place for the school master to board at. This was called in the records of the day, a “movable school.” The school house proper was located at Piety Corner.”

Alexander Starbuck (Drake)

WATERTOWN

In 1635 “Distinctive names marked the several localities of the original town. The Small Lotts, as the house lots and homestalls were called, were scattered over its eastern portion which embraces the present territory of the town. They included the Meeting House Common of 40 acres, Pequusset or King’s Common, and Pequusset Meadow. The Great Dividends [of 1636] were four tracts of land, sometimes called squadrons. Running eastward, each 40 rods in breadth, and by next to the Cambridge line on the north, beginning not far from the present boundary of Watertown and Waltham.”

Drake notes an area that includes Weston: the tract commonly known as the Farmers’ Precinct, and the 3d Military Precinct, and sometimes as the western precinct. Also notes a Hither Plain or Little Plain, and Further Plain or Great Plain.

Francis S. Drake (Drake)

WESTFORD

“Schools were first kept in private houses and for only one term in the year. At a later date there were two terms each year, but they were short. The town was evenly divided into school squadrons, of which there were four: the Centre, the South corresponding to Parkersville, the West corresponding to Forge Village, and the North including the region about Long-Sought-For Pond.”

The school-district went into operation in 1789 and was abolished in 1869... The several squadrons were then converted into districts with their numbers attached.

Levi Hedge, the first preceptor of the Academy (1792) graduated at Cambridge in 1792. It appears he had previously been a teacher in Westford. "From February 6, 1792, he was paid £6 15s for keeping school nine weeks in the middle school squadron."

Edwin R. Hodgman (Drake)

WESTON

From texts of town documents: Details the laying out of a road from Lexington to Weston as early as 1730 "...so entering at the corner of said Garfield's side of said corner and running on the Division line southerly to the next Squadron strait and coming out at said squadron, half on the one side and half on the other side of the division line... So along southerly on said two rods (reserved by Deacon Brown) to the south line to a heap of stones on a rock on the said squadron line."

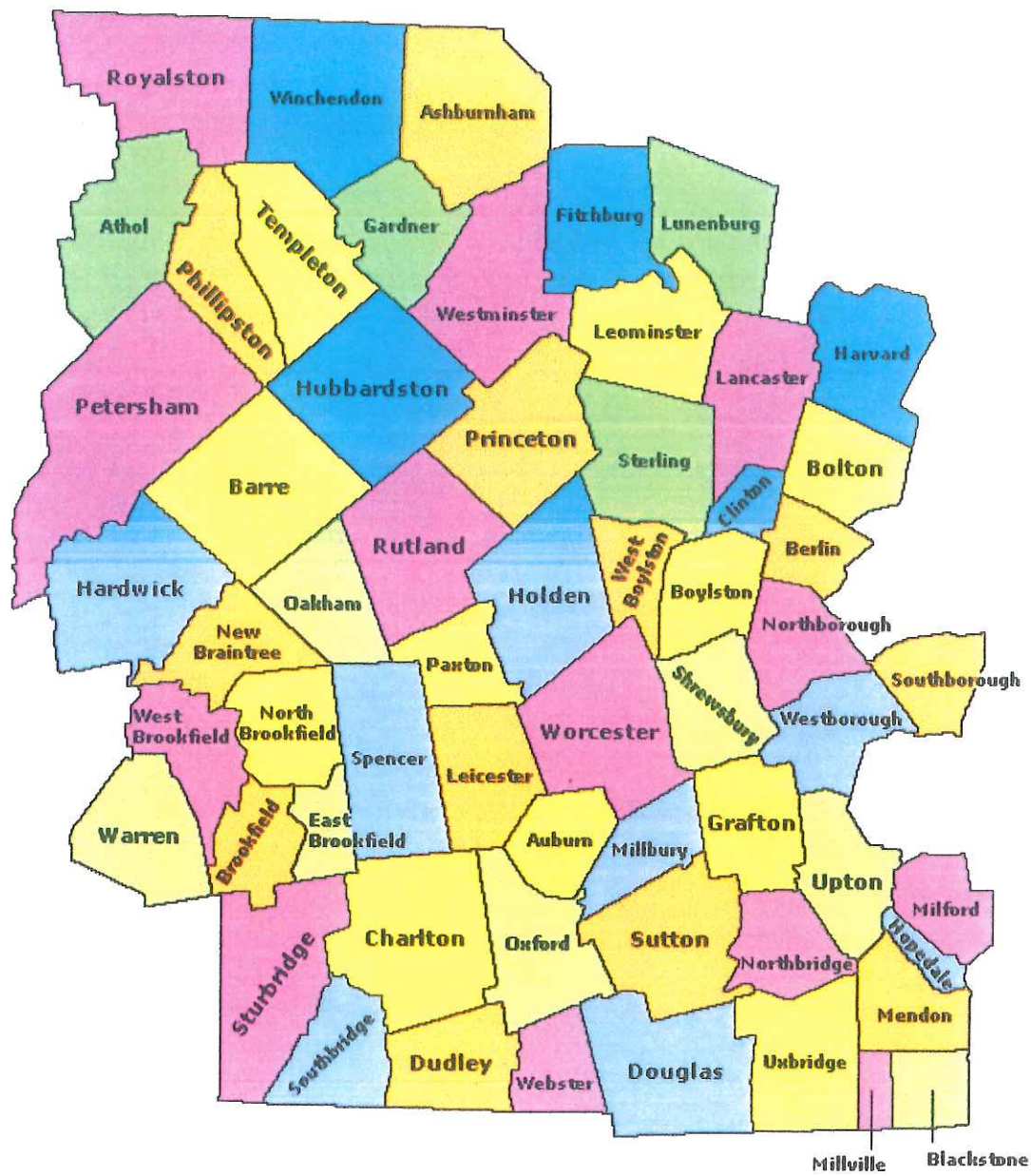
Confirmed at the Town Meeting March 1, 1730/1; extract from the Book of Records.

History of the Town of Weston, 1630-1890; Daniel S. Lawson

WOBURN

"All through the colony and early Provincial period Woburn had amongst its men of military age a large representation from its population in that arm of the service [cavalry]. This was especially so during King Philip's War when the New England colonies... had but one company or squadron of cavalry in their army and the troop in the squadron of horse commanded by Captain Thomas Prentice of Cambridge, and with John Wyman of Woburn as ensign and lieutenant, and something like 20 Woburn privates under his command."

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WORCESTER COUNTY

CLINTON

In 1783 “As the school squadron about Prescott’s Mill will be assigned £3 1s/10p out of the £100 that might be raised for the support of schools in 1792, it might be supposed that its population was not far from 50 souls. The Allen family, and perhaps some of their neighbors, at the time were reckoned in the New Boston squadron.... [Also named were] the Wilder squadron. It is possible that some living within the present Clinton territory may have been included in the Deer’s Horn squadron.”

History of Clinton; Andrew Elmer Ford; 1896

DOUGLAS

A division of the town into five sections of “squadrons” took place in March 1764 for the double propose of establishing permanent schools and organizing the able-bodied males into military companies.

In 1774 there were six squadrons and the town voted the sum of £125 (old tenor) to build and repair the school-houses in the several squadrons. A committee was chosen to divide the money according to the valuation of each squadron...

In the northeasterly squadron, now known as district ten, preparations were made to build a schoolhouse... A new house was also built in the Center squadron... and an appropriation made for building a house in Caleb Hill’s squadron, now the East village.

History of the Town of Douglas; William Andrew Emerson; 1879

GARDNER

At Town Meeting April 3, 1786, it was voted “to divide the school money into four equal divisions, and the rest of the money to be divided in said divisions according to the number of scholars from 21 years down to four years. Each squadron is to provide their own school master or mistress”

In 1794, the town voted to redistrict its territory, making seven squadrons instead of four.

Rev. William D. Herrick (Hurd)

LANCASTER

1788: Proposal for a Grammar School. “The town will vote to any squadron in the town £12 to support a grammar school... and also voted that the subscribers may be a squadron in the town, and draw their own money as the squadrons do, the

subscribers engage to become a squadron agreeable to such vote... A committee of five, two members chosen by the town and two by the squadron.

1789: The town formed several squadrons or districts — one called the North Squadron and formed of the following persons and estates... Another squadron with a school house at Colonel Henry Haskell's, north of the Brick tavern... and another south of Edward Robbins's in the northwest part of town.

History of Lancaster from the First Settlement; Abijah Perkins Marsh

NORTHBOROUGH

March 5, 1770 — “We, the subscribers, being chosen a committee to divide the town into squadrons, for the keeping of the school, having viewed the situation of the town and each particular family or house, have come to the following conclusion, viz.: That the district be divided into four parts or squadrons, and the persons hereafter named, to be in the First Squadron [24 names]; For the Second Squadron [16 names]; For the Third Squadron [30 names]; For the Fourth Squadron [25 names]... These four divisions were known respectively as the west, south, east and north squadrons.

“By the year 1780, the number of children in the town had increased to such proportions that they could no longer be accommodated in private houses, and in March of that year. ‘ it was voted to build a schoolhouse in each squadron, on the town's cost, 18 feet square. ... The second squadron came in under cost... Whether this was an exemplary budget committee, or the currency had materially fluctuated within those two years, does not appear; very probably the latter.”

Northborough History; Josiah Coleman Kent (1921)

TEWKSBURY

1769: It was decided to divide the town into squadrons for the benefit of schooling.

1772: It was voted for each squadron to draw their equal rate of money for schooling.

1793: It was voted to build a school in the several squadrons and to choose two persons in each squadron to visit the schools.

1795: Five men were chosen to inspect the schools... sometimes the number was raised to 10 for each squadron.

“March 1, 1779 is notable for the raising of £200 for the use of the schools, to be equally divided to each squadron according to their rate bills.”

Rev. E.W. Prior (Hurd)

WESTBOROUGH

In 1765 the first effort was made to “squadron” the town, and the system then adopted lasted essentially for the 20 years following.

“We, the committee have attended the business for which we were appointed, and after considering the situation of our inhabitants have divided them out into squadrons as within mentioned and pitched upon places for the school houses to stand on in each squadron, unless any squadron shall agree to sett them other where; also that the money shall be granted for schooling shall be divided according to the number of families in each squadron and that Flanders Squadron, so called, remain as they are.

First Squadron (15 families) The school house to stand between the meeting house and Doct. Traintor’s on the south side of the road.

Second Squadron (12 families)... to stand at the Great road, at the end of Asa Forbush’s lane.

Third Squadron (20 families) ... to stand between the end of Elijah Hardy’s lane and the top of the hill toward Lt. Grant’s.

Fourth Squadron (11 families) ...to stand at the end of Mr. Bowman’s lane.

Fifth Squadron (14 families) ...at the end of Lt. Thomas Morse’s lane where it meets the Upton road, between Mr. Eben Miller’s and Ensign Warren’s.

Sixth Squadron (23 families) ... to remain where it now stands, between the top of the hill and the River.

Seventh Squadron (113 families) ... between Mr. Abraham Bond’s and Jonathan Bathrick’s.

Flanders Squadron (12 families).

The above report being accepted, the Meeting was dissolved.

History of Westborough; H. P. de Forest, et.al (1891)

WORCESTER

1673 — “At this time the grants to the following persons were surveyed, confirmed, and recorded.

“In the West squadron or division on the North side of Connecticut Road...”
[seven grants (by names), two of 50 acres and five of 25 acres]

“In the West squadron or division on the South side of the County Road...”
[three grants of 50 acres]

“In the Middle squadron or division on the North side of the County Road...” [two grants of 50 acres and one of 25 acres and 100 acres to Joel Jenkins of Waltham]

“In the Middle division on the South side of the County Road, on the east side of the mill brook...” [three grants of 50 acres, one of 40 acres, and one of 25 acres]

“In the eastern squadron, lying next to the County Road to Boston...” [one grant of 50 acres, six of 25 acres, one of 44 acres]

“Another squadron on the way to Lancaster...” [three grants of 25 acres]

From the County Files of 1674 and the Middlesex County Registry of Deeds.

History of Worcester from the Earliest Settlement; William Lincoln