

A HISTORY OF EAST BOSTON CAMPS

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The Land

The land we know as East Boston Camps has undergone many transformations and many changes of ownership. But in some fundamental ways, it has changed remarkably little since the glaciers retreated some 16,000 years ago. The known history of East Boston Camps is largely a history of the human uses of this beautiful 286 area of wooded land. But to understand these uses, we need to start at the beginning of what we can know about the land.

Geology and Pre-History

East Boston Camps lies north of the Clinton-Newbury fault zone, which runs right across Westford. Bedrock in this zone consists of granite. Westford's Open Space Plan of 2002, states: "The particular type of granite that underlies Westford is known as Chelmsford Granite. It is excellently formed granite, and one that is much sought after for ornamental use." (pg.14) Granites are formed from cooled molten rock, a result of plate tectonic and volcanic action, which at some distant era ruled this area. Approximately 65,000 years ago a vast ice sheet covered the land, several miles thick. It endured in this area for about 50,000 years - the most recent ice age. When the climate warmed and the glacier finally retreated sometime between 18,000 and 16,000 years ago, sedimentary material was deposited, overlying the bedrock. This sedimentary material was deposited in the form of multiple north-south aligned eskers. Eskers formed as tunnels, which filled with the sediments that the glacier had scraped off the bedrock as it moved forward. When the glacier melted back, responding to a warming climate, the tunnels of sand were left as great hills of sand and gravel. Slowly some vegetation and animal life returned to this desolate land.

Native Americans

In his beautifully illustrated book, [The New England Indians](#), C. Keith Wilbur describes the changes of climate and life for the humans living in this area between 16,000 years ago and the European invasion. After the retreat of the glacier, the cold climate at first only supported tundra-like vegetation. About 16,000 years ago, large grazing animals, such as Mastodons and Mammoths moved in, closely followed by summer hunters, the Paleo Indians. In time the climate warmed, and New England's landscape could support some coniferous softwoods, while lichen-covered tundra still abounded. Other animals, such as herds of caribou, moved north to take advantage of this new habitat. About 7,000 years ago, a new group of nomadic people, the Early Archaic Indians, moved in to hunt the caribou and fish the rivers. By 5000 years ago, the climate had warmed still more, and a hardwood forest was now spreading throughout New England. With it came white-tailed deer, moose, black bear, and turkey. The Early Archaic peoples moved north with the caribou, leaving New England to a new culture, the Middle and Late Archaic Indians. These were more permanent settlers who built circular living quarters covered in bark. These people came to be known as the Algonquian tribes. By 300 A.D., these tribes had evolved an entirely new culture around agriculture and ceramic making. From 300 A.D. to 1676, the New England tribes were known as Ceramic-Woodland Indians. The fallen leaves of trees enriched the soil and supported a thriving agriculture. Corn, squash, pumpkins, beans and tobacco were grown. The Algonquian peoples moved with the seasons, preferring mountainous terrain with heavy forest cover in the winter, but moving towards the coast for

fishing and planting in fertile river valleys in the summer. Their wigwams or wetus were movable. The matting or bark covering rolled up and carried.

It is thought that tribes camped and grew corn along the flat plains to the south of Stony Brook every summer. In 1959, Howard Smart presented the Westford Historical Society with two Native American stone implements: a war club and a stone pestle found at the Willard Fletcher farm on Depot Rd. A Native American pestle was found at the Eli Tower Farm on Providence Rd., and the museum is in possession of other "Indian Relics" collected by Amos B. Polley. Mr. Polley lived on Lowell Rd. near the Depot. Mrs. Elizabeth Whitney collected many Native American implements and presented them to the J.V. Fletcher Library in 1909. In 1975 they were given to the Westford Museum. In 2004, Marty Dudek, archaeologist with Timelines, Inc. of Littleton, examined these implements. He pronounced them an impressive collection. The oldest, a felsite arrowhead, is probably Paleo Indian, 11,000 to 9,000 years old. There are examples of implements from the Middle Archaic Indians, for instance a stemmed felsite arrowhead, 7,000 to 8,000 years old, and a broad-eared felsite arrowhead from the Late Archaic Indians, 4,000 to 5,000 years old. Also represented are the Early Woodland Indians with a small-stemmed quartzite arrowhead that is 4,000 to 6,000 years old, and a chert knife, 2500 to 3000 years old. Most recent implements are gouges, an abrading stone, and pestles which date from the Mid and Late Woodland Indian era, 400 to 1800 years ago. There are also some trade goods represented: some terra cotta pottery shards from the Southwest, and an effigy of a bird, a rare ceremonial piece called a "bird stone". These bird stones were made in the Late Woodland period by the Adena people of the Ohio River Valley (Wilbur, pg. 25).

The fact that so many of these implements were found along Stony Brook in the vicinity of Depot St., leads one to the inescapable conclusion that Native Americans would surely have used the East Boston Camps land. It is forestland, perfectly situated between two rivers, Stony Brook and Keyes Brook, and containing a pristine twenty-five acre pond, Burge's Pond. What better place for hunting and fishing?

The Rev. Edwin R. Hodgman wrote the excellent History of the Town of Westford in 1883. Hodgman states that the northern area of Westford, then still a part of Chelmsford, was "the hunting-ground of the Wamesits or Pawtuckets, who owned the Great Neck, as it was called, between the Merrimack and the Concord rivers, on which the city of Lowell stands;" (pg. 2) He also poetically surmised that Native Americans used the northern ponds: "By those clear and quiet waters no doubt the Indian maidens had their toilet, and by the setting sun their graceful forms were mirrored in the limpid stream. These freeborn children of solitude have passed away, but still the waters shimmer in the sunlight and remind us of the sad fate of a vanished race." (pg. 3)

Native Americans did not vanish, but their lifestyle was irreparably changed in a very short time. Inter-tribal fighting between Native American groups, pressure from colonists who built and defended farms on the best agricultural land, and disease spread from colonists to Native Americans, all conspired to weaken the tribes' hold on the land. Native Americans may have given up their hunting rights in this area of West Chelmsford (Westford) about 1660. Hodgman states: "in 1660 the Indians of Pawtucket and the inhabitants of Chelmsford entered into an agreement... to exchange lands and settle the boundaries between them." (pg. 6)

European Settlement and Incorporation

The 1730 map of Westford shows five families settled near Burge's Pond, in the Depot Rd. area: Josiah Burge, Timothy Spalding, Jonas Fletcher, Jacob Wright, and John Comings (also spelled Cummings). All of these families probably eventually owned parcels in the East Boston Camps area, as they are represented in the final sales of land in 1937. After the Town was incorporated in 1729, members of these families held positions of importance in

Westford town government, and were well represented in the War of Independence and in the Civil War.

Hodgman states that Burge's pond was actually named for a cousin of Josiah, by the name of Samuel Burge (p. 440). The Burge family came to Chelmsford from Weymouth at about 1682. Their land encompassed two to three hundred acres and stretched from Main St., over Stony Brook. Samuel Burge's land surrounded Burge's Pond. Hodgman states that early farms were simply appropriated by new settlers without any legal formality or surveying. The 1730 map and all subsequent maps show the area between Stony Brook and Keyes Brook as being wooded, and it is likely that it was always used as a woodlot, and for turpentine production. Early settlers topped pines and made tar and turpentine products to sell in Salem (Hodgman, pg. 14).

In the mid 1700's, Westford was already feeling the impact of human settlement. Since the land was being cleared in town for farming, and deer were declining, a law was passed to regulate the killing of deer. But the killing of wolves, squirrels and blackbirds was encouraged with a bounty system. There was concern that the number of dams on Stony Brook was blocking the passage of shad and alewives from the Merrimack River to Forge Pond. Dams were mostly made of rocks, earth and timbers. They were set up to power an iron forge shop and numerous timber and grain mills (Seavey, Westford Eagle, 1988). Steps were taken to build fish passages around the dams: " March the 1st day 1735-6. Voted to chos two men for a comity to vew the dams across stonnebrook with the cost of making conveaninces for the fish to run and report to the selectmen of what the cost may be." (Hodgman, pg. 69)

The 1853 map of Westford drawn by Edward Symmes shows that the closest neighbors to Burge's Pond were A. Fletcher living at the Depot, Hamlet's Mill at the Depot, J.H. Young living on Depot St., and A. Nutting on Nutting Rd. The Stony Brook railroad was opened in 1848. It connected Lowell to New York. The 1875 map shows N. Wright Freight, Heywood and Burbeck Sawmill and Grist Mill, and the Stony Brook Railroad Depot, all at the location where Depot St. crossed Stony Brook. At this time, lumber was being cut on the East Boston Camps land and other lands and was being shipped out by railroad. An ice business was also flourishing because of the railroad. Ice was being cut on Burge's Pond among others. There was an icehouse on the premises, owned by Wallace Johnson. Gordon Seavey is quoted in June Kennedy's Westford Recollections as stating, "Wallace W. Johnson cut ice for many years on Burge's Pond, which was spring-fed. Everyone considered this the best." He made local deliveries by horse-drawn wagon (Kennedy, pg. 48). In 1881, one hundred seventy-five men were employed in the ice cutting business in Westford, and fifty horses were used to haul it. Thirty-five thousand tons of ice was sent to Boston in 1881, and another fifty thousand tons were stored (Hodgman, pg. 346).

In 1899, the " Old Elm" was celebrated by Eliza Babbett. This tree grew near the Westford Depot on Lowell Rd. Ellen Harde, in her book, Photographs, quotes Eliza: "Among the many ornamental trees, there is one elm deserving especial mention, as being one of the largest in Middlesex County. This magnificent tree stands near the station on the Stony Brook Railroad opposite the Dupee homestead. With a height of ninety feet, many of its graceful, pendant branches, nearly reach the ground, and radiate in opposite directions one hundred and eighteen feet. It is indeed one of God's temples, and inspires feelings of reverence." It was said to be 25 feet, 8 inches in circumference. (Harde, pg. 90) This tree was probably lost in the 1938 hurricane.

Present Natural History

East Boston Camps' 286 acres are critical to protecting Westford's water resources. It is, in effect, a peninsula of land that sits between Stony Brook and Keyes Brook. These two brooks are the sources of Westford's primary drinking water aquifer. East Boston Camps is

within Zone II of three of Westford's wells. A portion of the land along Keyes Brook lies only about 1,000 feet upstream of the Depot St. well. The Nutting Rd., and the Cote wells are nearby. Within the parcel lies Burge's Pond, a pristine and sparkling clean pond that has seen minimal human impact. There is no development around its shores, and there are no motorboats allowed- a rare phenomenon for eastern Massachusetts.

Because of the presence of all of these water resources, East Boston Camps supports a large variety of habitats for plants and wildlife. The upland forest is composed primarily of white pine and oak. In the lower, wetter areas, trees such as maple, birch and sassafras are found. Forest floor plants include pink lady's slippers, pipsissewa, wintergreen, and many ferns and club mosses. There is a large bog, complete with black spruce and sundews to the south of Burge's Pond. Stony Brook, and a part of East Boston Camps is designated habitat for the spotted turtle, a species of special concern in Massachusetts. Older residents of Westford remember when the spotted turtle was a common sight in Town. Several rare or uncommon plants are also found along the shores of Stony Brook.

Migrating warblers and other songbirds arrive in fall and spring waves. Many species of ducks and other waterfowl also move through on migration. Nesting species include Wood Ducks, Scarlet Tanager, Hermit Thrush, Yellow Warbler, Baltimore Oriole, Brown Creeper, Kingfisher, Barred, Great Horned and Screech owls. Minks and Otters hunt in both brooks. White-Tailed Deer, Fox, and Fishers are seen. There are several vernal pools on the property that protect several species of amphibians, which can breed only in vernal pools. As George Fletcher, caretaker of East Boston Camps, has noted, the Camps are truly "the Walden Pond of Westford".

History of the Camps

The Hyams Foundation

The Hyams Foundation web site states that Godfrey Hyams grew up in Boston and attended Harvard College. He was a Metallurgist, engineer and financier. He was responsible for the growth of the Anaconda Mining Company and the Virginia Railway. He lived in Dorchester with his two sisters, Sarah and Isabel, both of whom were active in social work in Boston. None of the siblings ever married. In 1927, Godfrey established a charitable trust, to which the major portion of his estate was given. Smaller grant-making trusts were set up in his sisters' names. For many years, the Godfrey M. Hyams Trust and the smaller Sarah A. Hyams Fund had identical trustees, grant making purposes and processes. They were merged in 1993, and were then called the Hyams Foundation, Inc. The Isabel F. Hyams Fund, Inc. provided support for many years to the East Boston Social Centers, Inc. In 1996, all three funds became merged.

The mission of the Hyams Foundation is "to increase economic and social justice and power within low income people in Boston and Chelsea, Massachusetts." Its grant-making guidelines focus on four community priorities: Increased civic engagement, with a special focus on immigrant communities; more affordable housing, especially for very low-income families; increased family economic self-sufficiency; and enhanced opportunities for low-income teens. In the last few years, the Hyams Foundation has disbursed more than \$5 million each year, in such diverse areas as after-school programs, voter participation, housing production, diversity initiatives, job training and English as a second language classes.

In the 1930's, tuberculosis was a great scourge, especially in East Boston. Isabel and Sarah Hyams thought they could help the inner-city children by providing a "Fresh Air Camp" in the country. They hired a private firm to look for just the right location for this camp. In 1937, they purchased 16 parcels of land between Stony Brook and Keyes Brook in Westford. The land contained the pristine 25-acre Burge's Pond. Parcels were purchased from the following owners: Oscar Spalding, Allister MacDougall, Charles Hildreth, trustee for Mary

Heywood, Eli Burbeck, Alex Fisher estate (formerly of Cummings and Fletcher), the Boston and Maine Railroad, Lapham and Boyd, the Stony Brook Railroad, Frances Fisher, Amelia Brown, Louis Lescard, Hiram and Everett Fernald, Ada Mudge, Edward Fisher, Frank Johnson, and John Hornbrook. Interestingly, the land near the boggy area to the south of Burge's Pond, owned by Mary Heywood, was known as "The Old Growth".

The sisters immediately set about having the land for the camp buildings cleared, and the cabins built. The cabins were built of lumber obtained from the land itself. It is hard to imagine how all this could be done so quickly, but it is said that the camp opened in the same year, 1937. The hurricane of 1938 hit the area hard, taking down many trees. Two sawmills were set up on the land, and the lumber was milled right there. Since then, selective tree cutting has been done about every twenty years, the last time being in the 1980's. The East Boston Social Centers, Inc has run the camp since 1937. The Hyams Foundation sold the East Boston Camps land to the Town of Westford, in 2005.

The East Boston Social Centers, and East Boston Camps

The East Boston Social Centers, Inc. was founded in 1918. It is a multi-service agency, serving clients from Boston. It provides childcare, after- school programming, programming for at-risk teens, summer day and overnight camps, nutritional support for the elderly and meeting space for numerous community groups. The Social Centers provide programs for over 1,000 children in their formal programming. Their motto is "When All Give, All Gain". Since East Boston Camps opened, it has been run by the East Boston Social Centers.

When the camp opened in 1937, families paid \$2 for a two-week session. Most of the campers' families in those early days were of Italian descent. George Fletcher, caretaker at East Boston Camps for 31 years, remembers when he helped his father at the camp. He remembers that the campers' families would all pitch in to the camping experience. The mothers would come out early and clean the cabins and make up the cots. The fathers would do necessary repairs to the buildings. A few of the mothers would stay on to be the cooks. There were always plenty of freshly baked pies and cookies, and lots of food to go around. George fondly remembers the good cooking he got there. George's father, Walter, was caretaker at East Boston Camps for 26 years, before George took over. Walter, and later George, ran the Stony Brook Farm, a local dairy farm. They often brought the campers to the farm to see the animals. Arnold Wilder, Westford resident and friend of the Fletcher family, delights in telling the story of one of these visits. After showing the campers the milking process, he said, "That's where your milk comes from. One of the campers made a wry face and retorted, "Maybe that's where your milk comes from, but mine comes from the market!"

George remembers that during World War II, the children came by train to the Westford Depot. An extra coach was added for these trips. After the war, the children were bussed.

Originally, there were three camps: one for the 6-9 age group of boys and girls, a separate boys camp for ages 10-15, and another girls camp for ages 10-15. There were four two-week sessions in July and August. Approximately 80- 125 children would attend each session. There are now seven weeks of camp, one week of day camp, and three two-week sessions of overnight camp. The one-week day camp, Camp Cielo, serves boys and girls aged 6-14, including children from Westford and surrounding communities. Girls, 8-14 attend Camp Waki, the overnight camp for girls. And Camp Nashoba, the overnight camp for boys, serves ages 8-14. According to the East Boston Camps Social Center website, close to 350 day and overnight campers attend each summer. The website states, "East Boston Camps strives to provide a safe and happy summer for a diverse group of children and help children of all cultures to live with and respect each other." They also host a weeklong Senior Picnic and Senior Camp. Traditionally, they have hosted Westford's 5th

grades for a very popular weeklong nature day camp, free of charge, as a thank-you to the Westford Community.

All who come into contact with the campers and staff at East Boston Camps rave about the happy family atmosphere. Many campers return year after year, and become counselors when they "graduate". George Fletcher tells of many campers for whom their experience at East Boston Camps has been a life-changing event. Campers have become doctors, lawyers, and even a Senate President! Senate President Robert Travaglini attended East Boston Camps. His son is now an East Boston Camps counselor. Other campers have married and returned to Westford to buy homes and raise their families. East Boston Social Centers will continue to run the camp for the 2005 season.

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