

The Story of Beverly's Common Land
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Today, when we speak of Beverly Common, we are referring to the park across Essex Street from the library. In colonial times and into the 19th century, this land was known as the Training Ground and was used as a drilling field for the local militia. In earlier times, “the common”, or more often “the commons” referred to wasteland that was owned by the town as a whole.

In 1650 the town of Salem, of which Beverly was then a part, set off over four thousand acres of marginal land on “the Cape Ann Side” (Beverly) as common land. This wild land included Snake Hill (Sally Milligan Park), Beaver Pond in North Beverly, and a huge tract of woodland, swamp and ledge in areas that are now

Centerville, Prides Crossing and Beverly Farms. During the next 50 years much of the common land was parceled out by the town.

According to Stone’s *History of Beverly*, by the end of the 17th century the town had a total of 1850 acres of common land. The Sheep Pasture, comprising 1013 acres, extending from what is now Hart Street and including the areas of Greenwood Avenue and Branch, Wood, Boulder, and Common Lanes into Centerville, was the largest parcel and was often referred to on later maps as simply “The Commons”. At some point prior to 1760, the hilly ledges around Greenwood and probably including Beverly Rock came to be known as Woods Egypt. The flatter area toward Centerville was the pasture. Other smaller common pastures included Bald Hill Pasture in Centerville and Snake Hill Pasture which included the areas around Essex, Corning Streets and Lake Shore drive.

Residents could graze livestock in these common pastures, but rights were strictly regulated according to English custom. A 1673 ordinance forbade rams to be set loose among the ewes in the commons between the end of July and the last of November, the purpose being to control the time of spring lambing. Any loose rams found in the commons were forfeited to the person who discovered them. Swine could run loose in the commons during the late fall and winter, but presented a problem during the growing season since their grubbing could destroy neighboring crops. From April 16th to October 16th swine could be in the common land only if they wore yokes that prevented them from rooting in the ground. Owners of unyoked swine found on the commons were charged a shilling a week. Beverly had a hog reeve who was charged with enforcing the law.

Much of the common land was forested and served both as a liquid asset for the town as well as a carefully regulated communal wood lot. In 1671 Jonathan Byles built a town animal pound for which he was paid in part with ten trees (not white oak) from the common land.

Wood from the commons could also be cut, with permission, for personal use. In 1679, Andrew Elliot and Nehemiah Glover “had liberty to cut two loads of timber on the town’s common to be used in building a ketch.” In 1696 the town allowed Isaac Woodberry to cut timber for the masts and yards of a vessel he was then building. Liberty to cut wood was a privilege not a right. A 1678 town ordinance set a

severe penalty on anyone caught selling common land timber out of the town. The fine exacted was divided between the informant and the town.

In 1669, when Blackleach's Pond in Beverly Farms broke through to the sea, destroying a section of the Ancient Highway, a new road was routed through a section of the commons, forming what is now sections of Thissel and Hale Streets.

By the beginning of the 18th century, the town had disposed of several parcels of common lands through grants or exchange. In 1716 the commons were divided into stints or rights of 6 acres each. Ten of these were set aside for the poor, three for the town's ministers: two for First Parish minister and one Second Parish. The remaining stints were granted to individuals, generally based on ownership of a house built before 1715. By the time the Reverend Stone wrote his history in 1842, most of the common land was in private hands.

With the coming of the railroad to Beverly Farms in 1847, wealthy Boston residents bought up shorefront farms for summer homes. The land rush was on. Once all the ocean lots had been sold, summer people bought parcels of land in Witches Woods, Woods Egypt and the Sheep Pasture. Large estates were built on some of these parcels; others were purchased as wood lots. Greenwood Avenue, Wood Lane, Branch Lane, and Boulder Lane were formalized as town roads, and a network of private carriage roads were constructed. . In the early 20th century, the contractors, Linnehan and Son and Connolly Brothers bought areas of granite ledge to quarry.

In Woods Egypt, on what is now Greenbelt land, Connolly Brothers quarried stone and established a stone crusher. A shanty town for about fifty workers grew up. The foundations of the foreman's house and well, abandoned chunks of quarried stone, and remnants of the shanty town remain on the site. A short stretch of lovely old carriage road runs through the AMG property near Greenbelt land.



Today we are fortunate that much of the old common land has returned to public ownership. A few large estates remain on sections of Greenwood Avenue, Common, and Branch Lanes, but large parcels of land are owned by the City or by Essex County Greenbelt. These large areas of the old Sheep Pasture and Woods Egypt are included in the Beverly Commons Conservation area and are open to the public. Sally Milligan Park, once the old Snake Hill Commons, in Beverly Cove, and Bald Hill, adjacent to the Centerville School playground, are also City owned open space.

These old common lands, once considered waste land, are now city treasures--beautiful, unspoiled places filled with magnificent trees, native plants, and animals that are open to residents for hiking, snowshoeing and cross country skiing. The Beverly Open Space and Recreation Committee invites everyone to get to the know them.